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28th July 2020

ATTENTION: The House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy

RE: Inquiry into the problem of feral and domestic cats in Australia

Submission from -Cat Welfare Society Inc. T/A Cat Haven

Background

Cat Haven has been in operation for over 60 years and is the only open admission shelter in Western Australia. Taking in between 8,000 and 9,000 cats per year, we never say "no" to an incoming cat, no matter how old, sick or feral. We rehome approximately 90% of our intake and advocate for responsible cat ownership, either by keeping cats indoors or allowing access to the outdoors via a secure cat enclosure.

We work closely with local Government and various stakeholders, and were fundamental in lobbying for the creation of the Cat Act 2011.

Terms of Reference

- a) We are writing in regards to your inquiry on the problem of feral and domestic cats in Australia. We believe it is important to establish that domesticated cats and feral cats are two very different issues and that they need to be addressed separately. It concerns us greatly that this inquiry is placing a strong emphasis on addressing this as one overarching issue, rather than considering the many environmental, social and emotional factors that play a part in identifying unsocialised "feral" cats and domestic companion cats. It is our opinion, that these issues deserve to be addressed separately, and that by not doing so is a detriment to the significant role the domestic cat companions play in the lives of millions of Australians.

There are no known numbers of feral cats in Australia with estimates made between 2.1 million to 6.3 million.

The estimated number of domestic cats is approximately 3.8 million, but again this is anecdotal, as there is no mechanism for the collection of companion animal numbers in Australia. Perhaps this is something which should be considered adding to the census as it would provide the ability to determine the need for future veterinary clinics in developing areas. It would also provide data in terms of how many individual Australians depend on the companionship of a companion animal (it is estimated one in four Australians live on their own.)

- b) There are many other feral animals causing irreparable damage to our fragile flora and fauna, for example pigs (estimated 23 million), camels, horses, goats, starlings, cane

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toads, foxes, rabbits etc. Perhaps a more strategic approach is required to address the issue of feral animals in Australia as a whole.

It should also be noted that up to 89% of a feral cat's diet can be attributed to rats and rabbits. This needs to be taken into consideration, as a large reduction in the number of feral cats may cause the numbers of these other pests to increase.

For your reference, a feral cat is defined as "a cat that is unowned, unsocialised, has no relationship with or dependence on humans, and reproduces in the wild independently from the domestic cat population, often found in rural and remote areas" (RSPCA and Animal Welfare League of South Australia, 2019).

Domestic cats do not become "feral", the link between feral and domestic cats can be attributed to an unsterilized domestic cat wandering, and as a result breeding, with the resulting offspring not receiving any human contact.

A domestic cat can fall into three categories: a cat that is owned, a cat that is semi-owned, or an unowned domesticated cat. These cats are vastly found within urban areas, and are the overwhelming majority that are successfully rehomed through community-based rescue groups and shelters such as Cat Haven.

c) It is clear by your terms of reference that the domestic cat has been identified as a "problem", with no clear definition as to what that problem is. In our experience as a trusted and well regarded cat welfare agency, the major overriding issues are:

- Lack of application of Legislation (Cat Act 2011)
- Lack of enforcement from local Government (Cat Act 2011 and local cat laws)
- Lack of education of a cat's breeding cycle and sexual majority, resulting in cats being desexed at 6 months of age, rather than at 3 months of age or younger. Cats are prolific breeders, reaching sexual maturity by the age of 4 months and having two to three litters of kittens per year. Litters can consist of up to nine kittens. In 4 months, these 9 kittens can breed, and then the cycle continues. This is probably the biggest factor in the cat problem. Unlike dogs, cats are harder to contain, particularly un-desexed cats who will roam in breeding season
- The reluctance of the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) citing:
"The AVA believes surgical desexing (sterilisation) is an important tool to reduce unwanted companion animals in the community, particularly when combined with relevant community education programs. Veterinarians should make decisions about the type of sterilisation procedure and age of sterilisation on a case-by-case basis, in consultation with the client, based on the risks and benefits to the individual animal"

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So often in animal welfare, we will see a cat with an unwanted litter of kittens and the owner advising us they were told by their Vet to leave the desexing until the cat is 6 months of age

- Lack of education on responsible cat ownership (for example, sterilization and containment requirements)
- The management of cats being left solely to agencies such as Cat Haven or the RSPCA with little to no government funding
- That the general population is still unaware of the existence of the Cat Act 2011, which came into effect in 2013
- Access to affordable desexing for cats owned by those that experience financial hardship, which will increase in the current economic climate. This leads to unwanted breeding and the trading/selling of these litters, which ensures the overpopulation of cats continues. More often than not, when these kittens are sold or given away, they are not desexed, so the uncontrolled breeding continues

The effectiveness of the current legislation is not only hampered by the above issues, but by the fact it is not compulsory for individual local Governments (Councils) to comply with the Cat Act 2011, with some not taking any action at all. From our intake records, it is evident there are problematic areas in WA for unwanted cats, usually from an area where the Council does not have adequate resources to enforce the Cat Act 2011.

