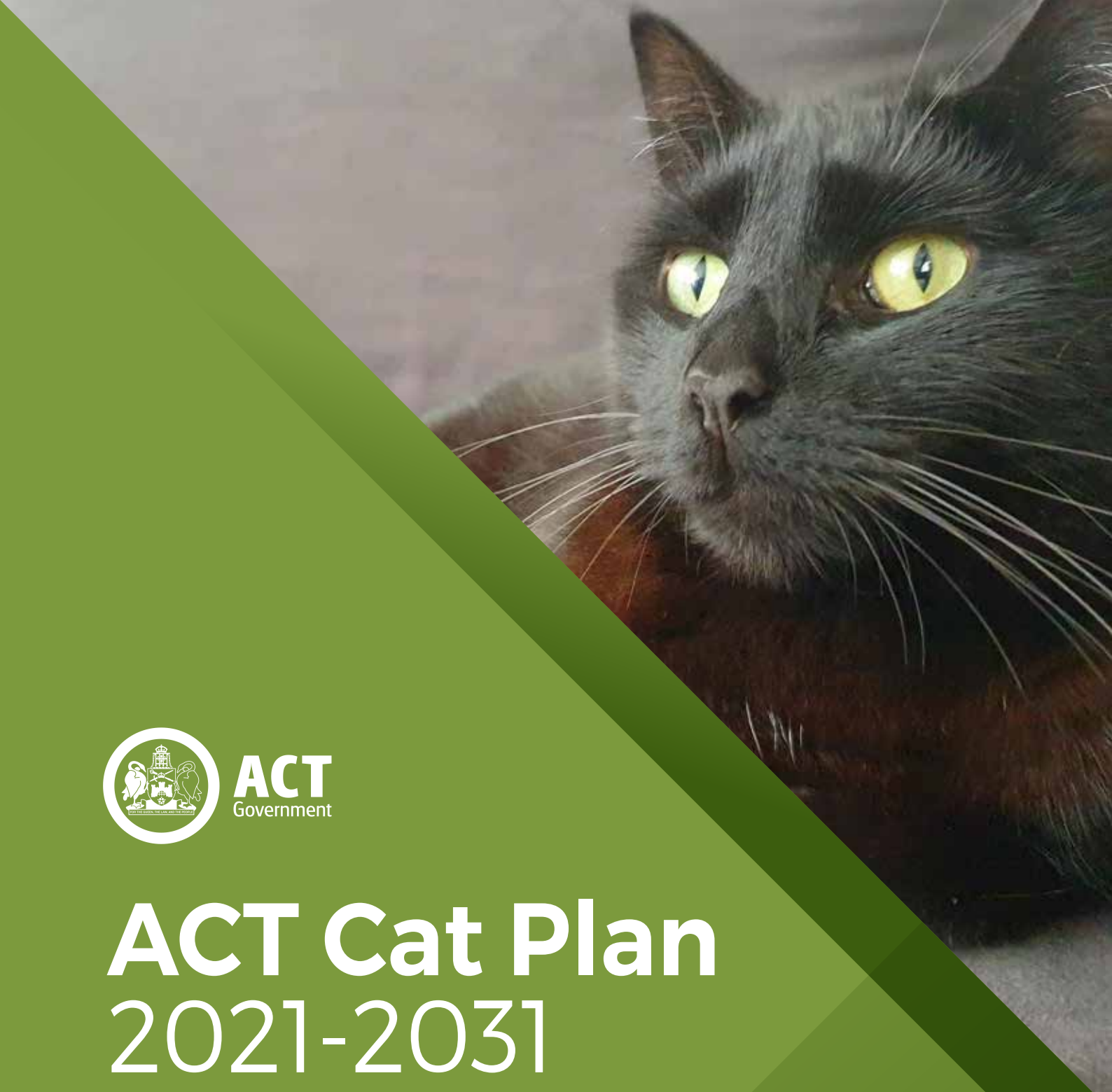


ACT Government

ACT Cat Plan 2021-2031

A plan developed under the 2017 ACT Animal Welfare and Management Strategy

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Acknowledgement of country
We acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as Canberra's first inhabitants and Traditional Custodians. We recognise the special relationship and connection that Ngunnawal people have with this Country. Prior to the displacement of Ngunnawal people from their land, they were a thriving people whose life and culture was connected unequivocally to this land in a way that only they understand and know and is core to their physical and spiritual being. The segregation of the Ngunnawal people from Culture and Country has had long-lasting, profound, and ongoing health and well-being effects on their life, cultural practices, families, and continuation of their law/lore. We acknowledge the historic interruption of the Ngunnawal people of Canberra and their surrounding regions. We recognise the significant contribution the Ngunnawal people have played in caring for Country. For time immemorial they have maintained a tangible and intangible cultural, social, environmental, spiritual, and economic connection to these lands and waters.

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Message from the Ministers



Chris Steel, MLA
Minister for Transport and City Services



Rebecca Vassarotti, MLA
Minister for the Environment

Canberrans love animals, be they pets or native wildlife.

About a quarter of Canberra households own cats, which are important companion animals. At the same time, our suburbs and many nature reserves are rich in wildlife. Most of us live close to nature, with all its benefits, but this means native wildlife is more vulnerable to predation by wandering cats.

The ACT Government understands that managing cats is complex, particularly since we need to consider the needs of pet cats as well as cats that have little or no interaction with people. Indeed, the cat population is made up of an inter-connected network that can be characterised as owned, semi-owned, un-owned and feral cats.

The Canberra community has helped develop the ACT Cat Plan and has a shared vision and understanding to guide cat management in the ACT over the next decade. Successful implementation of this plan will require community support and participation over the long term. Without this, there will continue to be animal welfare issues associated with unowned and unwanted cats. The impact of roaming and feral cats on the environment will remain significant.

Message from the Conservator

Cats are great pets and highly valued companions. We have a duty to care for their health and wellbeing. This plan provides guidance on the best way to look after our cats while also reducing problems of cat predation on native wildlife.

Australia is home to some of the most incredible wildlife and plants on the planet. Changes to the landscape as a result of human activity have put many of these extraordinary species at risk. Predation by feral cats has already directly contributed to extinctions of more than 20 Australian mammals. In recent years, small carnivorous marsupials, including two species of antechinus and a dunnart, have disappeared from many Canberra Nature Park reserves where they once were common. Today, these animals only thrive behind the cat and fox proof fence at Mulligan's Flat Woodland Sanctuary.

A Canberra research project[1] estimated that free roaming but owned Canberra cats predated on 61,000 native birds, 2000 native mammals, 30,000 native reptiles and 6000 native frogs each year.

The Cat Plan is responding to this threat in the ACT, while also considering animal welfare and community wishes. Cats do, and can continue to, provide a great benefit to our society provided owners are responsible and cat management minimises potential adverse impacts.

Ian Walker
Conservator of Flora and Fauna





Overview

Why do we need an ACT Cat Plan?

Cats play an important but complex role in our society. While pet cats bring health and wellbeing benefits to their owners, all cats have a natural instinct to hunt other animals and feral cats need to hunt for survival.

The ACT has legislation, strategies, plans and codes of practice to guide management of animals and protect the natural environment, including the *Animal Welfare and Management Strategy 2017–22* (the Strategy) and action plans for recovery of threatened species. Development of a management plan for cats will meet a priority under Action 4.1.2 of the five-year Strategy:

Action 4.1.2 Develop and implement policies and management plans to promote responsible pet ownership and reduce the impact of domestic species on the environment and the community.

The vision, objectives, strategies and actions set out in this plan set a clear direction for the future and are designed to:

- build on existing legislation
- align with the ACT's nature conservation, animal welfare and human health strategies
- support national approaches to cat management, including control of feral cats.

