

# The Australian Government's '2 million cat cull'

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## The Threatened Species Strategy—killing 2 million cats

The Australian Government has implemented a Threatened Species Strategy that aims to reverse the decline in native species numbers and to support species recovery.<sup>1</sup> Central to the Strategy's 'five-year response' is a project to kill 2 million cats by 2020. This is the Strategy's response to the threat cats are thought to pose to native species.<sup>2</sup>



## Why is the Government targeting cats?

The Australian Government estimates that cats have an impact on 1 in 5 mammal species and are implicated in 28 mammal extinctions.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note, however, that these figures are virtually impossible to calculate accurately or to verify.<sup>4</sup> It is also unclear how any action taken in relation to cats will be effective if human threats to biodiversity, such as habitat destruction, urban expansion and vehicle collisions, are not also tackled.<sup>5</sup>

## How will the 'cull' be carried out?

A major part of the Strategy is the implementation of the *Threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats*.<sup>6</sup> This Plan sets out the methods that will be used to kill cats. These methods include:

**Poisoning:** The 'conservation' effect of baiting, or poisoning, is debatable. Baiting also has significant animal welfare concerns and is an offence in some jurisdictions. For example, it is a criminal offence in the ACT to lay a poison where it is reasonably likely the poison will kill a domestic or native animal. Whether the person intends to kill or injure the animal is irrelevant.<sup>7</sup>

**Trapping:** Padded jaw leg-hold traps and cage traps are legal in some jurisdictions. However, trapped animals (including cats and native animals) are vulnerable to exposure, thirst, starvation and shock.

**Shooting:** Cats are often killed by recreational shooters who are not always experienced or skilled. The regulation of shooters in Australia is not comprehensive, meaning welfare standards are lacking.

<sup>1</sup>Department of the Environment and Energy, *The Australian Government's Threatened Species Strategy* (2016) Australian Government <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/strategy-home>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See for example: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-13/greg-hunt-feral-cat-native-animals-fact-check/5858282> (13 November 2014) and <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/feral-cat-population-over-estimated/7941824> (18 October 2016).

<sup>5</sup> The only reference to 'human' in the entire 55-page Strategy is the observation that 'Threatened species do not respect human borders and boundaries' (ibid, p14).

<sup>6</sup> Department of the Environment, *Threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats* (2015) Australian Government: <https://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/78f3dea5-c278-4273-8923-fa0de27aacfb/files/tap-predation-feral-cats-2015.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> *Animal Welfare Act 1992* (ACT), s 12A(3).

**Fencing:** Exclusion fences keep cats out of specific fenced areas, and are a non-lethal and less inhumane method of controlling impacts of cats on other animals.

It is also important to note that animals other than cats are at risk from these methods.

### Will these actions be monitored for their animal welfare impacts?

The Threatened Species Strategy and associated documents provide relatively little information about the welfare impacts of these methods on cats. The Government states that a Feral Cat Taskforce made up of government officials and stakeholders will implement, monitor and report on the cat *Threat Abatement Plan*. However, this mainly relates to population levels and research for new, potentially less inhumane control techniques.<sup>8</sup> There is no readily available evidence of government plans to monitor the welfare impacts of the cat culls.



Photo: www.abc.net.au

The Threatened Species Strategy asks members of the community, land managers, farmers and other stakeholders to report impacts, sightings and culls of cats via a 'CatScan' App that is designed to monitor cats Australia wide.<sup>9</sup> However, the Government's explanation of the App does not mention reporting on animal welfare standards as part of this process.

### Non-lethal alternatives: Trap, Neuter, Release programs

Managing cat populations can be achieved in non-lethal ways, including fencing or Trap, Neuter and Release programs (TNR). Some of these methods, or a combination, would be effective in addressing concerns about cat populations with minimal negative consequences. For example, TNRs catch, desex and return cats from certain colonies and populations to where they were found. This ensures the cat population diminishes over time. There are, however, some legal uncertainties related to TNRs. Releasing cats back into the environment as part of a TNR program may constitute an offence of abandonment or unlawful liberation under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* (NSW) or an offence of liberating a non-native animal under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* (NSW).<sup>10</sup>

### In conclusion...

The ADO has significant concerns about the Government's proposed cat cull as a satisfactory response to the issue of native species loss. Proposed killing methods such as poisoning, trapping or shooting are inhumane and have unacceptable welfare consequences for individual sentient animals. The lack of monitoring of the culls increases the welfare concerns. The ADO recommends that non-lethal methods be supported and funded, and human activities be placed at the centre of any proposed strategy for dealing with Australia's deplorable rate of native species loss and extinction.

#### DISCLAIMER

While all care has been taken in preparing the information on this fact sheet, it is not a substitute for legal advice. For any specific questions we recommend you seek legal advice. The Animal Defenders Office accepts no responsibility for any loss or damage suffered by people relying on the information on this fact sheet.

<sup>8</sup> Department of the Environment, above n 6.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Environment and Energy, above n 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979*, s11; *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*, s 109.