

## **Cats — perceptions and misconceptions: two recent studies about cats and how people see them**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Cats, their control and management are contentious issues.

Throughout Australia, animal management staff in local authorities are attempting to come to grips with the practical application of their local and state regulations concerning cats. Until recently, there has been a dearth of research into the attitudes of cat owners to the management of their pets, or even to the behaviour of cats in Australia to assist them in determining the most appropriate path to follow.

Two studies were recently conducted in Queensland. The first was into levels of ownership, desexing, hunting behaviour and likely compliance to regulations on mandatory desexing, registration and confinement of cats in Mt Isa. The second, in Brisbane, investigated current methods favoured for the identification of cats and into the effect of bells on hunting behaviour.

People and cats have certainly had a chequered relationship. Revered by ancient Egyptians then reviled in the middle ages as witches' familiars, cats until recently had occupied a cosy, if often unnoticed place in our households. Then began the Great Cat Debate! Cats hit the headlines as wildlife killers and carriers of disease. People wanted them controlled!

This took many local authorities by surprise. Few local laws existed to control the keeping of cats in Australia. Over the past 10 years, however, in response to the increasing perceived demand for cat control, several working parties have been formed by both State Governments and Local Authorities to determine the need for and content of such legislation and local laws. Since 1994 some local authorities have actually introduced cat laws, which include sections on compulsory identification, registration, and restraint. These measures have been taken even though no data has been available on the current status of cats in the community.

In 1995, I was approached by Mt Isa City Council to conduct a study into cat ownership in the city. The council wished to assess levels of cat ownership, desexing and restraint, and attitudes towards control of cats of both owners and those who did not own cats. The data was collected in a door to door survey conducted by council employees.

During this research it became apparent that, although many councils advocated compulsory identification, no data existed on current levels of identification particularly why people, without any compulsion, chose to identify (or not identify) their cats. A further study was therefore conducted in Brisbane to collect this information. Forms were completed by cat owners who visited participating veterinary practices and a major pet retailer. Four hundred and twenty responses were collected.

As owners were being asked whether their cats wore collars, it was decided to ask whether the collars had bell(s) attached and whether they thought that wearing a bell had affected hunting success. The only study in Australia which had looked at this issue (Reark, 1994) had asked whether the cat wore a bell and whether it hunted. This study produced data showing that cats which wore bells were more likely to hunt than those which did not. It had not asked owners whether their cats had hunted before the bell was attached, so it was felt that this data might not reflect the true value of attaching bells to cats' collars to reduce their hunting success.

## **PERCEPTION/MISCONCEPTION 1**

### **All cats are killers**

Many cats do not hunt — 49% of the cats in the Mt Isa study were reported to hunt, which is significantly less than the 56% in the only other study to measure this (Reark Report, 1994). Of those cats in the Mt Isa study which hunted, 81 (6%) hunted daily, 67 (5%) frequently, and 548 (38%) hunted occasionally. Five hundred and thirty seven (37%) cats were known not to hunt, 117 (8%) had hunted in the past but no longer did so and 420 (29%) had never hunted. The hunting behaviour of 206 cats (14%) was unknown.

## **PERCEPTION/MISCONCEPTION 2**

### **Birds are the main prey of cats**

Most cats in Mt Isa which hunted were reported to take several types of prey. Lizards were the commonest prey, caught by 40% of cats, while 37% each took birds and mammals. Snakes (17%), frogs (5%) and arthropods (4%) were also caught.

## **PERCEPTION/MISCONCEPTION 3**

### **Night confinement of cats will control their hunting**

Confining cats at night has often been suggested to prevent cats from hunting, but the Mt Isa study found that anything less than total confinement did not prevent hunting. This would seem logical as lizards are the most common prey and they are active during the day.

## **PERCEPTION/MISCONCEPTION 4**

### **Entire female cats produced millions of kittens**

Cats often reach reproductive age early (5-6 months), and, as it is difficult to confine a determined cat without access to a secure cattery, it is highly likely that those females not desexed by this age will become pregnant. While 21% of female cats in Mt Isa had given birth to one or more litters of kittens, 78% of these had produced six kittens or fewer and only 7% had produced more than 8 kittens. It therefore appears that, although many owners may have inadvertently allowed their cat to produce a litter, few were caught out a second time!