Purpose

The purpose of the plan is to guide the management of cats—domestic and feral—in the ACT over the next decade. Cats that are not responsibly owned are at risk of harm to themselves and native wildlife. They may also pose a nuisance to neighbours.

The plan recognises the different roles and impacts cats have in the ACT, ranging from the benefits they provide as much-loved companions and as sentient beings with the ability to experience a range of emotions, to an introduced animal that poses risks to wildlife.

All cats are the same species (*Felis catus*); however, for management purposes it is useful to define cat populations using different categories. RSPCA Australia defines cats as either feral or domestic and further separates domestic cats into three sub-categories (owned, semi-owned and unowned) based on a cat's relationship with humans. See Box 1.



Box 1: Categories of cats for management purposes

Domestic—all cats with some dependence (direct or indirect) on humans. There are three sub-categories of domestic cats:

- Owned—these cats are identified with and cared for by a specific person and are directly dependent on humans. They are usually sociable, although sociability varies.
- Semi-owned—these cats are fed or provided with other care by people who do not consider they own them. They are of varying sociability, with many socialised to humans, and may be associated with one or more households.
- Unowned—these cats are indirectly dependent on humans with some having casual and temporary interactions with humans. They are of varying sociability, including some who are unsocialised to humans, and some may live in groups (e.g. at common aggregation sites including rubbish tips, food outlets, coastal fishing spots associated with urban environments etc.).

Feral—these cats are unowned, unsocialised, have no relationship with or dependence on humans, and reproduce in the wild.[2]

Vision

All cats in the ACT will be owned, wanted and cared for by responsible owners.

The vision recognises the important role of cats as pets and that people have responsibilities for animal welfare and protecting native wildlife. This plan is developed under a framework based on this vision.

Objectives

The plan has three overarching objectives:

- Caring for pet cats through responsible cat ownership
- Protecting wildlife from cat predation
- Reducing nuisance by roaming cats to ACT residents

Strategies and actions have been developed in order to achieve these objectives.



Key stakeholders

Improving cat management in the ACT requires a shared commitment by government and the community. Nearly everyone has a stake in how cats are managed, including cat owners, neighbours, people involved in the pet industry, veterinarians, conservationists, animal welfare and rescue organisations, community groups and rural landholders. The vision, objectives, strategies and actions in this plan will be implemented by the government, in collaboration with key stakeholders, over the next ten years.

Key stakeholder	Roles and responsibilities
Government	• Coordinate development and periodic review of the ACT Cat Plan and relevant legislation. • Monitor compliance and enforce relevant legislation. • Coordinate education activities to raise awareness within the community of cat management.
Cat owners	• Legally required to microchip and de-sex their cat. • In declared cat containment areas, legally required to contain their cats.
Breeders and sellers	• Required to have a licence to breed for commercial gain. • Must provide a licence number when advertising cats for sale.
Pet shops and pet supplies	• Source of information and products for cat care and may sell pet cats.
Animal care and rescue organisations	• Many local organisations provide education, advice, foster care and re-homing of rescued animals.
Not-for-profit animal organisations	• Provide various cat management and welfare services, including services for vulnerable animals. For example, Canberra Cat Fix and Pet Assistance and Wellbeing Service (PAWS).
Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)	• RSPCA Australia advocates for improved animal welfare and management practices. • RSPCA ACT, partly funded through an agreement with the ACT Government, provides animal care and rescue services in the ACT: » Services include accepting and housing stray and surrendered cats » Provides an inspectorate service to enforce the provisions of the *Animal Welfare Act 1992*.
ACT Veterinary Surgeons Board	• The ACT Veterinary Surgeons Board is a statutory body responsible for: » registration of suitably qualified veterinary surgeons and veterinary specialists » monitoring of the best practice standards and conduct of the profession.
Australian Veterinary Association	• The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the professional organisation that represents veterinarians across Australia. AVA members are committed to continuing education and abide by the Code of Professional Conduct.
Veterinary practitioners	• Provide care and treatment of pets, including de-sexing services.
Conservation Council ACT and Region	• Advocates for, campaigns for and engages with the community to safeguard the environment for future generations and strongly supports improved cat management.
Rural landholders	• Rural land management, including pest animal control. • Manage owned or semi–owned cats on their properties.
Conservation volunteers	• May participate in citizen science around cat management.
ACT residents	• All residents can contribute to the improved management of cats.

Strategy and actions

Strategy	Action	Implementers
1. Promote responsible cat ownership	1 Promote responsible cat ownership through community education and engagement. • Improve available information on what it means to be a responsible cat owner, including making information accessible to the whole community; for example by producing materials in languages other than English.	EPSDD, TCCS, AWAC, RSPCA—ACT, peak bodies, breeders and sellers, animal care and rescue groups, pet shops.
	2 Raise awareness of the impact of roaming cats on wildlife and on ACT residents, including through research and citizen science. Examples include: • Cat tracker • Canberra Nature Map	EPSDD, conservation volunteers, cat owners
	3 Improve cat desexing rates by: • working with community partners such as vets, animal shelters and cat breeder associations to: » increase access to affordable de-sexing » increase uptake of microchipping and pre-pubescent de-sexing prior to sale, transfer or return • working with veterinary professionals and other stakeholders to support cat owners and breeders in meeting requirements for pre-pubescent de-sexing.	TCCS, breeders and sellers, vets, RSPCA ACT, animal care and rescue organisations
2. Improve compliance and enforcement	4 Review and amend the *Domestic Animals Act 2000* to support compulsory registration of cats.	TCCS
	5 Introduce a compulsory registration scheme for cats as part of a pet registration model to improve capacity for cat identification and reunification with owners.	EPSDD, TCCS
	6 Implement a public education campaign using a system of warnings and information, in concert with a program of compliance and enforcement. Pursue repeat offenders for offences against the *Domestic Animals Act 2000*.	TCCS
3. Reduce number of semi-owned and unowned domestic cats	7 Provide information to the community to increase awareness about the environmental and welfare implications of abandonment and feeding wandering cats.	EPSDD, TCCS
	8 Work with animal care and rescue organisations to manage semi-owned and unowned cats in public places, through trap, de-sex and adopt activities.	TCCS
4. Continuously improve domestic cat welfare and management practices	9 Develop and adopt model Codes of Practice (CoPs) and Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs) for the humane treatment of domestic cats, including under the *Animal Welfare Act 1992*.	TCCS, AWAC
	10 Review and implement CoPs, SoPs and memoranda of understanding (MOU)/ agreements with external service providers for the operation of cat management facilities.	TCCS, AWAC
	11 Provide access to appropriate training and education to practitioners responsible for implementing domestic cat management to improve welfare outcomes for cats.	TCCS, RSPCA–ACT, EPSDD
	12 Facilitate provision of adequate cat management facilities/shelters to support finding and reclaiming of lost cats; adoption and re-homing; and compliance and enforcement.	TCCS

Strategy	Action	Implementers
5. Expand cat containment	13 Encourage voluntary cat containment by providing information, education and awareness raising on benefits to cats, benefits to wildlife, how roaming cats can cause nuisance and how to contain a cat.	All
	14 Continue to declare all new suburbs as cat containment.	TCCS
	15 Introduce city-wide cat containment requirements for new cats acquired after a date declared by the government, with grandfathering arrangements for all cats owned before this date. Review and amend the *Domestic Animals Act 2000* to support this expansion of cat containment.	TCCS, EPSDD
	16 Review definitions of cat containment in legislation to allow cats to be contained 'on leash'.	TCCS
6. Reduce impacts of feral cats	17 Educate people about the impacts of cats on Australian wildlife.	EPSDD
	18 Support implementation of the Australian Government Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats 2015 and assess any nomination of predation by feral cats as a key threatening process under the *Nature Conservation Act 2014*. Subject to listing, prepare an ACT Action Plan for Feral Cats.	EPSDD
	19 Participate in regional and national monitoring, research and trials to: • increase understanding of the feral cat population and impacts on the environment and • improve efficacy, humaneness and expand available feral cat control methods.	EPSDD
	20 Undertake feral cat control where feasible, cost-effective and provides highest conservation benefit as part of integrated pest animal management.	EPSDD
	21 Increase cat-free conservation areas by expanding predator-proof fences in nature reserves.	EPSDD
7. Engage rural landholders in improved cat management	22 Undertake awareness raising and training of rural landholders regarding cat management on rural properties, including: • responsible cat ownership • impacts of cats on agriculture and methods for limiting transmission of parasites and disease to livestock • pest control methods including feral cats and vermin (rats and mice).	EPSDD
	23 Engage with rural landholders and animal care and rescue organisations on managing wandering domestic cats on rural properties.	EPSDD
	24 Consider options for expanding cat containment to rural areas in consultation with rural communities.	TCCS
	25 Work with rural landholders to reduce the impact of feral cats on the environment.	EPSDD
8. Promote human health and wellbeing through responsible pet ownership	26 Recognise and promote the health and wellbeing benefits associated with responsible pet ownership.	EPSDD, Health
	27 Raise public awareness about how to reduce risk of infection from cats.	

