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

The Friends of Warrandyte State Park welcomes this opportunity to make a submission for the House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy inquiry into the problem of feral and domestic cats in Australia.

Warrandyte State Park is a combination of disjunct parcels of land and vegetation corridors enclosed by urban and semi rural private households. Cats have been identified in the Warrandyte State Park as a major threat to native wildlife and a priority pest animal species to manage. Without a 24 hour curfew and actual enforcement of sanctions the physical and financial efforts by Friends of Warrandyte State Park to protect the local fauna including the threatened Brush Tailed Phascogale are quickly undone by the constant action of domestic cats. It is clear from the references cited that there is no alternative to a 24 hour curfew that is safe for the wildlife of Warrandyte and the greater environment.

**DISCUSSION:**

**a. TOR: the prevalence of feral and domestic cats in Australia;**

Feral cats are distributed throughout all Australian states and territories and many offshore Islands. The wide distribution of feral cats across Australia encompasses every possible habitat type on the continent (Arid Recovery 2019). The success of feral cats in Australia can be attributed to many factors including their opportunistic and generalist prey and habitat preferences, being able to survive without access to water and the presence of a constant domestic source population (Doherty et al. 2017).

The cost of feral cat management and research has been estimated at \$2 million per year nationally. The economic loss inflicted by feral and domestic cats, based on bird predation alone, has been estimated at \$144 million annually ([agriculture.vic.gov.au/agriculture/pests-diseases-and-weeds/pest-animals/a-z-of-pest-animals/cat-feral-or-wild](http://agriculture.vic.gov.au/agriculture/pests-diseases-and-weeds/pest-animals/a-z-of-pest-animals/cat-feral-or-wild) 2020)

**b. TOR: the impact of feral and domestic cats including on native wildlife and habitats;**

The 'Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats 2015' finds that the categories of cats (Domestic, Stray & Feral) are artificial, as individuals may move from one category to another (Moodie 1995; Newsome 1991). This inquiry needs to highlight, that even well cared for, well feed domestic cats will instinctually hunt for pleasure (Paton 1991).

**Impact of Cats on Native Wildlife**

Cats prey on and destroy a large number of native fauna species. The inventory of species on which the cat is known to feed includes 186 birds, 64 mammals (possums, sugar gliders), 87 reptiles (snakes, lizards, skinks), at least 10 frog species and numerous insects (Paton 1993). Cats are known to eat animals up to their own body weight, which includes most endangered and vulnerable mammal species in Australia.

The remaining native wildlife in around the Warrandyte State Park, are threatened by many factors, including: climate change; wildfires; fragmentation of habitat and vegetation corridors; loss of habitat from diseased trees and fungus; overgrazing from rabbits, horses and feral deer; competition for habitat with other feral species; decline in stream water quality; urban sprawl; light pollution; fox, dog and cat predation (Foreman 2004). The recent catastrophic bushfires is reported to have killed over a billion native animals, with warnings of more bushfires of this scale and the extinction of the koala by 2050 (Climate Council 2020). Australia's native wildlife is now extremely vulnerable. This inquiry is an opportunity to remove *one* of the pressures on our wildlife populations.

**Indirect Impact of Cats on Wildlife Populations & Humans**

The cat is recognized as the [natural reservoir](#) of disease:

Cat Saliva Bacteria - Cats have a cocktail of deadly bacteria in their saliva that Australian Wildlife has not adapted to. Therefore, cats don't have to kill the animal in the attack, they only have to create a

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puncture wound on the animal and they will die from the bacterial infection alone (Wildlife Victoria 2015).

Cat-Scratch Disease - Cat-scratch disease is caused by the *Bartonella henselae* species of bacteria found in flea faeces. As the cat scratches and grooms itself, the bacteria enter its saliva and become lodged under its claws, therefore if wildlife or humans are scratched by a cat the bacteria can cause serious infections for humans and death for native wildlife (Florin 2008).

Salmonellosis - Salmonellosis is another bacterial illness cats can pick up by eating raw meat, including wild prey like rodents and birds, which can be transmitted to wildlife and humans (Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine).

Toxoplasmosis - is a disease caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*, spread through contact with cat faeces, which affects the central nervous system and vital organs, and can lead to organ failure, blindness, abortion and death in native wildlife; humans and stock can also be similarly affected, with human miscarriage a well-known risk (DSE 2004). Women infected during pregnancy, can also pass the infection on to their child, resulting in severe consequences for the babies, such as damage to the eyes or nervous system. Studies have also linked toxoplasmosis with a range of human mental illnesses, including schizophrenia, bipolar disease and obsessive compulsive disorder (Bushak 2015).

Parasites - There are several types of intestinal [parasites](#) that are common in cats. Some of these parasites, such as roundworms, hookworms and others, can also be passed to people. Cats that are allowed to roam are more likely to contract these worms from eating dead animals containing these parasites (RSPCA 2015).

