



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS TACKLING FERAL CATS AND THEIR IMPACTS

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WHAT IS A FERAL CAT?

Feral cats are cats that operate in the wild and can survive without human reliance or contact. The science shows that feral cats are the main driver of extinction for Australia's mammals. They also put extinction pressure on many birds, lizards and frogs. That's why the Threatened Species Strategy targets feral cats.

Domestic cats are ones that are owned and cared for. Stray cats are those found roaming cities, towns and some farming areas and can draw some of their resources from humans – for example scavenging at tips. Responsibly owned domestic cats are those which are cared for according to the RSPCA's policies including: desexing, registering and containment. Roaming domestic cats are those owned and cared for but allowed to roam outside.

Cats are not native to Australia. They arrived in Australia as pets with the first fleet. Over the last 200 years, many domestic cats have become independent of their owners and bred to become feral. Feral cats breed successfully in the Australian landscape, meaning many feral cats have never known or interacted with humans. Feral cats are now present across 99.8% of the Australian continent and can weigh up to 9 kilograms. Female feral cats produce two litters every year. They live on average for five years, as opposed to domestic cats that live on average 9 to 15 years.

WHY ARE FERAL CATS SUCH A BIG PROBLEM?

The peer reviewed science (for example, the Action Plan for Australian Mammals, published in 2014¹) tells us feral cats are the single biggest threat to Australia's native mammals. The threat of feral cats to Australian mammals is almost double that of foxes, which is the next highest threat, and substantially greater than habitat loss.

Feral cats have already directly contributed to extinctions of more than 20 of our Australian mammals, like the rusty numbat, the desert bandicoot, the broad-faced potoroo and the crescent nailtail wallaby. We will never see these remarkable animals again. And they are implicated in another eight mammal extinctions.

Feral cats put direct pressure on at least 124 Australian species endangered with extinction. Feral cats hunt, kill and eat bilbies, numbats, quokkas, quolls, bandicoots, parrots, lizards, frogs and many other endangered animals. Indigenous rangers in South Australia found an endangered black-footed rock-wallaby in the stomach of a 6.5 kg feral cat. Many Australian animals simply cannot survive where there is predation by feral cats. Feral cats also threaten 19 migratory birds listed under international conventions.

The main impact of feral cats is through direct predation, but cats also spread diseases that affect, humans, livestock and our wildlife. These diseases can cause abortions in livestock which reduced farmers' productivity, and create scar tissue in livestock meat which reduces farmers' incomes.

The scientific evidence is very clear: by controlling feral cats, we reduce harm caused to Australian animals and reduce the risk of their extinction. Tackling feral cats humanely and effectively is thus one of the highest priorities for protecting Australian wildlife, particularly our mammals.

¹ BURBIDGE, A. A., HARRISON, P., & WOINARSKI, J. (2014). *The Action Plan for Australian Mammals 2012*. Melbourne, CSIRO Publishing. <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1702486>.

WHAT IS BEING DONE TO REDUCE FERAL CATS?

The Australian Government has a target to cull 2 million feral cats by 2020. Action is happening now across Australia to reduce the number of feral cats and their impacts. We are removing feral cats, in targeted areas which are important to the protection and recovery of threatened species, in a way that is humane, effective and justifiable.

In Kosciusko National Park, Dottie the feral cat detector dog has helped to remove 92 feral cats and 139 foxes, sniffing them out, her handler then humanely removing them from critical mountain pygmy-possum habitat. More juvenile possums are being located where this feral cat removal is occurring and more bandicoots and koonoom populations are also being found.

In South Australia's Flinders Ranges, over 100 feral cats have been removed to support re-establishment of a western quoll population in Wilpena Pound. As many as 160 threatened western quolls are now surviving and thriving in the feral-cat-free environment.

In Western Australia, emergency feral cat baiting and other recovery efforts are being carried out over almost 150,000 ha to protect the critically endangered Gilbert's potoroos and the western ground parrots after recent wildfires made it nearly impossible for them to hide from feral cats.

Since 2014, over \$30 million has been mobilised by the Australian Government to tackle feral cats. An additional \$4.4 million has been invested in the development of the Curiosity® bait. This includes over 105 Green Army projects have been approved that are tackling feral cats.

We all have a role to play in fighting extinction. The Office of the Threatened Species Commissioner is working with regional NRM bodies, local Landcare groups, local councils and other partners to escalate actions that remove feral cats from the environment.

HOW MANY FERAL CATS ARE THERE IN AUSTRALIA?

There are millions of feral cats in Australia, killing many millions of native animals every day.