Implementation

Implementation of the plan is based on the framework for continuous improvement outlined in the Animal Welfare and Management Strategy 2017–22 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Framework for continuous improvement



Primarily, two ACT Government directorates—Transport Canberra and City Services (TCCS) and Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development (EPSDD)—are responsible for implementing actions within the plan, including through partnerships with service providers, such as the RSPCA ACT, other organisations and community groups.

Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate

TCCS is responsible for administering the *Domestic Animals Act 2000* and the *Animal Welfare Act 1992*. TCCS provides domestic animal management services to the ACT community, including dog registration, nuisance and attack investigations, collection of stray and roaming dogs, cat containment, community engagement and education, and management of the domestic animal shelter.

Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

EPSDD is responsible for administering the *Nature Conservation Act 2014*, *Pest Plants and Animals Act 2005*, and *Planning and Development Act 2007*. Responsibilities include the Parks and Conservation Service, nature conservation policy, conservation research, environment and rural programs and biosecurity.

Timeframes for implementing actions

Timeframes have been identified for implementing actions: short term, medium term or longer term, while recognising that some actions may be ongoing, such as awareness raising. It is proposed to implement the actions in the plan over the next decade in three stages.

Short term (1–2 years)

- Promote responsible cat ownership and build community awareness (actions 1, 2, 6, 7, 22, 26).
- Improve de-sexing rates in partnership with community organisations (action 3).
- Improve animal welfare and management systems and compliance and enforcement, including introducing compulsory registration for cats (actions 4, 5, 9, 10, 11).
- Encourage voluntary cat containment and define how, where and when mandatory containment areas will be expanded (actions 13, 14, 15).
- Review and amend the *Domestic Animals Act 2000* to address updated cat containment requirements (action 15).
- Increase cat-free conservation areas—extend predator proof fence (action 21).

Medium term (3–5 years)

- Support cat management facilities to improve management of semi and unowned cats including adoption and rehoming (action 12).
- Improve management of semi-owned and unowned cats (action 8).
- Educate, plan and research to support feral cat control (actions 17, 18, 19).
- Work with rural landholders to improve management of domestic cats (actions 23, 24).
- Review legislation (actions 5, 16).

Longer term (5–10 years)

- Expand area of mandatory cat containment (actions 15, 25).
- Improve feral cat control (actions 20).

Monitoring, reporting and review

Information will be gathered to improve our understanding about trends in the uptake of responsible pet ownership. Data from the Canberra Pet Census will be utilised to provide baseline information about cat ownership in the ACT.

Data on de-sexing, microchipping, cat containment, euthanasia and nuisance levels will be collected from:

- ACT's Domestic Animal Services
- service providers including RSPCA ACT
- surveys, queries and complaints received through Access Canberra.

Monitoring and research on the impact of roaming cats, including feral cats, will continue to be undertaken within the ACT and nationally. Citizen science and other monitoring techniques such as use of wildlife cameras in nature reserves will help inform this.

Annual reporting on progress in implementing actions will occur through annual reports prepared by ACT Government directorates.

Progress will be monitored at the end of five years to identify which actions are on-track, which actions need more attention and/or resources to be achieved in a timely way and which actions need to be refined.

The ACT Cat Plan, including its implementation and outcomes, will be evaluated towards the end of the 10-year plan.



Cats in the ACT

It has been estimated that about a quarter of Canberra households own a cat.[3] Responses received from the ACT Government Community Views Survey reflect this, with 24% of respondents indicating they own a cat.

Although cats are required by law to be microchipped, data is not centralised and microchipping does not provide a system for monitoring the number of domestic cats. Microchipping is primarily used to identify owners if a cat is lost, injured or taken to an animal shelter.

There are currently no reliable estimates of the feral cat population; however, wildlife cameras in Namadgi National Park and other ACT nature reserves record many cat sightings. One estimate is that there is one feral cat for every five square kilometres in the Brindabella Mountains, but as many as 90 cats per square kilometre in certain areas, for example, around rubbish tips.[4]

Impact on wildlife

Hunting and killing is a natural instinct for cats, with many studies showing that most domestic cats do hunt when given the opportunity. Approximately half of Canberra's suburbs are located within 500 metres of threatened fauna habitat, and a further 25% are within 1 kilometre. A survey of Canberra cat owners found that 75% of owned cats hunted, with 64% of prey being rodents, 14% native birds and 10% introduced birds and a few reptiles and frogs.[5]

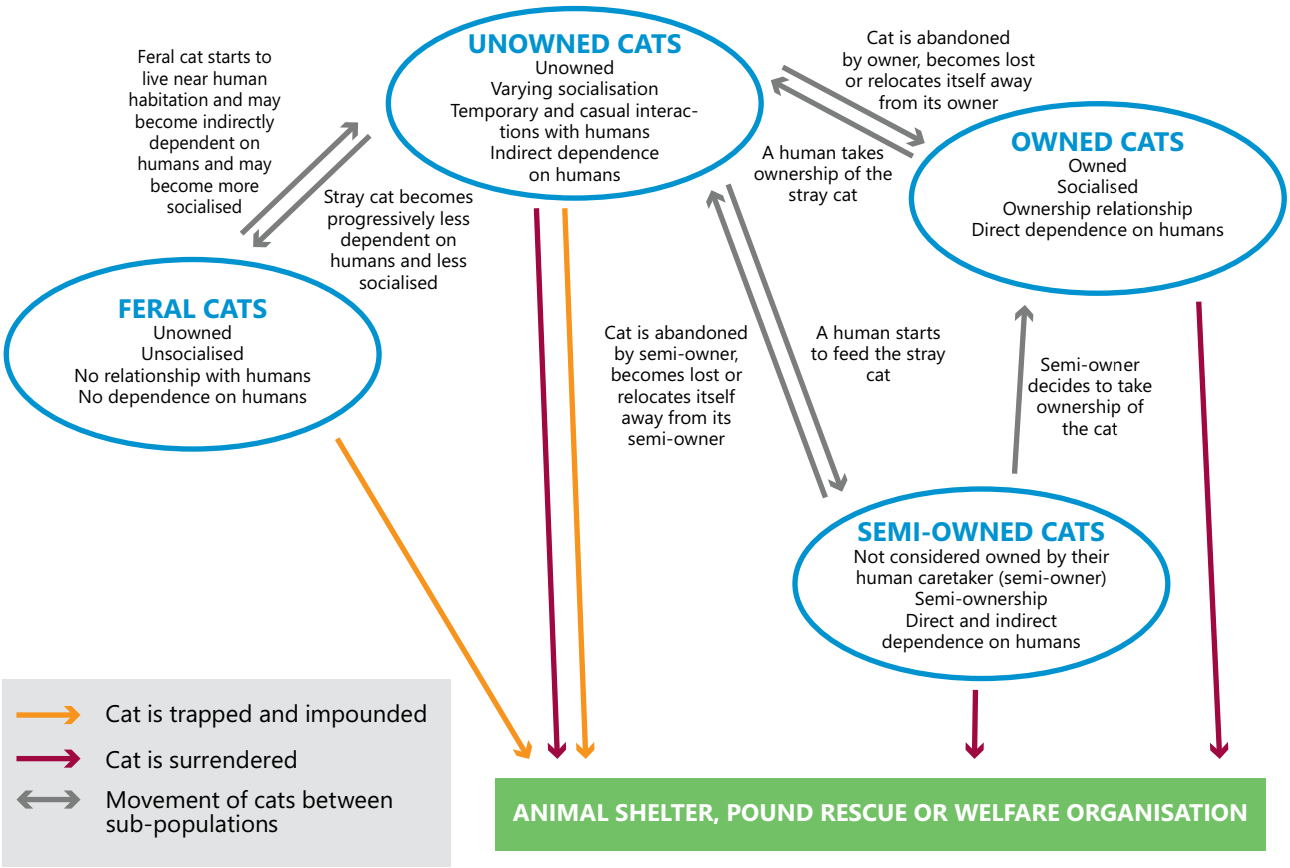
There is an increasing body of evidence that predation by feral cats is a major threat to biodiversity in Australia. Feral cats are found across most of the land mass; the most recent review estimates a population fluctuating between 2.1 and 6.3 million.[6] Their presence has contributed to the extinction of 22 Australian mammals[7] and they are believed to be a current and major threat to at least 142 species of mammals, reptiles, frogs and birds.[8]

