



Cat Management Policy

8 July 2021

Background

South Australia (SA) has the second highest level of cat ownership in Australia with 37% of households owning a cat (*Pet ownership in Australia 2016*, Animal Medicines Australia Report). In addition, there are also large numbers of unowned cats in SA.

SA lags other States in managing cat populations. It is important for governments to enact measures that maintain cat welfare and minimise the threats cats pose to wildlife.

Cats are deservedly popular pets. They are intelligent and sensitive animals which deserve a safe home in which they are well cared for. However, many cats are either only loosely associated with humans (unowned) or live completely independently (feral).

Unowned and feral cats suffer from a high mortality rate, especially as kittens, and suffer from a range of infectious diseases, including parasitic diseases, which can be readily passed on to household cats and, in some instances, to humans.

Cats that live without close association with humans often prey on wildlife and in Australia are recognised as a potential threat to 74 species of mammals, 40 bird species, many reptile species and four amphibian species (*Federal Inquiry on Feral & Domestic Cats*, 2020). According to recent estimates, predation by cats is currently responsible for the loss of at least 320 million native birds across Australia per year.

All cats, especially those which are not household pets, may become a nuisance due to their behaviour which may include soiling, spraying, fighting with other cats and noise as well as their threat to native wildlife.

The South Australian *Dog and Cat Management Act 1995* provides the framework for management of dogs and cats in the community. It promotes effective management strategies for dogs and cats (eg the requirement for microchipping and desexing of animals) but fails to achieve the State-wide changes that are needed for effective cat management.

A Birds SA survey revealed that individual councils and the Local Government Association have identified a lack of consistency in cat management by-laws across the State as an issue.

Cat management faces several challenges. Unlike dogs, containment of owned cats outdoors (such as in gardens) is very difficult due to their high agility.

While rehoming of semi-owned and un-owned cats is an attractive idea, it is expensive, (currently greater than \$700 per rehomed animal) and is an unsustainable long-term solution for animal welfare charities such as the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League (AWL). There is also a limited capacity for rehoming, which is already under pressure from pet cats whose owners have surrendered them.

Recommendations

1. The SA Dog and Cat Management Board should administer a common and consistent approach to cat management across the State. Legislation should cover all council areas so that there are consistent requirements for all cat owners to meet.
2. Cat registration, with an annual fee, should be mandatory in all council areas to contribute to the cost of implementing and enforcing cat ownership laws.
3. Clear guidelines are required for detaining roaming cats. These should include the basis for detention, the length of time that cats can be retained if not claimed by their owners, and the resultant fate of unclaimed cats.
4. The Dog & Cat Management Act should specify a State-wide limit on the number of cats an owner can retain at a property without a special permit.
5. Cat owners should be encouraged to keep their cat(s) at home, reinforced with the following message from the Australian Veterinary Association: *"The fact is, the more time a pet cat spends safe at home, the less risk of injury or death from road accidents, fighting, and disease. A pet cat kept safe at home can live up to four times longer than a cat left to roam."*
6. An owned cat should be desexed so that it cannot mate with unowned cats.
7. An owned cat should be micro-chipped and should be confined to the owner's property, except if the cat is being exercised, in which case it should be kept under control.
8. Cats which are shown to be living independently of humans and carrying no means of identification should be euthanased. Methods employed for this must minimise suffering.

References

Effective management benefits cats, native wildlife and the human community
(<https://www.safecat.org.au/>)

Tackling the feral cat pandemic: a plan to save Australian wildlife

Commonwealth of Australia Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy, 2020

RSPCA/AWL Cat Management Plan for South Australia, November 2019