Native Plant Pollination impacted - It is also thought that the reduction in numbers of bird species such as honey-eaters has the potential to lower pollination rates of native plants (Greenwood 1993).

c. [TOR: the effectiveness of current legislative and regulatory approaches;](#)

**24 Hour Domestic Cat Protection is important for Wildlife Protection.**

Confining pet cats to their owners' properties is an effective measure to protect native fauna from cat attacks because they prevent cats and wildlife interacting. Confining cats at night should reduce predation on nocturnal fauna such as bats, possums and sugar gliders, however, birds, lizards, snakes, skinks, insects and frogs remain vulnerable to cat kills and attacks during the day (van Heezik, 2010, Barratt 1998).

Total 24 Hour Cat Protection at the owners property would broaden protection to all native wildlife during the day and night and is therefore a preferred option to a night curfew to ensure safety of all wildlife species. Although cat curfews can be unpopular with some cat owners (Grayson et al., 2002; Lillith et al., 2006), it is argued that cats adapt well to staying at home permanently (Jongman 2007). Keeping cats at home also enhances cat welfare by protecting against fighting, road accidents (Rochlitz, 2003a,b, 2004; Engvall et al., 2009), disease and bacteria transmission (Courchamp et al., 2000), and reduces risks of attacks from snakes and larger predators (Crooks and Soulé, 1999; Dabritz et al., 2006) such as dogs and foxes.

Cats living indoors live an average of 12 years, whilst cats living outdoors have their lives cut short by 9 years with an average life span of only 3 years (DNRE 2002).

Pet cats kill wildlife in urban and semi-rural settings, therefore, for the safety of both wildlife and the cats themselves, the RSPCA, the Cat Protection Society, many Scientists, Veterinarians, Environmentalists, Wildlife Victoria and the Federal Government argue for immediate regulatory action (e.g., Longcore et al., 2009; Lepczyk et al., 2010; van Heezik, 2010).

d. [TOR: the effectiveness of Commonwealth action and cooperation with states and territories on this issue, including progress made under the Threat Abatement Plan, national framework and national declaration relating to feral and domestic cats in Australia;](#)

**Legal Status of Cats**

The Federal 'Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats 2015' has specific objectives and actions relevant to local government recommended, including:

*Action 4.2 focuses on gaining community support on three elements:*

- 1. an understanding of the biodiversity impacts posed by cats;*
- 2. an understanding that all cats are the same species and cats may transition to and from domestic to feral. Incorporated into this is the concept of responsible ownership, including responsibility for stray cats;*
- 3. While many de-sexed domestic cats tend to be more passive, domestic cats do negatively impact on native animals. The last element seeks support for expansion of 24-hour containment requirements for domestic cats, particularly close to identified conservation areas of significance.'*

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### Victorian Legal Status

Predation of native wildlife by the cat is listed as a potentially threatening process under the ***Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act***

1988. The long-term objectives are to reverse the decline of all Victorian native species subject to predation by the cat, and to address any associated detrimental impacts of cats on native wildlife. The key approach outlined is:

*'Responsible cat ownership can limit the number of pets taking native wildlife through the enforcement of curfews, keeping cats confined to the owners property and through desexing.'* (DSE 2004).

***Endangered Species Protection Act 1992*** – also lists *'Predation of native wildlife by the introduced Cat'* as a key threatening process.

***The Domestic Animals Act 1994*** - provides legislative recognition of cats and their management in relation to animal welfare, responsible ownership and the protection of the environment.

Despite the list of legislation and policy at the Federal, State and Local level, cats are still destroying our native wildlife.

The Warrandyte State Park is bordered by the local government areas of Manningham and Nillumbik. Both Council's have compulsory desexing, however, Nillumbik only has a dusk til dawn cat curfew and Manningham only has a prohibition of cats in a small number of reserves due to the nuisance factor of cats. Therefore, cats in Warrandyte Township are permitted to roam freely 24 hours a day and cats in Warrandyte North are permitted to roam freely during the day.

This inconsistency is largely due to the political drivers at the local level. Significantly, this inconsistency with adjoining municipalities creates confusion for cat owners and the community. Protection of wildlife areas from cat attacks in environmentally sensitive areas, should not be a local political issue. To ensure a consistent approach to domestic cat management, clear and consistent regulations and education is required for the communities across the state.

e. TOR: the efficacy (in terms of reducing the impact of cats), cost effectiveness and use of current and emerging methods and tools for controlling feral cats, including baiting, the establishment of feral cat-free areas using conservation fencing, gene drive technology;

Cat control in urban and peri-urban areas is limited due to the risks of using firearms and poison baits in areas with a high human population density and other non-target at risk pets. Investment in research and development of safe control techniques for stray unowned cats in urban and peri-urban environments is required.

g. TOR: public awareness and education in relation to the feral and domestic cat problem; and

Organisations such as the RSPCA, the Cat Protection Society, Landcare, Wildlife Victoria and local veterinarians advocate and strongly support Councils introducing curfews and mandatory desexing of cats.

