



The state of cats in New Zealand: A precarious position

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ABSTRACT

Cats are one of the most popular companion animals around the world, but they are also one of the most invasive species. In New Zealand alone cats are responsible for the extinction of several native species. However, management of cat populations and the effect they have on the environment is confounded by people's emotional attachment to cats, and the many health and social benefits cats provide. In New Zealand, anti-cat sentiment is putting pressure on local councils to increase regulation of cat ownership in order to control cat populations and reduce their impact on native wildlife. Regulations and policies concerning cats have so far been developed by individual local councils, and as such there is considerable variation in how cats are managed throughout New Zealand. While there are national guidelines for care of companion animals, it is worth investigating whether it is time for stronger national regulations and direction on cats. As such, desktop research on cat management in New Zealand was conducted, including analysis of various central and local government policies, along with academic studies and news articles from around New Zealand. This article concludes that stronger national direction is needed and discusses what exactly should be included in such national direction.

Keywords: Companion species, Predator management, Biodiversity Policy, feral, domesticated

1. INTRODUCTION

First brought to New Zealand by European settlers in 1769 (King, 1984), cats (*Felis catus*) have long been a beloved companion animal in New Zealand households. Not only do they offer companionship, but cats are also prized for their hunting abilities—particularly where pest species, such as rats and mice, abound. This, however, does not negate the International Union for Conservation of Nature's classification of cats as among 100 of the world's worst invasive species (Lowe, Browne, Boudjelas, & De Poorter, 2000). In New Zealand alone, where native species evolved without exposure to land-based mammalian predators, cats are implicated in the extinction of at least six endemic species (Fisher, Algar, Murphy, Johnston, & Eason, 2015). Cat predation on native wildlife—particularly native birds—is well-publicised, with various factions advocating for stronger

cat ownership regulations, improved management of companion and feral cat populations, or even for the total eradication of all cats (companion and feral alike) from New Zealand (Perry, 2013; The Morgan Foundation, n.d.; Chen, 2018). However, as total eradication of cats would be extremely costly and likely elicit negative public reaction, it is perhaps neither a practical nor wise strategy to adopt. At present there is inadequate national direction on cat management in New Zealand, with the responsibility being left to the Department of Conservation (DOC) and local councils. If cat populations are to be effectively managed in New Zealand, there needs to be stronger national direction to achieve conservation goals whilst protecting the socio-cultural importance of cats to New Zealanders. There are numerous ways such national direction could be achieved, including: through statutory means such as a National Policy

Statement or biodiversity strategy, which could give cat management operations legal backing; or through non-statutory means, such as a national strategy or action plan. Momentum for such a national direction is already underway, with a proposed New Zealand National Cat Management Strategy being put forward by the National Cat Management Strategy Group in 2017 (National Cat Management Strategy Group, 2017). This article aims to explore which approach is most suitable given the relationship of cats to New Zealanders, existing cat management systems, and growing concerns around the issue.

2. THE ROLE OF CATS IN NEW ZEALAND

From 1769 onwards, cats became an increasingly popular feature of New Zealand households (King, 1984). According to the New Zealand Companion Animal Council, in 2016 44% of households owned a cat—making cats the most popular companion animal in New Zealand. Since their arrival, cats have often been considered an invasive pest that should be eradicated to protect New Zealand’s native biodiversity (Farnworth, Dye & Keown, 2010). Several studies concur that cats are responsible for a number of bird, mammal, and reptile extinctions in New Zealand (Bruce, 2018; Farnworth, Dye & Keown, 2010; Fitzgerald & Gibb, 2001). Well known examples in New Zealand include the total extinction of the Stephen Island Wren in the late 1800s due to a single cat owned by the lighthouse keeper on Stephen Island (Farnworth, Dye & Keown, 2010). Likewise, Grand and Otago skink populations are believed to be at critically low levels in Central Otago due to cat predation (Department of Conservation, n.d.).