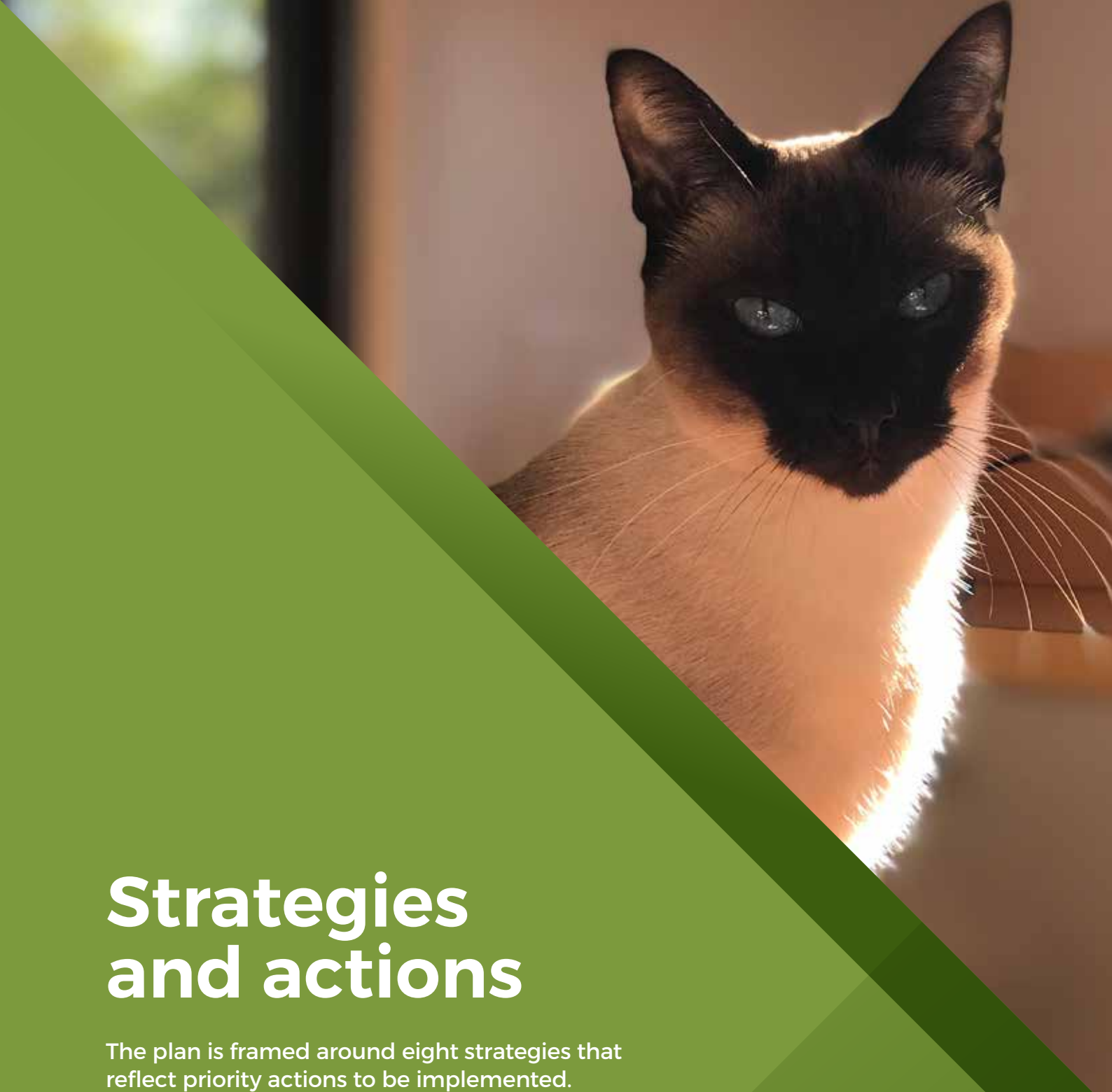
How different types of cat interact

The inter-connections between different categories of cats, as well as their interactions with humans, is described in Figure 2. To manage feral cats effectively, the entire cat population must be managed in an integrated way.

To provide clear guidance for managing the cat population, the commonly used term 'stray cats' (which may apply to some owned, semi-owned, unowned and feral cats) has been avoided in the 27 actions in this plan.

Figure 2: Categories of cats and their interactions with humans.[9]





Strategies and actions

The plan is framed around eight strategies that reflect priority actions to be implemented.

STRATEGY 1: Promote responsible cat ownership

It is important that people who choose to own a cat understand their responsibilities. The notion of being responsible relates to people caring for the health and wellbeing of their cat, as well as taking responsibility for their cat's impact on wildlife and the ways it may interact with other people (Box 2).

In the ACT, responsible pet ownership is promoted through a range of public awareness activities, in particular pamphlets and web-based information, with a focus on encouraging cat owners to:

- de-sex their cat to avoid unwanted kittens
- microchip their cat to make it easier to reunite lost cats with their families
- contain their cat to their premises to benefit their cat's own health and the environment—and to comply with legislation in cat containment areas.

All owned cats over three months old are required by law to be de-sexed, except where the owner has a permit to keep a sexually entire cat (e.g. for breeding purposes). However, there is no accurate information on the rate of de-sexing in the ACT.

Incentives can play an important role in complementing regulatory approaches. The government will explore ways to encourage de-sexing and containing cats, including to improve affordability for people on low incomes and through transitional periods.

Some vets and non-government organisations have supported discounted microchipping for cat owners and run programs to encourage de-sexing, such as Fix your Feline. Engagement of veterinary practitioners is central to increasing de-sexing rates and prepubescent de-sexing. Working with breeders' associations is also an important step in increasing the rates of kittens being de-sexed before sale. The ACT Government will continue to explore options and support programs that increase the accessibility of de-sexing cats, as this is vital in reducing the numbers of unowned and feral cats.

In the ACT, a permit is required for a person to keep four or more cats. Limiting the number of cats aims to prevent kitten farms and animal hoarding.

Many cat owners contain their cat voluntarily to protect the pet's wellbeing and avoid harm to native wildlife. The more time a pet cat spends at home, the less risk of injury or death from road accidents, fighting and disease. A pet cat kept safe at home usually lives longer than a cat that is allowed to wander. Voluntary containment will be supported as part of this plan through provision of information and support to those who wish to contain their cats.