Scientific analysis shows they occur across 99.8% of the nation, from Australia's highest alpine peaks to remote central Australian deserts, from our beaches, to our forests and across our farmlands. The number of feral cats changes over time in response to ecological and climatic conditions. The impact of feral cats is more important than their exact number. We know feral cats have contributed to over 20 mammal extinctions already, as well as threatening survival of at least another 124 native Australian animals at risk of extinction. Even small numbers of feral cats in some areas can cause severe declines in native species.

Science commissioned by the Threatened Species Strategy shows that there could be between 2.1 and 6.3 million feral cats in Australia. Although this first thorough scientific assessment of the number of feral cats shows their numbers are lower than previous estimates, it also shows that they are more broad-spread than previously assessed and that the damage to our wildlife per feral cat is higher than previously estimated.

HOW WAS THE TWO MILLION FERAL CATS CULLED TARGET DETERMINED?

The Threatened Species Strategy contains a number of ambitious but achievable targets, which promote the national effort needed to save Australia's threatened animals and plants. The targets were determined based on wide consultation with community groups, expert scientists and state and territory governments. The full set of feral cat targets are, by 2020: feral cats eradicated from five islands; 10 feral cat free mainland exclosures established; 10 million hectares of feral cat control action, using the best techniques for each location; best practice feral cat action implemented across two million hectares of Commonwealth land; and two million feral cats culled at the national level. These were chosen as the most appropriate and comprehensive policy approach to drive national effort and protect Australia's wildlife from harm and extinction.

Improving trajectories of endangered animals and plants, and stopping extinctions, are the most important indicator of success. Every feral cat removed from an area of high-value conservation in a humane, effective and justifiable way, reduces harm and the risk of extinction to Australia's native animals.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY HUMANE, EFFECTIVE AND JUSTIFIABLE?

Humane, effective and justifiable are the three policy principles developed by the RSPCA to underpin work to control feral animals. They are the basis for the Australian Government's actions on feral cats.

All control actions should be as painless as possible, should be effective in reducing the number of feral cats in a sustainable manner, and should be protecting and recovering Australia's native species, thus making actions justifiable.

For example, removing feral cats from Wilpena Pound in the Flinders Ranges is justified, because it is part of a coordinated effort to return the native western quolls to the region. The methods adopted are proving effective. More than 115 feral cats have been culled, and up to 160 western quolls are now surviving where they were once locally extinct. And the feral cat control is being done humanely, with licensed and highly skilled shooters ensuring instant mortality.

When we look at control actions, it's important to think about the impact of not taking those actions in terms of the nightly slaughter and maiming of threatened species caused by feral cats. Tackling feral cats is net humane because it substantially reduces animal suffering. Failing to tackle feral cats means continued killing of millions of native animals each night, leaving the devastating impact of feral cats unchecked.

HOW DOES ERADICAT® AND 1080 WORK?

Eradicat® has been approved for operational use in Western Australia by the Australian Pesticide and Veterinary Medicines Authority, with strict conditions on its use. Use outside of Western Australia requires permit approval by the APVMA. The active sodium fluoroacetate compound, commonly known as 1080, occurs naturally in many Western Australian plants predominantly from the *Gastrolobium* genus. Native animals of Western Australia have evolved with the plants and have developed a degree of tolerance to its effects but invasive species like feral cats are highly susceptible to the compound. In these susceptible species 1080 halts the ability of cells to process energy and results in unconsciousness and death. This provides conservation land managers with a unique natural advantage in being able to selectively target introduced predators like the feral cat without harm to native animals. A synthetic version of 1080 is injected into meat baits and applied at a landscape scale in high-value conservation areas to protect threatened and non-threatened native wildlife from the threat of predation by feral cats.

The compound was reviewed in Australia in 2008 by the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority and in New Zealand in 2011 by the Commissioner for the Environment. Both reviews concluded it was important for the control of invasive species and maintained its registration.

According to Twigg and Parker 2010:

“1080 is considered more humane than most other pesticides currently available for widescale vertebrate pest control operations (Eason et al 1994a,b; Fisher & Marks 1996; Gregory 1996; Littin et al 2009). Consequently, the use of 1080 products can be considered ethical when used appropriately, particularly in the absence of viable alternatives for wide-scale pest control, and with the urgent need to reduce the detrimental impacts of pest species (including the detrimental impacts of pest species on the animal welfare of native and domesticated species).²

When considering the use of Eradicat® and 1080, it's important to think about whether it will be effective, and whether the action is justified, including the impact of not taking those actions on the nightly slaughter and maiming of threatened species caused by feral cats. Acting on feral cats is net-humane because it saves millions of native animal lives. Failing to tackle the threat of feral cats allows for the killing of millions of native animals each night, leaving the devastating impact of feral cats unchecked.

