



Australian Government
Department of the Environment

Ref: MS15-002277

Mr Steven Morrissey
True To You
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Dear Mr Morrissey

I am writing about the Australian Government's commitment to saving our country's unique and wonderful wildlife. I was appointed as Australia's first Threatened Species Commissioner on 14 July 2014 by Australia's Minister for the Environment, the Hon Greg Hunt MP. I am tasked with implementing the Australian Government's new national focus on threatened species, aiming to halt and reverse the growing number of native plants and animals in Australia facing extinction. I work collaboratively with the conservation community including the non-profit sector, industry, scientists and all levels of government to broker solutions to avoid the extinction of Australia's species.

Firstly, I would like to commend you for your commitment to, and advocacy for, animals and their welfare. I also feel for the animals we share this world with and I have a particularly deep concern for Australia's native animals. Australia is a country rich in unique plants, animals and landscapes. We are home to more than 500 000 species, most of which are found nowhere else in the world. Our animals and plants define us as a nation, so when we lose them, we lose a part of who we are as a country.

But our wildlife has endured one of the highest extinction rates in the world. We have lost 29 unique Australian mammal species over the last 200 years. This represents 35 per cent of the world's modern mammal extinctions and is the highest rate of mammal extinctions in the world.

Much of this animal species loss is due to very high levels of predation by feral cats, which are an invasive species on this continent. In Australia, they have been a major contributor to the extinction of at least 27 mammals. The lesser bilby, desert bandicoot, crescent nailtail wallaby and large-eared hopping-mouse are just some of the unique Australian species that the world has lost forever due to feral cats. These were delightful creatures, rich in importance in Australian Indigenous culture, and formerly playing important roles in the ecology of our country. We don't want to lose any more species like these.

It is with this sentiment in mind that the Australian Government has taken a stance on feral cats: for the protection of our native species which belong here.

As part of the new national focus, on 16 July 2015 the Minister launched Australia's first Threatened Species Strategy and drew a line in the sand on this extinction crisis. The Threatened Species Strategy outlines an evidence-based approach based on science, action and partnership to achieve the long-term goal of reversing species declines and supporting recovery. Within the strategy, there are hard targets to combat the impact of feral cats, along with targets for real improvements by 2020 for mammals, birds and plants.

Today, feral cats endanger at least 124 of Australia's threatened species, which is more than one third of our threatened mammals, reptiles, birds and frogs. A conservative estimate of feral cat numbers in Australia today is around 20 million. Scientists advise me that these feral cats kill at least 5 animals every night. This equates to around 20 billion animals being killed every year – from insects and lizards to small mammals and birds. The scientific evidence is very clear: by controlling feral cats, we reduce harm caused to Australian animals and the risk of their extinction. Tackling feral cats humanely and effectively is thus the highest priority for protecting Australian wildlife, particularly our mammals.

I want to be very clear that the Threatened Species Strategy refers specifically to feral cats and not domestic cats. Pet owners can join the fight against extinction of Australia's native animals by following the Royal Society for the Protection and Care of Animals (RSPCA) policy of desexing, microchipping and containing domestic cats.

The Australian Government is committed to adhering to RSPCA Australia's policy that supports culling invasive species where it is justifiable, effective and humane. The greatest impact of feral cats occurs across Australia's vast deserts, rugged mountains, forests and savannahs: remote and often inaccessible landscapes that are home to our native wildlife.

The Australian Government is working closely with experts to identify the best approach for addressing the impact of feral cats. Reducing feral cat numbers is just one of a number of measures being taken to address their impact. We are funding expansions to the network of exclosures that fence out introduced predators as a safeguard against extinctions. Such areas provide an effective, achievable, long-term option for controlling feral cats, but only in localised areas. We are also using strategies like improving fire regimes to reduce the hunting efficiency of feral cats on a landscape scale.

As Threatened Species Commissioner, I am working directly with RSPCA Australia to ensure that our approach is consistent with its standards for humane intervention. The RSPCA is one of Australia's most respected non-government organisations and has a mature and sensible approach to managing invasive animals. I am committed to pursuing its policies in all of our feral cat management actions. I am also championing the use of Curiosity®, which is a newly developed bait for reducing feral cat numbers. It has been tested as effective and humane and the delivery mechanism of the Curiosity® pellet is cat-specific.

Australians love their native wildlife and know that saving our animals from extinction and harm requires hard choices. The work we are doing to tackle feral cats is supported by the overwhelming majority of key environmental non-government organisations including:

- the World Wildlife Fund
- The Nature Conservancy
- RSPCA Australia.

We are committed to using the most up-to-date science to inform our decision making. We have, and will continue, to consult with the community throughout the process to ensure continuing support for our approach. At Minister Hunt's request, I am establishing a Feral Cat Taskforce to guide our actions to tackle feral cats. This group will provide advice on the justification, effectiveness and humaneness of all actions that are proposed. It will bring together federal, state and territory government representatives, leading biologists, ecologists and social scientists, and RSPCA Australia.

Australia has drawn a line in the sand on the loss of native wildlife. The Australian public and conservation community supports our approach; we cannot tolerate the damage feral cats are doing to our wildlife anymore. Feral cats must be controlled to protect Australia's unique native wildlife and our ecology. Our native species are simply not equipped to coexist with feral cats; they did not evolve alongside predators like the feral cat. As a result, they are highly vulnerable to this threat and need our help. If we are to offer our threatened species a fighting chance at survival, we must tackle their greatest threat – the feral cat.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gregory Andrews". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Gregory Andrews
Threatened Species Commission
09 October 2015