

D.I.Y. cat-proof fencing and cat enclosures

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Background

An increasing number of Victorian councils are requiring the confinement of cats to their owner's property, for a range of animal welfare, environmental and community amenity reasons.

For instance, around 80% of accidents involving cats happen at night. Roaming cats can get hit by cars, injured in fights, catch fatal diseases (eg feline AIDS), or become lost. Cats kept inside at night generally live at least three times longer than cats allowed to roam.

Roaming cats can also kill native wildlife, and can annoy neighbours by spraying, fighting, yowling and digging in gardens.

A survey of 320 Melbourne residents (Van de Kuyt, 2003) revealed that 85% of respondents (including 74% of cat owners) supported or strongly supported the idea of confining cats to the property at night time. Thirty five percent of respondents (and 16% of cat owners) supported or strongly supported the 24-hour confinement of cats to the property.

Open-ended questions revealed the main reasons for supporting confinement of cats were to prevent wildlife predation, to prevent cats causing neighbourhood nuisance and disturbance, and to protect the cat itself from injury or loss.

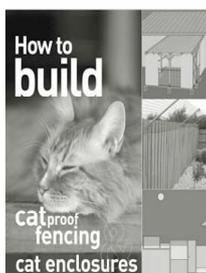
The *Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994* makes it an offence for an owner to allow his/her cat to repeatedly trespass on private property against the property owner's wishes, and also enables the seizure of cats found without a council identification tag while wandering off their owner's property. In addition the legislation gives councils the power to introduce requirements for cats to be confined to their owner's property during certain hours, or to prohibit or restrict the presence of cats in particular public places. To date, 21 of the 79 councils in Victoria have introduced some form of compulsory cat confinement requirement.

A number of excellent cat enclosure products are available commercially, to assist owners with containing their pets to the property. However the cost of buying these can be a problem for some cat owners. For this reason, the Bureau of Animal Welfare has developed a booklet on building 'do it yourself' (D.I.Y.) cat enclosures and cat proof fencing.

D.I.Y. cat enclosures and cat proof fencing booklet

This booklet aims to help people who wish to save money by building their own cat enclosure or cat proof fencing. Materials cost approximately half the price of purchasing similar (but ready to assemble) commercially available products.

The booklet was drafted by a team of people all contributing their various areas of expertise. The team comprised of Bureau of Animal Welfare staff, a builder who had previously designed Mitre 10 hardware D.I.Y. booklets, an illustrator with expertise in technical drawing, a publication design firm, and several cat owners who were willing to trial the cat proof fencing.



The booklet provides instructions for building:

- Cat proof fencing (ie modifying existing fencing to make it 'cat proof', giving cats free access to parts of, or an entire, yard),
- A cat enclosure attached to another structure (eg the house or a shed), and
- A free standing cat enclosure.

The booklet provides full construction details including basic design considerations, step by step D.I.Y. instructions and supporting illustrations, tools and materials checklists, and details of materials suppliers.

It also includes a section on environmental enrichment for cats while they are contained to the property. For instance, it covers in detail the following needs of cats if they are to remain happy and healthy:

- Companionship
- A well informed owner
- Space
- Sleeping, resting and viewing areas
- Food and water
- Litter boxes
- Scratching posts
- Toys and exercise.

This section was particularly important to include as research has revealed welfare concerns are one of the main reasons why cat owners are reluctant to contain their pets to the property (Van de Kuyt, 2003).

Cat proof fencing

Given the cat proof fencing is a relatively new idea, several trials were undertaken to test "netting" and "PVC capping" options. The trials have been important in determining which cat proof fencing options are the most effective and suitable for inclusion in the booklet.

Two cat owners were selected to participate in the trials. The first cat owner trialed a "netting extension option", which was successful in keeping her cat contained to the property. The netting extension effectively enclosed the 'alleyway' area between the house and the fence. Her cat had free access to the house through a cat door.