Eradicat and 1080 are used carefully and must be deployed following strict requirements set by the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority, to ensure these baiting activities do not have an unacceptable impact on other wildlife like dingoes, goannas and eagles.

² LE Twigg & RW Parker (2010). Is sodium fluoroacetate (1080) a humane poison? The influence of mode of action, physiological effects, and target specificity. *Animal Welfare*. Universities Federation for Animal Welfare, United Kingdom.

HOW DOES CURIOSITY® WORK? IS IT HUMANE?

The Curiosity® bait puts feral cats to sleep before they die. When consumed by a feral cat, oxygen in the blood is reduced and the feral cat becomes lethargic and loses consciousness before death. Curiosity® feral cat bait has three elements: an attractant, an active compound and a delivery method. The attractant is a small meat-based sausage which research shows is attractive to cats. The active compound used is PAPP (para-aminopropiophenone). The delivery method of the compound is a small, hard pellet which is implanted in the bait. Importantly, this design is highly targeted: feral cats eat large chunks at a time and swallow the pellet as they eat the bait, whereas small native mammals nibble their food and reject the pellet, so are not affected.

The Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority is currently assessing Curiosity® feral cat bait for widespread use. Regulations placed on Curiosity® feral cat bait from the APVMA will ensure that it is used safely and in the most humane, effective and justifiable way.

ARE THESE FERAL CAT BAITS POISONING THE ENVIRONMENT?

Cat baiting does not harm the environment. Government regulations, independent scientific assessments and licensing ensure that baiting programs are safe. The active compound in Curiosity® feral cat baits, para-aminopropiophenone or PAPP, is used in very small dosages and is biodegradable. The active sodium fluoroacetate compound in Eradicat®, commonly known as 1080, is a naturally occurring compound in many Western Australian plants. It is also used in very small dosages and is biodegradable. The 1080 compound breaks down rapidly in the environment through the action of soil borne microorganisms.

Before active compounds are used in Australia for baiting, they are scientifically and rigorously assessed by the Australian Pesticide and Veterinary Medicines Authority to ensure that they are safe. Both of these compounds are used under strict regulations to make sure there are no adverse impacts on humans or the environment.

IS FERAL CAT CONTROL A THREAT TO MY PET CAT?

Feral cat management is not a threat to domestic cats. Management activities like baiting and trapping are undertaken by highly skilled land managers who target feral cats only. The overwhelming majority of actions to tackle Australia's feral cat problem are in remote and regional places well away from urban centres.

The science shows that feral cats are a threat to domestic cats that roam outside. That is one reason why the RSPCA encourages cat containment for pet cats, because while inside they are safe from disease and harm inflicted by feral cats. Cat owners can join the fight against extinction and protect their cat's health and their own health by choosing to follow the RSPCA policies for responsible pet ownership which include cat containment.

WHY DON'T YOU MAKE DESEXING OF ALL CATS MANDATORY?

Desexing, and rules about domestic cat ownership, is the responsibility of state governments and local councils. The Office of the Threatened Species Commissioner encourages and applauds responsible pet ownership, including desexing. We all have a role to play in the fight against extinction and pet owners can play their part by desexing their cat and keeping it indoors. The RSPCA's assessment is that contained cats are happier and healthier than roaming cats.

HABITAT LOSS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT DRIVER OF EXTINCTION, WHY ARE YOU FOCUSING ON FERAL CATS?

Improving habitat loss is important for many threatened species. It is one of four key action areas in the Threatened Species Strategy, along with tackling feral cats, establishing safe havens for species most at risk, and emergency interventions to avert extinctions. To maximise value for public money and have the biggest impact in the fight against extinction, we need to focus on the key threats.

The science is clear that feral cats are the single biggest threat to Australia's mammals, which are at higher risk of extinction than any other group of animals. Tackling feral cats is about making habitat safe for Australian species that are vulnerable to feral cats.

Habitat loss is the fourth biggest threat to Australia's mammals, which is why the Threatened Species Strategy focuses on tackling feral cats, as well as improving the quality, extent and connectivity of habitat.

IF FERAL CATS SIMPLY REPOPULATE AFTER A CULL, WHAT'S THE POINT IN CULLING THEM?

Giving up on managing feral cats would mean giving up on Australian wildlife. In places like islands and fenced areas we can eradicate cats and they can't repopulate, creating safe havens and securing our native species for the future. That's why the Threatened Species Strategy has targets for five new feral-free islands and 10 new large fenced areas on mainland Australia.