It should be noted that cats are more than simply a conservation concern, and it is worth exploring the emotional relationship between New Zealanders and their cats. Cat management is a sensitive topic due to the emotional investment many New Zealanders have with the species. The strong relationship between New Zealand cat owners and their pets is clearly seen in the public opposition to Gareth Morgan’s controversial ‘Cats to go’ campaign (Perry, 2013; The Morgan Foundation, n.d.). The Morgan Foundation

admits that “we got hate mail, even death threats. We upset a lot of people that are interested in cat welfare” because of their campaign to eradicate cats and make New Zealand truly predator free (The Morgan Foundation, n.d.). This indicates that while stronger national direction is needed to manage cat populations in New Zealand, such national direction must respect and provide for the unique and significant socio-cultural relationship between humans and cats, and ensure that any measures to regulate cat populations are ethically and publicly acceptable.

Furthermore, the benefits cats provide to human welfare should not be under-valued when considering cat management policies. Numerous studies have, for instance, found that cat ownership correlates with many positive health outcomes. Of particular note, cat owners, or people who have previously owned a cat, have been found to have significantly lower risk rates of cardiovascular disease compared to non-cat owners (Friedmann & Thomas, 1995; Qureshi, Memon, Vazquez & Suri, 2009). The mental health benefits of cat ownership or companionship have already been well implemented into many mental health and psychotherapeutic practices (Friedmann & Thomas, 1995; Qureshi, Memon, Vazquez & Suri, 2009; Wood, Giles-Corti & Bulsara, 2005). Cats have been shown to reduce and improve negative moods (including anxiety, fear, depression, and introversion), and are often present in psychiatric centres (Turner, 2017). Cat companionship has also been described as a cure for loneliness. This is because cats often substitute, or replace, aspects of our social networks and become additional sources of emotional support (Rijken & van Beek, 2011; Turner, 2017; Wood, Giles-Corti & Bulsara, 2005). For example, women living alone tend to be significantly lonelier than those living with a cat (Zasloff & Kidd, 1994). It is for these reasons that total eradication of cats in New Zealand would not only be unwise, but also seriously unpopular. The benefits to human welfare should not be overlooked when creating and implementing any national direction on cat management.

3. EXISTING POLICIES, LEGISLATION, AND MANAGEMENT OF CATS IN NEW ZEALAND

Management of cat populations in New Zealand walks a fine line between addressing conservation concerns and protecting the interests of cat owners. To date, cats live in an ambiguous legislative state: they are neither classified as a pest under a national pest management plan or the New Zealand Biodiversity Action plan (2016), nor protected as an exotic species under the New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy 2000. In general, the New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy (2000) has emphasised in situ conservation, favouring the protection of native fauna rather than introduced, or exotic, species. This reflects a requirement under the Convention on Biological Diversity in Article 8(h) to “prevent the introduction of, control or eradicate those alien species which threaten ecosystems, habitats or species” (Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992). Though clearly a conservation issue, the New Zealand Biodiversity Action Plan (2016)—which showcases actions being undertaken to meet New Zealand’s commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity, including the Predator Free 2050 program—fails to address the threats that cats pose to native wildlife. Predator Free 2050 instead aims to eradicate rats, stoats, and possums from New Zealand by 2050 (Predator Free 2050, n.d.). Under provisions of the Biosecurity Act 1993, a cat could be labelled as a ‘pest’ in both national and regional pest management plans (Biosecurity Act 1993, part 5). While some regional councils have included feral cats in their regional pest management plans (for example, section 10.3.5 of the Auckland Regional Pest Management Strategy 2007-2012), there has been no national pest management plan targeting cats—companion or feral—to date. Not classifying cats as pests would make sense if *feliis catus* (the companion cat) was protected under the previous New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy (2000), which can offer protection to exotic species if they are important for economic, biological, or cultural reasons (The New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy, 2000, section

26.4). Cats, however, have not been granted this protection.