Box 2: Responsible cat ownership

A responsible cat owner

1. Obeys cat laws
2. Meets all needs of their pet including basic needs (food, water, toileting areas, places to rest, hide and scratch), as well as play and companionship.
3. Prevents their pet cat being a nuisance to other ACT residents.

Citizen science can be very powerful in increasing community understanding and engagement. Citizen science usually involves the collection and analysis of data relating to the natural environment by volunteers, typically as part of a collaborative project with professional scientists. For example, the Cat Tracker project conducted by the University of South Australia raised awareness of cat behaviour, including the distances uncontained owned cats roam. Canberra Nature Map is a popular local mobile phone app for reporting sightings of native plants and animals as well as introduced species such as cats.

Along with other research programs, citizen science can contribute to our knowledge of cat behaviour and impacts.

Actions

Action 1

Promote responsible pet ownership through community education and engagement.

- Improve available information on what it means to be a responsible cat owner, including making information accessible to the whole community, for example by producing material in languages other than English.

Action 2

Raise awareness of the impact of roaming cats on wildlife and on ACT residents, including through education, research and citizen science. Examples include:

- Cat Tracker
- Canberra Nature Map

Action 3

Improve cat de-sexing rates by:

- working with community partners such as vets, animal shelters and cat breeder associations to:
  - increase access to affordable de-sexing
  - increase uptake of microchipping and pre-pubescent de-sexing prior to sale, transfer or return
- working with veterinary professionals and other stakeholders to support cat owners and breeders in meeting requirements for pre-pubescent de-sexing.

Box 3: Current cat laws

What are the legal obligations of cat owners?

- A cat must be microchipped by 12 weeks of age.
- All cats over the age of three months must be de-sexed unless the owner has a permit to keep a sexually entire cat.
- A person must have a licence to keep four or more cats.
- Cats in cat containment areas must always be confined to the owner or keeper's premises.

What is a cat containment area?

A cat containment area refers to all or part of a suburb, where cats must always be confined to their owner or keeper's premises. Cat containment areas are declared under the *Domestic Animals Act 2000* where cats are thought to pose a serious threat to native fauna and flora in the area.

What are requirements for cat breeders?

- A licence is required to breed from a female cat.
- The 'breeding standard' under the *Animal Welfare Act 1992* sets out the rules around breeding cats in the ACT, such as the age of cats and the number of litters a breeding cat may have per year.

It is an offence to sell a cat that is over the age of three months that is not de-sexed.

STRATEGY 2: Improve compliance and enforcement

The ACT Government is committed to improving enforcement of legal requirements for cat owners to de-sex and microchip cats and contain their cats if they live in a declared cat containment area. De-sexing is central to reducing the number of unwanted cats. The ACT was the first jurisdiction to introduce compulsory de-sexing (under the *Domestic Animals Act 2000*). Microchipping of cats is also compulsory in the ACT and is important for identifying and contacting cat owners.

There is currently no requirement to register a cat in the ACT; however, the Animal Welfare and Management Strategy 2017–22 includes an action to improve animal management systems and processes for animal identification and reunification, including through registration systems. In line with this, the ACT Government will progress the development of a compulsory registration scheme for cats aligned with the requirements for dogs.

Registration of all newly-owned cats will assist in reuniting roaming cats with owners, identifying semi or unowned cats and enforcement of cat containment laws. Free registration of already owned cats will be accommodated as part of implementing the registration scheme. Registration of cats will also provide accurate data regarding the domestic cat population that will help the government and associated groups provide targeted and appropriately resourced services to meet community needs.

While microchipping already does this to some extent, there is currently no incentive or trigger to remind cat owners to update their details.

The time when cats are sold, transferred or returned to owners from a cat shelter provides an opportunity to ensure cat owners are complying with their legal obligations for de-sexing and microchipping cats. The government will explore more efficient systems to support compliance and enforcement.

The government recognises the importance of a comprehensive compliance and enforcement framework to support animal management and welfare laws. An efficient and effective compliance and enforcement framework needs to include:

- risk-based codes of practice and guidelines
- community education programs
- proportionate and escalating penalties for non-compliance.

Voluntary compliance should be encouraged, along with initiatives that support positive behaviour to complement the regulatory framework.

Organisations responsible for delivering compliance and enforcement activities include TCCS (Box 4), the RSPCA ACT and ACT Police.

A range of compliance and enforcement mechanisms is necessary to underpin effective laws. Measures—including targeted communication and education activities, timely provision of information and advice, persuasion, cooperative assistance and collaboration—are important to:

- raise awareness of the benefits of and how to comply with legal requirements
- raise awareness of the potential consequences of non-compliance
- encourage voluntary take up, for example, of cat containment in suburbs that are not declared as cat containment areas.

Codes of practice for cat management will complement legislation and support compliance.

Where compliance fails, enforcement mechanisms may be used. The government employs a range of mechanisms to ensure enforcement is undertaken in accordance with the law, is effective, proportionate, fair and impartial. Penalties may include suspension or cancellation of licences, fines and criminal prosecution.

Box 4: Domestic Animal Services (DAS)

DAS is the unit within TCCS responsible for the following services:

- Investigate alleged animal nuisance issues
- Manage and operate the DAS Shelter and impoundment facilities
- Provide advice about keeping animals in residential areas
- Administer and regulate the *Domestic Animals Act 2000*, which includes enforcing de-sexing, microchipping and cat containment measures
- Manage abandoned cats
- Appoint staff to investigate, and assist the RSPCA Animal Welfare Inspectorate investigate, any breaches of the *Animal Welfare Act 1992*

Some services are delivered through partnership agreements with other organisations, e.g. service funding agreement with RSPCA ACT.

Actions

Action 4

Amend the *Domestic Animals Act 2000* to support compulsory registration of cats.

Action 5

Introduce a compulsory registration scheme for cats as part of a pet registration model to improve capacity for cat identification and reunification with owners.

Action 6

Implement a program of compliance and enforcement, using a system of warnings and information in concert with a public education campaign.



STRATEGY 3: Reduce number of semi-owned and unowned domestic cats

Some people may irregularly feed or allow a cat to shelter at their residence. Some cats may be semi-owned by several people. Semi-owned cats are under the direct and intentional care of humans but are not considered owned by their carers. Semi-owners of cats are unlikely to comply with legislation requiring owners to de-sex or microchip their cat.

Unowned cats have fewer and irregular interactions with people but still rely to some degree on people, for example, through scavenging food. Semi-owned and unowned cats do not live as long as owned cats and are at higher risk of hunger, illness, injury and disease. Reducing the number of semi-owned and unowned cats is important to minimise indiscriminate breeding, nuisance complaints and wildlife predation.

To achieve the vision for 'all cats in the ACT to be owned, wanted and cared for by responsible owners', management of all semi-owned and unowned cats needs to be addressed.

Community-based programs may be effective in reducing unowned and semi-owned cat populations, including through free or low-cost cat de-sexing and microchipping that may encourage some people to adopt 'neighbourhood' cats.

There is also an important role for education and raising awareness in the community about environmental and welfare implications of abandoning cats and uncontrolled breeding. Recent amendments to the Animal Welfare Act 1992 have strengthened laws and penalties for abandoning cats.

It is also likely that a proportion of unowned cats were originally unwanted kittens of owned or semi-owned cats.[10] Stray (unowned) and semi-owned cats both add to cat overpopulation and predation of wildlife. A reduction in the numbers of semi and unowned cats is vital in reducing effects of cat predation on native wildlife and the potential for rise in feral cat numbers coming from the population of unowned cats.

Actions

Action 7

Provide information to the community to increase awareness about the environmental and welfare implications of abandonment and feeding wandering cats.