The second cat owner trialed a "PVC Capping" option (see photo opposite). This option was initially preferable to the netting style fence extension, as it was cheaper, easier and less visually intrusive (the PVC could also be painted to match the colour of the fence). The theory was that cats would not be able to get a grip on the PVC in order to climb the fence. However, while it easily kept one cat in, the owner's second cat eventually managed to grip and scale the fence after several days of (persistent!) effort.



The fencing was subsequently modified to include a panel of smooth metal (colourbond) sheeting, which was attached just below the top of the fence. This was designed to make it even more difficult for the cat to grip the fence while attempting to climb over it. See photos below.



However, the same cat yet again managed to scale the modified fence (it was at this stage that he was officially re-named "Houdini"). Houdini had watched the construction process with great interest, and once completed, attempted a number of times (unsuccessfully) to grip and climb the fence. Several days and many more attempts passed, during which time our volunteer owner reported Houdini becoming more and more frustrated (often taking out his anger by beating up his feline companion!). Eventually, Houdini was observed taking a run at the 1650mm high fence and clearing it in one jump, without even touching it!

This necessitated going back to the drawing board, and contact was made with a New Zealand company that specialised in designing fencing to keep pests (including feral cats) out of environmentally significant areas. Their trials had found that fences had to be over 2 metres high to prevent feral cats from being able to clear them. Given few suburban backyard fences are this high, the PVC capping option was scrapped in favour of the netting extension option (as used in trial 1).

The PVC capping and colourbond sheeting was removed from the trial 2 yard, and replaced with netting extensions (see photos below). To date, this option has remained successful in containing all cats participating in the trials (including, much to his disgust, Houdini!).



In addition to the total height of the fence (including the netting structure) needing to be at least 2 metres, the netting must also be angled into the property at an angle of at least 35 degrees (as cats cannot climb upwards and backwards). Recommended netting is similar to a tennis net, with openings small enough to ensure cats can't get their heads caught through it. The key to the netting is that it is 'floppy' enough to feel unstable and unsafe enough for cats to climb on (therefore rigid netting such as galvanised mesh is not suitable).

The booklet explains other relevant issues in more detail, such as the need for cats to have access to shelter and the house, legal issues regarding fence extensions, and preventing cats from escaping in other ways (eg through gaps in fencing, by jumping from other objects, climbing trees etc). The issue of preventing other cats from entering (and potentially becoming trapped) in the yard is also discussed.

Costs

At the time the booklet was produced, the cost of materials for the cat proof fencing (netting option) was approximately \$10-\$15 per Linear Metre.

The cost of materials for the free standing cat enclosure was estimated as roughly \$270 for the base unit (compared to over \$500 for a similar commercially available unit). Optional add on galvanised mesh units were estimated to cost an additional \$7 per square metre, and optional tunnel sections to cost an additional \$7 per metre.

Attached cat enclosures (ie attached to a house or other structure) were estimated to cost around \$300 (with a sewn in door at extra cost). Obviously these costs cover the basic building structure only, and don't include items such as scratching posts, beds etc.

Conclusion

While the "How to build cat proof fencing and cat enclosures" booklet has only been available for a few months, 50,000 copies have already been produced to meet demand. Hard copy and electronic versions have been supplied to all Victorian councils. Several media releases in local and State papers have generated additional interest in the booklet. The booklet can be viewed and downloaded online by visiting www.pets.info.vic.gov.au

References

Van de Kuyt, N. (2003). *Attitudes of Melbourne residents towards the management of dogs and cats in the community* (unpublished Masters Thesis), Melbourne University, Parkville.

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Neva Van de Kuyt is employed with the Bureau of Animal Welfare, Victorian Department of Primary Industries. Neva's work involves coordinating the Responsible Pet Ownership Community Education Program. This Program aims to provide councils with resources and assistance to help them promote responsible pet ownership in their local communities.