There is no regulation on the buying, selling and transferring of cats and kittens in regards to online selling sites such as Gumtree. Cats and kittens, which are not compliant with the Cat Act 2011 (for example, cats who are not desexed and microchipped) are continually and blatantly traded on these sites with no action or consequences. Written appeals from Cat Haven to Gumtree pointing out there is non-compliance to legislation on their site have gone unanswered.

- d) From our perspective in regards to domestic cats, we have not seen any action at a Commonwealth level in regards to cat legislation
- e) Methods to date to control feral cats have been largely ineffective. True feral cats can be wary of traps (which incidentally should never be hired to unqualified people), as they can sense the contact from humans. Shooting is probably the most humane method of disposal, but feral cats can be elusive and largely unseen. 1080 poison is not effective for cats who prefer live prey. Additionally, bait such as 1080 does not discriminate in what it kills and we have the situation of much loved family pets, usually dogs, dying an agonizing death as a result of accidental ingestion

It is evident that there needs to be advances in how we approach the issue of feral cats.

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f) As outlined above, whilst the Cat Act 2011 has given us a platform to begin work in Western Australia, there is more work to be done, namely:

- Heavily subsidized/free desexing for high risk cats, funded by the Government
- Curfews for cats at night – this will also benefit the welfare of domestic cats
- Mandatory management of cats to be undertaken by local Government (Councils) with the potential to outsource or subcontract to agencies such as Cat Haven to avoid unnecessary euthanasia. This is the practice here in Western Australia with some (but not all) local Councils
- The cessation of online buying, trading, giving away and selling of cats and kittens
- Education in regards to the responsible ownership of cats, for example school programs, community programs and programs for residents new to Australia

High risk cats are generally owned by people experiencing financial hardship or who live on or close to the poverty line that are un-desexed, and the resulting kittens can be sold/traded/given away without the appropriate information in regards to desexing.

g) Education plays a large role in how we manage cats, feeding stray cats because they feel it helps the cat is a prime example. Feeding a stray cat rather than surrendering it to a rescue group or shelter is allowing that cat to potentially continue breeding. Many members of the public are reluctant to surrender these cats, fearing euthanasia as the most likely outcome. However if surrendered, health checked, desexed and microchipped, these cats could then be released back to the community, provided someone took responsibility for the health of the cat

Any education program that is established must include the positives of owning a domestic cat, as opposed to focusing on the perceived negatives associated with feral cats. Domestic cats require a secure and loving home, and in return can become a valued, essential part of our lives.

The benefits of cat ownership are well known, some examples include:

- Love, affection and companionship, resulting in the improvement of mental health and well-being. This has become even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Providing a sense of purpose and responsibility, particularly for those experiencing social isolation

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- Cats are a low-maintenance pet for both families and individuals living in cities and high density suburban areas

h) As previously stated, the only connection between feral and domestic cats occurs when un-desexed domestic cats are either dumped or wander, and as a result breed with feral cats. The best practice to avoid this would be to ensure all kittens are desexed by the age of three months.

There seems to be a very negative tone in this inquiry in regards to the domestic cat, with the benefits of companion cat ownership not being addressed.

Until we can get 'buy in' and absolute commitment from all stakeholders in regards to resolving the current cat issues, acknowledging that cats are here to stay, there will be no solutions and the perceived problems will continue indefinitely.

We hope that as part of this inquiry, you take into account the difference between a 'feral' cat, and a 'domesticated' cat in Australia. Accordingly, we hope that you can separate the perceived problems between the two groups of very different cat populations in Australia. We also hope that you take into consideration the many benefits that domestic cats can bring into a person's life.

In addition, any decisions made, particularly with 'feral' cats, need to be implemented with an understanding that these cats are sentient beings that feel pain, suffering and fear.

Roz Robinson
CEO
Cat Haven

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