Action 8

Work with animal care and rescue organisations to manage semi-owned and unowned cats in public places, through trap, de-sex and adopt activities.

STRATEGY 4: Continuously improve domestic cat welfare and management practices

The ACT Government is committed to continually improving animal welfare and management practices across the ACT as articulated in the Animal Welfare and Management Strategy 2017–22.

The *Animal Welfare Act 1992* promotes and protects the welfare, safety and health of animals and the proper and humane care and management of animals. Codes of practice under the Animal Welfare Act promote best practice by guiding organisations and individuals in key areas of animal management.

The government has codes of practice (CoPs) related to cat management that are regularly reviewed. For example, under the *Animal Welfare Act 1992*, CoPs guide the:

- humane treatment of cats
- operation of cat refuge and rescue organisations, including handling of companion animals in pounds and shelters.

The government and RSPCA ACT work together to provide cat management facilities in the ACT, including ensuring practitioners comply with CoPs and are well trained in standard operating procedures and new management methods. RSPCA ACT and other organisations and groups provide re-homing and rescue services (Box 5). The government is expanding its capability to respond to and manage cat compliance issues, including expansion of the Domestic Animal Services shelter at Symonston to accommodate impounded cats.

Box 5: RSPCA ACT and other re-homing services in the ACT

RSPCA ACT has operated at Weston Creek since 1957. It has a workforce of about 300 people, 250 of whom are volunteers. RSPCA shelters are the public face of the RSPCA, rescuing, rehabilitating and re-homing thousands of stray, neglected, abused and unwanted animals every year. RSPCA ACT also provides a lost and found service for cats.

Generally, a cat owner can surrender their cat to RSPCA ACT at any time for re-homing. At times, RSPCA ACT may have a waiting list of people wishing to surrender their cat. A surrender fee of $100 is requested and any belongings go with the cat to its new home.

There are many other local rescue groups which work to rehome cats and domestic animals.





Actions

Action 9

Develop and adopt model Codes of Practice (CoPs) and Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs) for the humane treatment of domestic cats, including under the *Animal Welfare Act 1992*.

Action 10

Review and implement CoPs, SoPs and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs)/agreements with external service providers for the operation of cat management facilities.

Action 11

Provide access to appropriate training and education to practitioners responsible for implementing domestic cat management to improve welfare outcomes for cats.

Action 12

Facilitate provision of adequate cat management facilities/shelters in the ACT to support: finding and reclaiming lost cats; adoption and re-homing; and compliance and enforcement.

STRATEGY 5:
Expand cat containment

Cat containment is a key policy for reducing the impact of cats on the environment.

Many people voluntarily contain their cat. The uptake of voluntary cat containment will be encouraged by providing information and education to raise awareness about benefits to cats, benefits to wildlife, how roaming cats can be a nuisance to neighbours and how to contain a cat.

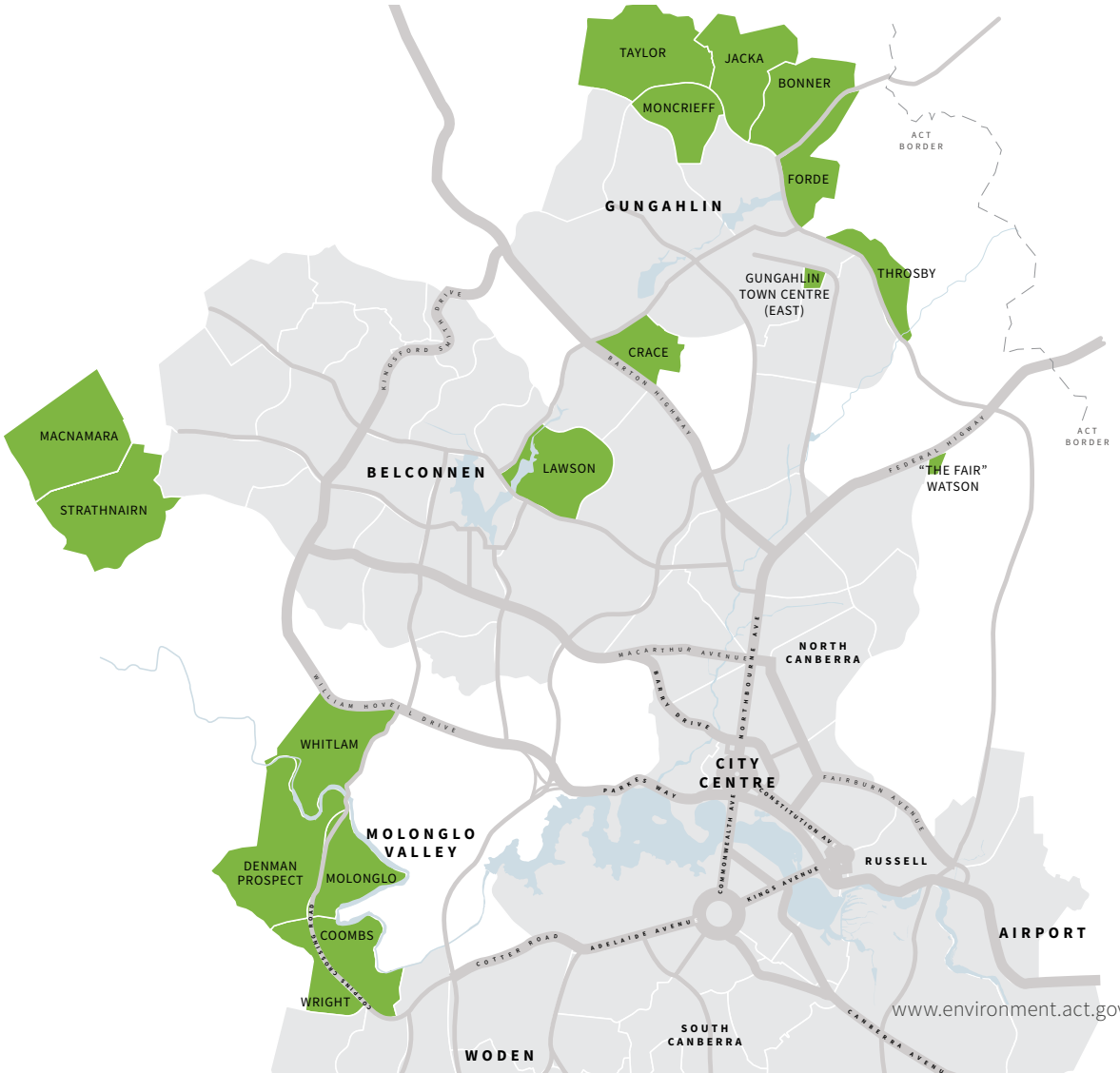
The expected lifespan of owned, domestic cats is 9 to 15 years. Contained cats tend to live longer due to the reduced chance of misadventure and/or interaction with diseased cats.[13]

Containing a cat to the owner's premises is a legal requirement in cat containment areas and may be adopted voluntarily in other areas. The *Domestic Animals Act 2000* (Part 3, Division 3.2, s. 81) allows the declaration of cat containment areas. Bonner and Forde were the first suburbs declared cat containment areas in 2004.

Since 2011, new suburbs that back onto nature reserves have been declared as cat containment areas; however, to date the Government has deliberately not introduced cat containment in established suburbs due to impacts on existing cat owners. Expansion of cat containment will reduce impacts of domestic cats on native wildlife and reduce risks to the health of domestic cats.

As of 2019, 17 areas (Figure 3) have been declared cat containment areas. Declared cat containment areas are shown on ACTmapi.

Figure 3: Cat containment areas (current at April 2021)



Community consultation undertaken in the development of this plan showed there were varying community perspectives on the expansion of cat containment across the ACT. Cat owners had a strong focus on the wellbeing impacts for cats which had previously been able to roam, and about the costs associated with complying with containment laws. However, owners and the wider community also recognise that containment brings benefits to cats and the environment. Providing sufficient time and community education to support a transition to further cat containment is important in managing these impacts.