Due to safety issues cat control in urban and peri-urban areas surrounding Warrandyte State Park is limited, therefore, compulsory desexing and 24 hour cat curfew legislation is important. Education and regulation of domestic cat owners is key to preventing domestic cats from roaming, killing wildlife and sustaining stray and feral cat populations.

h. TOR: the interaction between domestic cat ownership and the feral cat problem, and best practice approaches to the keeping of domestic cats in this regard.

The 'Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats 2015' finds that the categories of cats (Domestic, Stray & Feral) are artificial, as individuals may move from one category to another (Moodie 1995; Newsome 1991).

All cats are biologically the same, whether they are domestic (owned) pets, roaming unowned cats (strays) or feral cats. Domestic cats are those that live in close association with humans who supply the cat's needs for food, shelter and health; roaming unowned cats opportunistically scavenge from humans and hunt; feral cats are free-living, generally independent of humans and obtaining their food solely by hunting. During times of environmental stress, feral cats may become semi dependent on humans. Conversely, rural or peri-urban domestic cats may be semi-independent and supplement their food from hunting (DSE 2004), however, even well cared for, well feed cats will instinctually hunt for pleasure (Paton 1991).

In addition, there is also evidence that owned and stray cats often disperse into the natural environment and help to sustain feral populations (Denny et al. 2002, Hutchings 2003), and so contribute more to impacts on native fauna than has been realized.

### Breeding Cycle of Cats

Cats can produce three litters per year, of between 2 to 9 kittens and reach sexual maturity by 14 months of age (Menkhorst 1995). Unowned populations of cats can increase very rapidly, with an average lifespan of three years, one female cat and her female offspring could potentially produce 108 to 350 young. Stray cats are most abundant near human habitation, with densities in urban areas as high as 40 per hectare (DSE 2004). In peri -urban areas, improperly managed domestic and farm cats often come into contact and breed with wild populations, which contributes to an increase in the unowned cat population. Therefore, desexing of domestic cats is important to help control the unowned cat population growth (Barratt 1998).

### Distances Cats Will Roam

On average, the size of a territory covered by a cat is; 42 acres for female cats and 153 acres for male cats, with domestic male cats on average wandering from 500 to 850 meters and female cats roaming approximately 230 meters away from their home. However, in reality, distances of how far cats roam will vary highly, with some cats known to roam over 3 kilometres in an evening. The distance cats travel depends on the area, whether they are desexed, food availability, age, health status, gender and the cat's personality (Munkevic 2013). Regardless of how well cared for or well fed a domestic cat is, it will still instinctually hunt live animals for pleasure (Paton 1991).

It is highly possible for a domestic cat living in the Warrandyte and Warrandyte Nth suburbs to roam into the Warrandyte State Park and kill protected native wildlife. Feral cats has been declared an established pest animal on specified Crown land in Victoria under the Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994 (CaLP Act), however, domestic cats are not declared as a pest animal under the CaLP Act. And it is an offence

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to destroy a domestic cat, except in very limited circumstances (DEWLP 2018). As domestic cats still kill native wildlife, domestic cats should be included under the CaLP Act as pest.

Desexing is essential to assist with restricting the unowned cat population, however, numerous studies confirm that many desexed cats still remain or become accomplished hunters (e.g., Barratt, 1998; Calver et al., 2007; van Heezik et al., 2010).

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Acknowledge and promote the massive environmental and economic cost of cats across Australia, and adequately resource the implementation of mitigation strategies in Victoria.
2. Ensure a consistent approach to domestic cat management across the state, with clear and consistent messaging, legislation and education campaigns.
3. Develop and implement education campaigns highlighting:
  - the importance of responsible pet ownership and of permanently confining cats for their own protection.
  - that dusk to dawn cat curfews do not protect wildlife from cat attacks during the day;
  - that domestic cats instinctually hunt for pleasure;
  - that the categories of cats (Domestic, Stray & Feral) are artificial;
  - the devastation cats inflict on local native wildlife populations;
  - the increasing vulnerability of native wildlife due to climate change and recent and future catastrophic bushfire events;
  - that cats can pass on disease and parasites to other cats, pets and humans.
4. Develop and implement state wide legislation for a 24 hour domestic cat curfew.
5. Develop and implement state wide legislation for compulsory cat desexing.
6. Invest in research to develop and implement safe cat control methods for urban and peri-urban environments.
7. Resource and implement recommended actions from the Federal 'Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats 2015'.
8. Declare domestic cats roaming at large as a pest under the CALP Act.

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