This lack of national recognition and direction for cats in New Zealand has meant that cat population management lacks a uniform approach across the country. Part of the problem is the difficulty in distinguishing between various classifications of cats. Under New Zealand’s Code of Welfare—Companion Cats 2018, cats are separated into companion, stray, and feral categories (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2018). Companion cats refer to those that live with humans or are dependent on humans for their welfare, whereas stray cats are defined as lost or abandoned companion cats either living alone or in a group (colony). Stray cats may be indirectly reliant on humans for their needs. Feral cats, on the other hand, have none of their needs supplied by humans and generally live away from centres of human habitation (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2018). This categorisation allows for different management techniques to be adopted to address feral cats, as opposed to stray and companion cats. Feral cats are considered to pose a more significant threat to New Zealand’s native wildlife than companion or stray cats (Forest & Bird, 2018). Under provisions of the Biosecurity Act 1993, DOC currently considers feral cats to be a pest species. Once labelled as a pest species, feral cats may be hunted and killed, as per the provisions of section 30B(1)(b)(iv) of the Animal Welfare Act 1999—which allows for any animals defined as a pest under the Biosecurity Act 1993 to be hunted and killed (Animal Welfare Act 1999; Farnworth, Dye & Keown, 2010). Management of companion and stray cats is generally left to the discretion of individual city and district councils who, under section 146a(v) of the Local Government Act 2002, may make bylaws to regulate the keeping of animals.

While on paper the distinctions between companion, stray, and feral cats are clear, in reality it is difficult to distinguish between them. This is because stray or abandoned cats can easily revert to a feral state within only one generation (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2018). This means that companion cats who are abandoned or get lost blur the boundaries

between companion, stray and feral (Griffiths, Poulter, & Sibley, 2004). False identification of cats not only reduces the effectiveness of pest control operations, but may also spur negative public reaction if companion cats are mistaken for their feral counterparts. Stray cats, therefore, are in an ambiguous territory and require a unified management approach from both DOC and territorial authorities (Farnworth, Dye & Keown, 2010).

Various councils, community groups, NGOs, and even government organisations (such as DOC) approach the issues of identification, de-sexing, and general cat population management in different ways. For instance, Part 2 of the Wellington Consolidated Bylaw 2008 regarding animals was updated in 2016 to enforce compulsory microchipping and registering of all cats within Wellington City limits. Companion cats in Wellington must now be registered either on the New Zealand Companion Animal Register (NZCAR) or another council approved microchip register (Wellington City Council, 2016). Similarly, Palmerston North City Council adopted its Animals and Bees Bylaw in 2018. This bylaw requires all cats born after July 1st 2018 to be microchipped, registered, and de-sexed. It also limits the number of cats residents in urban areas can keep to three cats per household (Palmerston North City, 2018). Microchipping, although an effective means of distinguishing between companion, stray, and feral cats, is not currently mandatory across New Zealand. The Code of Welfare for Companion Cats 2018 does suggest minimum standards for caring for companion cats, and includes recommendations to de-sex all cats, except for those kept by a registered breeder for breeding purposes. The Code also suggests that “cats should be identified with a microchip” (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2018, p.22). Currently, cat owners are not legally required to follow these recommendations. However, evidence of a failure to meet a relevant minimum standard in the code may be used to support a prosecution under the Animal Welfare Act 1999.

4. ESCALATING TENSIONS

The risks that cats pose to the protection and conservation of New Zealand’s native wildlife is not ground-breaking news. However, campaigns such as those by the Morgan Foundation to label all cats, companion and feral alike, as pests have been gaining traction in public spheres. Recently the town of Omaui in the Southland region of New Zealand moved to completely ban all cats in the township in order to protect native birds (Chen, 2018). Those opposed to such campaigns often raise concerns that labelling cats as pests may foster negative public perceptions of cats and, in some cases, promote cruelty towards them (Kerridge, 2019). Conversely, those campaigning against cats often overlook the strong attachment between owners and their companion cats, thus putting cat owners on the defensive. Clearly there is opportunity for a nationwide strategy or policy statement to co-ordinate management of cat populations and reduce their impact on native biodiversity, whilst also prohibiting inhumane actions towards cats. While cats are clearly a threat to conservation efforts, management of their populations must be ethically acceptable and done with caution (Kerridge, 2019; Farnworth, Dye & Keown, 2010; Medina et al. 2016).