A transitional period enables existing cat owners to prepare for cat containment and other members of the community to make more informed decisions. For example, some people may decide to contain their cat voluntarily, while others may choose to purchase another type of pet.

The draft cat plan proposed several options for introduction of cat containment into established suburbs. Community consultation undertaken in the development of this plan indicated that a grandfathering approach was preferred as it provides an easier transition for cat owners and for their cats. A grandfathering approach allows for a more natural phase-in of cat containment over the lifespan of an average cat and enables people to consider the need to contain their cat when they are thinking about purchasing or acquiring a new pet cat. The ACT Government has heard and accepted this feedback in opting to pursue compulsory cat containment for new cats only.

- Voluntary cat containment will also be encouraged and supported, including by the provision of information about how to contain your cat and through the exploration of the introduction of cat containment in areas or suburbs which self-nominate as wishing to cat contain.

The expansion of containment will continue to include the declaration of containment in all new suburbs.

The current wording of the *Domestic Animals Act 2000* has an unintended consequence that cats cannot be walked on a lead and harness in containment areas. This is was not the intention of the Government in introducing cat containment and is a low risk activity for the environment. Some cats may benefit from and enjoy being walked on a lead and their owners who do so are responsibly caring for their cats.

Compliance and enforcement of cat containment policy is a high priority under Strategy 2: Improved compliance and enforcement. A consistent approach to declaration of all new suburbs makes it easier to inform future residents and to undertake compliance and enforcement.

Actions

Action 13

Encourage voluntary cat containment by providing information, education and awareness raising on 'benefits to cats', 'benefits to wildlife', 'how a roaming cat can cause nuisance' and 'how to contain a cat'.

Action 14

Continue to declare all new suburbs as cat containment.

Action 15

Introduce city-wide cat containment requirements for new cats acquired after 1 July 2022, with grandfathering arrangements for all cats in non-containment suburbs owned before this date.

Review and amend the *Domestic Animals Act 2000* to support this expansion of cat containment.

Action 16

Bring forward legislation to ensure that cats may be walked on a lead and harness lawfully in all suburbs, including in containment areas.

STRATEGY 6:
Reduce impacts of feral cats

The potential risks to native wildlife have resulted in 'predation by feral cats' being listed as a Key Threatening Process under the Commonwealth *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.* While predation on native animals is the main concern, feral cats also impact the environment through competition with native carnivores such as quolls and changes in ecosystem function.

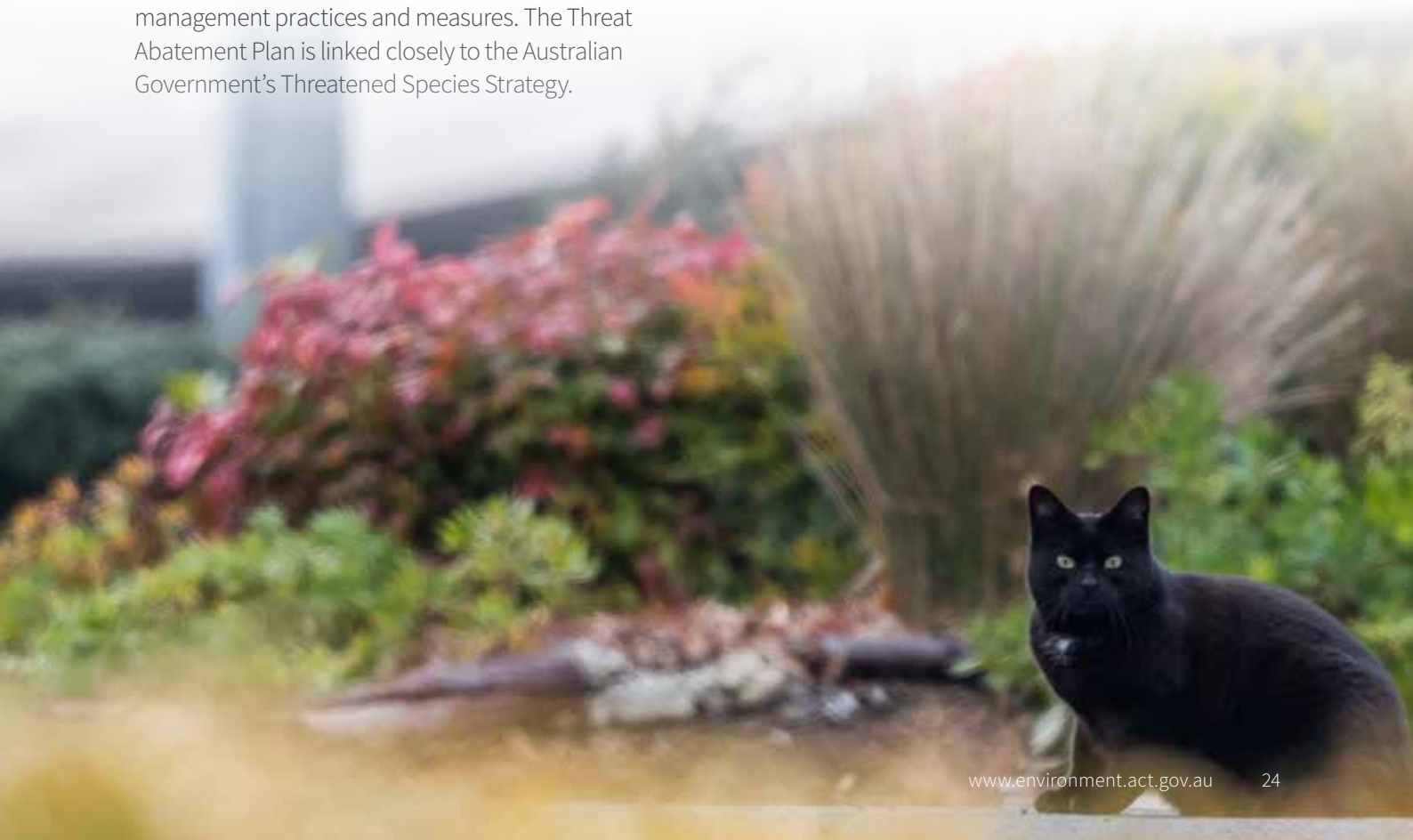
In preparation for the 16 July 2015 Threatened Species Summit, state and territory environment ministers committed to reviewing their jurisdictional arrangements to remove any unnecessary legal impediments to land managers undertaking feral cat control and management, where possible.

The Australian Government Threat Abatement Plan (Box 6) encourages national cooperation and promotes best practice management of feral cats. The background document for the Threat Abatement Plan[11] contains information on feral cat characteristics, biology and distribution; impacts on environmental, social and cultural values; and current management practices and measures. The Threat Abatement Plan is linked closely to the Australian Government's Threatened Species Strategy.

Box 6: Australian Government Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats

The Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats provides a national framework to guide and coordinate national action to:

- effectively control feral cats in different landscapes
- improve effectiveness of existing control options for feral cats
- develop or maintain alternative strategies for threatened species recovery
- increase public support for feral cat management and promote responsible cat ownership.



The ACT is committed to supporting implementation of the Threat Abatement Plan, including through the assessment of any nomination to list feral cats as a key threatening process under the *Nature Conservation Act 2014*. Listing would facilitate preparation of an ACT Action Plan for Feral Cats which would further clarify roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders in the ACT and promote improved planning, coordination and collaboration in the ACT urban context, which is quite different from other areas of Australia.

While significant research has provided important insights into how feral cats behave across different landscapes and how that might influence the success or failure of control and trapping programs, further research is required. For more information, see the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre report. In recent years, research effort has increased into new control options that are less labour intensive than trapping or baiting. The ACT Government supports national research through the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions (CISS) and would like to participate in trialling new control methods, including to refine methods for implementation in a semi-urban context. Citizen science projects such as FeralCatScan also assist in monitoring feral cats.