## **PERCEPTION/MISCONCEPTION 5**

### **Many people will not spend the money to have their cats desexed**

Although a smaller proportion of the cats in Mt Isa were desexed, compared with the studies of McHarg et al (1995) and Reark (1994), most adult cats (83% over 12 months) were desexed. This was even higher for mature cats (93% over 5 years).

## **PERCEPTION/MISCONCEPTION 6**

### **Many people do not want to spend much money on the purchase of a cat**

This is certainly true compared to dog ownership. While there is a 50% ownership of purebred dogs in Australia, only 12% of cats in Mt Isa were purebred.

## **PERCEPTION/MISCONCEPTION 7**

### **Many people own far too many cats**

While 28% of Mt Isa households owned one or more cats, most owned only 1 (73%) or 2 (19%). Only 8% had more than two cats.

## **PERCEPTION/MISCONCEPTION 8**

### **You can't keep cats in**

Cats are traditionally allowed free access to the house and this was true for Mt Isa (52%). Only 15% were kept wholly inside, while a further 10% were confined at night. 13% were kept outside. This confinement (or lack of it) was not necessarily by choice. Many cat owners, both those who agreed with confinement and those who did not, felt it was too difficult to confine cats. Another common answer was that confinement of cats was unnatural. The most common reasons people thought cats should be confined were to reduce cat nuisance, to protect wildlife, for the cat's safety, to stop straying and to reduce cat fights.

## **PERCEPTION/MISCONCEPTION 9**

### **Bells on collars will deter cats hunting**

This statement is both right and wrong. The Brisbane study found that cats which had bells attached to their collars before they began hunting were less likely to do so. While bells attached once hunting had begun did not reduce the numbers of cats which hunted, many owners reported some decrease in their cats hunting behaviour.

## **PERCEPTION/MISCONCEPTION 10**

### **Owners of cats will not identify them**

The majority of cats in the Brisbane survey were identified. Except for a few cats which were microchipped, almost all identified cats wore collars with name tags. Overwhelmingly owners cited the importance of prompt action should their cat be lost or injured as their reason for identification. The most common reasons given for not identifying cats were that the cat did not leave the owner's yard or that they had not bothered. Both of these groups had not therefore considered that identification was an important issue. Several owners were concerned that their cat did not like, or lost collars or that wearing a collar constituted a danger to the cat.

## **PERCEPTION/MISCONCEPTION 11**

### **Cats are a major problem to the community**

A majority of people (67%) reported problems with cats. Interestingly, cats were a problem to more cat owners (71%) than to those who do not currently own a cat (66%), but non-owners perceived more problems with cats than cat owners. The most common problem was that cats walked on people's cars, a problem to 43% of people. There were also significant differences between owners and non-owners for different categories of problems. Cats on the car, wildlife predation, digging in the garden and attacks on pet birds were all a greater problem to non owners, while noise of cat fights and urine spraying and noise of cat fights were equally important to both groups.

## **CONCLUSION**

Current figures suggest that cat ownership in Australia is declining, yet cats, properly managed, make ideal pets for those living in high density housing and/or whose lifestyles require that their pets spend long periods alone. State governments and local authorities are increasingly requiring that owners control their cats and that animal management staff enforce these regulations.

These studies suggest that the majority of cat owners are responsible. Once they have adopted a cat, usually a 'moggie', they have their cat neutered, but sometimes not until it has had a litter. While many of their cats hunt, as many do not and few hunt often, so this problem is probably overemphasised by non-owners. Contrary to popular belief, they more often hunt lizards than birds.

With the emphasis on the identification of owned cats, it is important to note the reasons given for identifying or not. Any education program to raise awareness of the importance of identification of cats should emphasise the problems which could occur for an unidentified cat and the value of microchipping as an identification tool.

All companion animals cause community problems — dogs bark, parrots screech — but both provide companionship whose value outweighs the problems they cause. Cats are particularly misunderstood and often cat owners feel guilt for the sins of their much loved couch potato's feral counterpart. It is important that the benefits of responsible cat ownership be acknowledged and that strategies are put in place to educate owners on the value of early desexing, confinement and correct identification.

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