In 2017, the National Cat Management Strategy Group (NCMSG), made up of members from Local Government New Zealand, the Morgan Foundation, the New Zealand Companion Animal Council, the New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA), Companion Animal Veterinarians, and the Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), developed a proposed New Zealand National Cat Management Strategy. Their aim was “to lobby local and central government to enact useful legislation that facilitates sustainable humane cat management” (National Cat Management Strategy Group, 2017, p.5). The proposed national strategy addresses the conservation issues around cats, whilst also seeking humane and sustainable population controls that respect the relationship between New Zealanders and their beloved cats. However, critics have been quick to suggest that statistics used in the strategy are unreliable and have

been used to paint a negative image of cats (Kerridge, 2018).

5. POSSIBILITIES

While the current Code of Welfare—Companion Cats 2018—perhaps does not go far enough in legislating responsible ownership of cats in terms of microchipping, de-sexing and so on, the strategy proposed by NCMSG does appear to strike a middle-ground approach to cat management. NCMSG’s call for “useful legislation” is warranted, and New Zealand could benefit from mandatory legislative requirements regarding cat management. Such mandatory requirements could be enacted through a National Policy Statement, and may include regulations such as: the compulsory microchipping of all cats nationwide; stronger de-sexing and neutering regulations; the creation of a regulated cat breeding programme; and investigation into the effectiveness of humane population control of stray cats, such as trap-neuter-release (TNR) programmes. It is important that the adopted regulations placate public desire for humane methods of cat population control, as highlighted by Mankad, Kennedy and Carter (2019) who found that “public perceptions of what is and isn’t in the best interests of cat welfare do not always align with veterinary definitions of care and welfare” (Mankad, Kennedy & Carter, 2019, p.316).

TNR programmes may be a viable option for future management of cats in New Zealand. As opposed to trap to kill programmes, which tend to spark public outcry, TNR programmes take stray and feral cats, de-sex them, and return them to their area. Using this method, the population of stray and feral cats will slowly decline over time, without causing public backlash over perceptions of inhumane treatment. Some studies have found that TNR is more effective because it does not open up cat territories to new stray or feral cat populations, as happens if the original cat inhabitants are euthanised. Therefore, although it takes a long time to achieve, TNR has more effective results (Levy, Gale & Gale, 2003). In 2014, Wellington SPCA and Wellington City Council set up a pilot project to investigate the effectiveness of TNR on a stray

cat population in the suburb of Strathmore. This resulted in a slow decline in the stray cat colony, showing that compassionate population control methods can be effective if given the chance (Mussen, 2015). In other countries TNR has become standard practise for major animal welfare organisations, such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the Humane Society of the United States (L.A. Unleashed, 2009).

Stronger requirements for nationwide de-sexing and neutering of cats should also be included in a national direction. Such requirements should not aim to fully eradicate cats from New Zealand, but rather to bring the national cat population under control. At present there are no statutory requirements for companion cats throughout New Zealand to be de-sexed or neutered (Farnworth, Dye, & Keown, 2010). Certain cat shelters, such as the Cats Protection League and the SPCA, require cats to be de-sexed before they are rehomed, but this is not currently a legal requirement (Cats Protection League Canterbury, n.d.; SPCA, n.d.). If requirements for microchipping, TNR, and neutering were made mandatory in a legislative document such as a national management strategy, uniform management of cats across New Zealand might just be possible.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Though clearly a conservation issue, the issue of cat management should not, and realistically cannot, be addressed without respect to the socio-cultural role of cats in New Zealand society. National guidance for minimum standards of care have been given through the Code of Welfare—Companion Cats 2018 as directed under the Animal Welfare Act 1999, but these minimum standards of care are not legally enforceable. To date, central government has provided little in the way of mandatory regulations regarding cats. If New Zealand is to achieve conservation goals then it is necessary to have stronger regulations around cat management and ownership nationwide. However, such regulations should not be at the expense of the emotional attachment many New Zealanders feel towards cats. There is room then, for a

National management strategy, national policy statement, or action plan regarding cat management to be developed. This could include nationwide legislative requirements for microchipping, de-sexing where appropriate, and possibly TNR programmes. Such a strategy should seek to balance the competing conservation and socio-cultural interests around cat management in New Zealand in a way that benefits all parties.

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