Feral cats are difficult to control; they are widely dispersed and do not take baits readily. In the ACT, feral and roaming domestic cats can also overlap near urban areas. Cat containment keeps pet cats safe, including from the potential risk posed by feral animal control programs.

The ACT Parks and Conservation Service undertakes pest control programs in Namadgi National Park and ACT nature reserves for foxes and wild pigs; however, there are currently no specific feral cat control programs. Feral animal control programs aim to reduce the impact of feral animals on the environment by focussing efforts on:

- protecting highest value environmental assets
- trialling and improving the cost-effectiveness of control methods
- promoting landscape approaches (including cross-tenure) to pest control.

The cost effectiveness of feral cat control programs will be improved by:

- reducing the flow of domestic cats to the feral cat population
- controlling reproduction of domestic cats through high de-sexing rates
- improving effectiveness of control methods for use over large areas
- reducing risk of owned and semi-owned cats being affected by control programs through responsible pet ownership and cat containment.

Territory-wide eradication of feral cats is not feasible with current techniques. Eradication was achieved at Mulligans Flat Woodland Sanctuary due to the predator-proof fence. Expanding the Sanctuary will reduce impacts of feral pest animals, including cats, and allow for successful reintroduction of native wildlife within the larger fenced area (Box 7).

Box 7: Mulligans Flat Woodland Sanctuary

Mulligans Flat Woodland Sanctuary is part of the ACT's nature reserve system. It is managed by the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust in partnership with the Parks and Conservation Service.

The rabbit, cat and fox proof Sanctuary at Mulligans Flat Nature Reserve was established with the expectation of reintroducing fauna that have become locally extinct. Following construction of the 11.5 kilometre feral-proof fence around the Sanctuary, feral animals were removed including foxes, cats and rabbits. Lost native species were reintroduced, including Eastern Bettongs in 2012 and Eastern Quolls in 2016. The fenced sanctuary has since been expanded to triple in size to approximately 1,555ha.



Actions

Action 17
Educate people about the impacts of cats on Australian wildlife.

Action 18
Support implementation of the Australian Government Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats 2015 and assess any nomination of predation by feral cats as a key threatening process under the *Nature Conservation Act 2014*. Subject to listing, prepare an ACT Action Plan for Feral Cats.

Action 19
Participate in regional and national monitoring, research and trials to:

- increase understanding of the feral cat population and impacts on the environment; and
- improve efficacy, humaneness and expand available feral cat control methods.

Action 20
Undertake feral cat control where feasible, cost-effective and provides highest conservation benefit as part of integrated pest animal management.

Action 21
Increase cat-free conservation areas by expanding predator-proof fences in nature reserves.

STRATEGY 7: Engage rural landholders in improved cat management

Rural properties in the ACT require an integrated approach to management of cats given any one property may have owned, semi-owned, unowned and feral cats living on or visiting it. Responsible cat management on rural properties will reduce impacts on the environment, noting that some rural properties have significant wildlife habitat and/or are close to national park and reserves.

Across Australia, it is not uncommon for 'farm cats' to be fed irregularly or live in the shed. Consultation with ACT rural landholders on this occurrence and ways to promote responsible cat ownership, including pre-pubescent de-sexing and cat containment, is needed.

While likely to be low risk or minimal, cats can host diseases that affect agricultural livestock. Cats can host and propagate common disease-causing parasites including *Toxoplasma gondii*, *Sarcocystis* and *Cryptosporidium*.

Working with rural landholders to increase awareness of responsible cat ownership, reduce risks to agriculture and promote integrated pest management across the landscape is an important aspect of cat management. Cat management issues could be incorporated into wider natural resource management awareness raising and training for landholders.

The government coordinates pest control with other land managers including rural landholders. Coordinated cat control programs by the Parks and Conservation Service and rural landholders in priority areas will increase the effectiveness of control programs. While it is recognised that cats may currently help control vermin by hunting rats and mice, it is considered more appropriate to control vermin by limiting their access to food (grain and food scraps) and use alternative vermin control activities on farms.

Actions

Action 22

Undertake awareness raising and training of rural landholders regarding cat management on rural properties, including:

- responsible cat ownership
- impacts of cats on agriculture and methods for limiting transmission of parasites and disease to livestock and
- pest control methods including feral cats and vermin (rats and mice).

Action 23

Engage with rural landholders and animal care and rescue organisations on managing wandering domestic cats on rural properties.

Action 24

Consider options for expanding cat containment to rural areas in consultation with rural communities.

Action 25

Work with rural landholders to reduce the impact of feral cats on the environment.

STRATEGY 8: Promote human health and wellbeing through responsible pet ownership

Owning a cat can provide many benefits to our physical and mental health and wellbeing. Cats and other pet can provide valuable companionship, strengthening mental health and sense of wellbeing. Pet ownership has also been associated with physical health benefits such as improved cardiovascular health.

The companionship of cats can help reduce feelings of loneliness, while their affection and contact can be particularly important to people who do not have significant contact with others. Having responsibility for a pet can be good for children and can provide a sense of purpose and improved self-esteem. Pets can also provide an opportunity for social interaction with fellow owners through clubs or even just through enabling conversation.

There may also be health risks associated with owning a cat. Although cats rarely carry germs that make people sick, cat owners should be aware that this can occur. Germs from cats may cause a variety of illnesses in people, from minor skin infections to more serious illnesses.

With routine veterinary care and some simple health tips, owners can reduce the risk of getting sick from touching, petting or owning a cat. Box 8 provides more information.

Box 8: Risks of infection from cats can be reduced by:

- using gloves when handling cat litter boxes
- washing hands with soap and water after petting, feeding, handling, or having any other contact with cats, their living quarters, or their litter waste
- covering any skin wounds before handling cats
- keeping pet cats indoors and away from stray and feral cats
- only feeding cats commercial cat food or well-cooked table food
- covering outdoor sandboxes when not in use to avoid cats using these as litter boxes
- wearing gloves when gardening or working with soil and washing hands promptly afterwards
- seeking timely veterinarian attention if a cat looks sick or unwell
- ensuring a cat has all necessary vaccinations and any other regular medication (as advised by a veterinarian)
- regularly cleaning and vacuuming living areas and regularly changing cat litter
- seeking medical attention if there is a risk of having contracted an infection from a cat or being bitten.



Cats can cause allergic reactions and asthma in some people through exposure to cat urine, feline saliva, inhalation of cat dander (dead skin) and exposure to dust, pollen and fur. Pet owners can help reduce the chances of allergic reactions or asthma by ensuring pet cats are restricted from sleeping areas, limiting direct contact with cat (and washing hands with soap and water after handling them), using high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) cleaners in living areas and regularly bathing pet cat.

Responsible cat ownership includes looking after the health and wellbeing of your cat, and yourself, and can lead to a long and fulfilling relationship that benefits both owner and pet.

Actions

Action 26

Recognise and promote the health and wellbeing benefits associated with responsible pet ownership.

Action 27

Raise public awareness about how to reduce risk of infection from cats.



Further information on cats and cat management is available from the following websites

ACT Government information on ACT cat owner's legal obligations

ACT Government information on responsible cat ownership

ACT Pest Animal Management Strategy 2012–20

ACTmapi - Cat Containment declared areas

Australian Government Threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats

Canberra Nature Map

Cat Tracker Project

Feral Cat Scan

Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia

Information on Toxoplasmosis

Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre: Review of cat ecology and management strategies in Australia

Research on Maximum Ages Reached by Domestic Cats

Mulligans Flat Woodlands Sanctuary

RSPCA ACT

Safe Cat - Safe Wildlife



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ACT Government

ACT Cat Plan
2021-2031