

Submission from the Cat Protection Society of NSW

The terms of reference suggest a broad consideration of the environment but only in relation to cats. We submit that this is flawed. The environment (and its animals) are significantly threatened by habitat loss, land clearing, climate change and extreme weather events including bushfire and drought. These are not caused by cats.

The summer 2019-20 bushfires burnt millions of hectares and killed more than one billion native animals. Iconic species such as koalas are now on the brink of extinction in NSW and keystone species such as flying foxes, vital to whole ecosystems, are now threatened. Surviving flying fox colonies will be further challenged by continued loss of habitat and extreme heat events.

Volunteer firefighters' efforts saved an area of bushland at Manyana on the NSW South Coast. Among burnt forest, this oasis is now earmarked to be bulldozed for housing development. A colony of chlamydia-free koalas in the Macarthur region south west of Sydney should represent hope for the species but it is threatened by land clearing for massive residential development.

The preservation of habitat, clean air and clean water are not contingent on the existence or non-existence of cats.

Achieving positive environmental outcomes requires investment in research; innovative, creative and humane thinking; effective legal protections; changed human behaviours and priorities; economic incentives; and a serious commitment to a One Welfare framework. Animal welfare, biodiversity and environmental health are all connected to human wellbeing. We ignore this at our peril.

Isolating a single species is fundamentally flawed. It actively deflects from recognising the complexities of the interdependency of nature and all species.

Cat Protection does not suggest that cats belong in all environments. Cat Protection accepts that there are habitats where cats cause harm. We also know that cats provide enormous health, economic and social benefits to people.

As an animal protection charity, Cat Protection is naturally concerned with animal welfare generally. One of our guiding principles is that every animal deserves to be treated humanely and with respect for their sentience. Any strategies seeking to promote native ecosystems must be humane.

Alternatives to cruel and dangerous poisons such as 1080 are long overdue. The continued use of this poison (banned across most of the world) isn't just hideously cruel to the animals it targets, it threatens wildlife directly and also indirectly when baits are consumed by guardian animals or dingoes. Numerous pets have also suffered excruciating deaths from eating 1080 baits.

Respectful consideration of all living creatures is imperative to building a humane and kind society. Treatment of animals should be respectful and compassionate, even when it is considered that a particular animal or group of animals is harmful to a particular ecosystem.

Responsible pet ownership

Cat Protection has long advocated for socially and environmentally responsible pet ownership, which protects native animals at the same time as supporting the benefits of the human-animal bond. Cats have been the companions of people for some 10,000 years and this unique relationship should be honoured.

Cat Protection and many other Australian animal charities deliver programs to promote and support responsible pet ownership in our communities, frequently with support from state and local governments. Domestic cat management issues can be highly local, and very local responses are therefore appropriate. To cite just one NSW example, Cat Protection supported an initiative of Tweed Shire Council “Love Cats, Love Wildlife” (which also received financial support from the NSW Government through the NSW Environmental Trust).

Cat Protection has enjoyed a constructive working relationship with the NSW Government and many NSW councils. We have had excellent support for our Good Neighbour Project, which includes a wide range of multi-media resources on responsible cat ownership topics (for cat owners as well as people working with cats) as well as subsidised desexing, microchipping and vaccination programs. The Good Neighbour Project includes materials in Auslan, Arabic, Cantonese, Korean, Mandarin and Vietnamese as well as English.

Animal welfare charities in Australia and overseas have invested significantly in research, community outreach and education programs to humanely minimise the negative impact of cats on the environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused the postponement of the 2020 RSPCA Animal Welfare Seminar which was to explore the future of humane domestic cat management in Australia. Unfortunately, a wealth of knowledge on this subject is unlikely to be provided to the Committee at this time, as researchers and animal charities are stretched by the economic, health and safety impact of the global pandemic.

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