Feral cats have been eradicated successfully and permanently from many islands in Australia (including Macquarie and Faure Islands) and from other islands around the world. Once eradicated from islands, it is cheap and straightforward to prevent their re-colonisation. Many cat-free islands have become critically important refuge areas for threatened species.

In other situations, including high-value conservation locations and in across larger strategically selected landscapes, where we can show cat culling is effective in protecting threatened species, we can commit to long-term control of cats in that area through the most effective means. We manage many other threats, like bushfires, with long-term hazard reduction principles and we should do the same for feral cats.

Western Shield is an example of a long-term, large-scale baiting programme that is proving effective at keeping feral predator numbers low, giving the best chance to our threatened mammals. It is the Western Australian Department of Parks and Wildlife's lead animal conservation program and is returning the balance and mix of animals in selected areas of WA's environment to levels comparable to pre-European settlement. With support of \$1.75 million from the Australian Government, *Western Shield* is integrating feral cat management with fox control as part of its operations at key sites and over time will ensure species like the bilby, numbat, black-footed rock-wallaby and western ground parrot have the best chance at survival.

WHAT METHODS IS THE GOVERNMENT USING TO CONTROL FERAL CATS?

The Threatened Species Strategy identifies a wide and flexible kit of effective tools for different settings to tackle feral cats. In each case they are humane, effective and justifiable.

Humane and effective science-based tools that are used to reduce feral cat impacts include shooting, trapping, exclusion fencing, baiting, re-wilding, guardian dogs, conservation sniffer dogs, traditional Indigenous hunting, Indigenous fire management, and adjusting the numbers and densities of herbivores – both feral and grazing stock. We are developing Curiosity®, the new, highly effective and humane feral cat bait which is being assessed for use and should be available shortly. The Threatened Species Strategy is also using innovative techniques like feral cat grooming traps that can identify feral cats from native animals, and spray a small amount of the PAPP compound onto their backs which feral cats then consume when grooming. Improved fire management also reduces the impacts of feral cats by improving habitat quality for native animals and decreasing the hunting efficiency of feral cats.

There are no panaceas for feral cat control. We need a flexible and science-based toolkit for the fight against extinction. The Threatened Species Strategy also includes the potential for developing a safe and effective biological control for feral cats. Any biological control would need to be carefully studied and verified as 100% safe (i.e. without negative impacts on humans or the environment, and targeted so pet cats are not affected).

WHY NOT REINTRODUCE DINGOES? WON'T THAT REDUCE FERAL CATS?

The Office of the Threatened Species Commissioner has been actively consulting with Humane Society International, the Jane Goodall Institute, the Australian Dingo Foundation and the science community on how dingoes may play a stronger role in the fight against extinction.

The Threatened Species Strategy recognises re-wilding as one of the tools available to reduce feral cats and their impacts. In some areas, dingoes may be part of the solution, but they are not a panacea. Dingoes hybridise with feral dogs, can predate on threatened species, and can affect agricultural productivity. These issues, and the possibility of unexpected negative impacts, must be taken into account as we look to build community awareness and support for actions to tackle feral cats. We need a varied and science-based tool kit to win the fight against extinction. The Australian Government's benchmark for actions to reduce feral cat impacts is the same as the RSPCA's – they must be humane, effective and justifiable.

CAN WE USE THE TRAP, NEUTER, AND RELEASE METHOD ON FERAL CATS?

It is not realistic or feasible to trap neuter and release millions of feral cats across the more than seven million square kilometres of the Australian continent. Trap, neuter and release as a feral cat control technique would not be humane, effective or justifiable. Returning neutered feral cats to the environment to keep killing and driving extinctions would be inhumane and unjustifiable when the alternative is for them to be humanely euthanized. Trap, neuter and release would be highly stressful for millions of feral cats, transported as wild animals in cages in remote and hot conditions across thousands of kilometres to be neutered and then returned to the wild.

You can watch my Facebook video on why TNR would be inhumane to the feral cats and our wildlife at <https://www.facebook.com/TSCCommissioner/videos/1653152638308769/>

DO YOU SUPPORT A FERAL CAT BIOLOGICAL CONTROL?

Bio-controls are not a panacea but can be a powerful tool in fighting extinction. Rabbit biological controls, for example, have helped avoid rabbit plagues of the past by keeping rabbit numbers low. The Threatened Species Strategy includes the potential for developing safe and effective biological controls for feral cats, however there is currently no feral cat bio-control agent on the immediate horizon. Any biological control would need to be carefully studied and verified as 100% safe (i.e. without negative impacts on humans or the environment, and targeted so pet cats are not affected). As the pace and depth of science progresses, the potential for developing a safe and effective biological control will increase.