

The metropolitan domestic cat

A survey of the population characteristics and hunting behaviour of the domestic cat in Australia.

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In April 1994, an extensive survey of the metropolitan domestic cat population was conducted by Reark Research, Pty Ltd. The executive summary of the study follows. A copy of the full report, with detailed maps and tables for each capital city, is available from the Petcare Information and Advisory Service.

Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

In Australia in recent years, concern has been raised about the possible impact of cats, both domestic and feral, on native fauna populations.

Concern about the role of domestic cats in particular has led some groups to consider cat management options. Management decisions are hampered, however, by a scarcity of scientific information on the interaction of domestic cats with native fauna.

Previous research has shown that domestic cats are catching native wildlife. But - how many? To date, none of the studies published have used sample groups which reflect domestic cat distribution, making it very difficult to draw conclusions about the behaviour of the cat population as a whole.

Most people live in highly urbanised areas. It was suspected that a survey conducted over the full range of metropolitan populations would show that domestic cats in fact catch very few native fauna.

Petcare Information and Advisory Service (PIAS) thus commissioned Reark Research Pty Ltd, an independent market research organisation, to conduct a detailed survey of the metropolitan cat in all Australian capital cities (except Darwin). The sample group was selected to represent domestic cat distribution within each city, thus ensuring that conclusions could be drawn about the metropolitan cat population.

The survey was to provide information on the hunting behaviour of domestic cats and determine the size, age and neuter status of the metropolitan cat population.

OBJECTIVES

1. To clarify the hunting behaviour of the metropolitan domestic cat, including:

- What creatures are caught;
- How many creatures are caught;
- How many native creatures are caught.

2. To provide detailed information on the metropolitan cat population, including:

- what percentage are desexed;
- changes in cat population over the last 12 months.

3. To provide information on factors likely to effect cat hunting behaviour, including:

- confinement of cats by the owner to the property at night;
- tendency of cats to roam from the owner's property;
- wearing bells.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The survey was designed to provide complete coverage of the cat population within metropolitan Australia, covering the entire Statistical Division for each of the capital cities.

The metropolitan region included within the scope of the survey covers 62.7 percent of the private dwellings throughout the whole of Australia. Within each city, sample selection was controlled to appropriately represent population distribution, and results were weighted accordingly.

A systematic probability sample of telephone 'white page directory' listings within postcodes classified as 'relatively low' to 'high' population densities was generated.

Over 4000 households were surveyed. The size of the sample group ensured that the maximum degree of error was limited to not more than +/-2 percent for all estimates relating to the total metropolitan domestic cat population.

The questionnaire was sequenced to establish a rapport between interviewer and subject, and invite an open and non threatening discussion of the cat's behaviour, thus reducing possible bias due to recent media coverage of 'cat issues'.

RESULTS

1. Hunting Behaviour

The proportion of domestic cats which caught prey.

- 41 percent of cats caught introduced mammals such as mice, rats and rabbits (vermin), and 2 percent caught native mammals such as possums or bats.
- 17 percent of cats caught reptiles or amphibians such as lizards, skunks, snakes or frogs.
- 19 percent of cats caught introduced birds such as sparrows and starlings, and 7 percent caught native birds such as magpies or honey eaters.

Overall, 56 percent of cats were reported to catch prey.

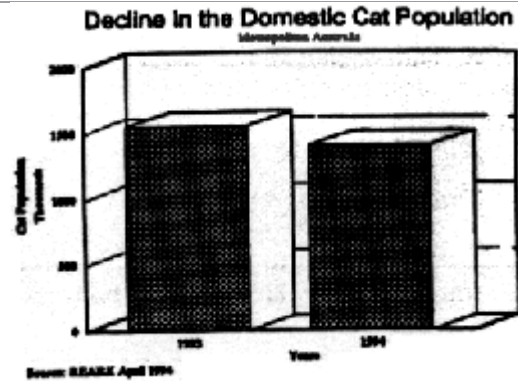
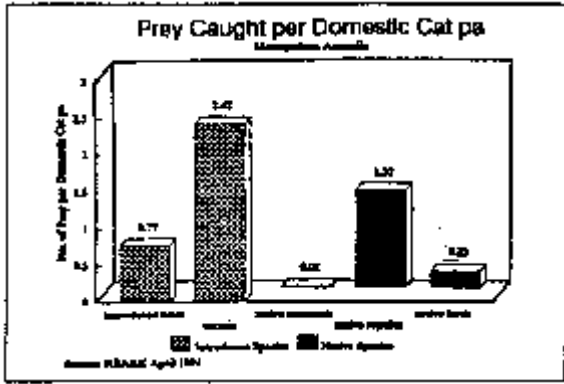
(Note that as cats could catch more than one type of creature, the total number of cats catching prey is less than the sum of cats catching individual creatures)

The number of prey caught by domestic cats

Over the period 12 months to April 1994, each metropolitan domestic cat caught on average:

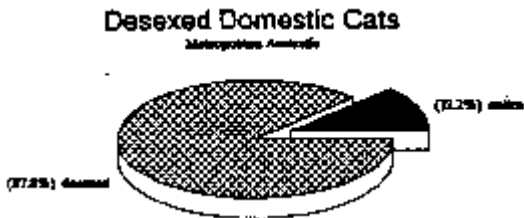
	Average Catch/Cat	
	Units	%
Native species		
Mammals	0.02	0%
Reptiles and amphibians	1.32	28%
Birds	0.23	5%
Sub Total	1.57	33%

Introduced species		
Mammals (Vermin)	2.42	50%
Reptiles and amphibians	0.00	0%
Birds	0.77	16%
Sub Total	3.19	67%
Total Prey caught	4.76	100%



2. Domestic cat population

- Almost one million households (985 000), that is 25.2 percent of households throughout the capital cities of Australia own a cat.
- The total number of cats living within those households is estimated as 1,397,000.
- Fewer households own cats than a year ago, and the number of cats per cat owning household has also dropped.
- In the past twelve months there has been a 10 percent decline in the metropolitan cat population.



3. Factors likely to affect cat hunting behaviour

- 39 percent of the cat population was securely contained at night.
- 79 percent of the cat population was reported to not roam away from the home surrounds during the day.
- The proportion of cats which caught any creature was lower for those cats which were confined to the house at night, than those which were allowed out.
- The proportion of cats which caught any creature was higher for those which wore bell collars than those which did not.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings support the suspicion that metropolitan domestic cats are in fact catching substantially fewer native fauna than previously supposed.

During the survey year, each domestic cat is estimated to have caught on average:

- One fiftieth of a native mammal;
- One fifth of a native bird;
- One and a third native reptiles or amphibians;
- Half of all creatures caught were vermin - mice, rats and rabbits.

Contrary to common perceptions that cat numbers are increasing, it appears the metropolitan domestic cat population is in decline.

- The metropolitan domestic cat population decreased by 10 percent over April 1993-1994.
- The vast majority (94 percent) of adult metropolitan domestic cats are desexed.

Bell collars do not appear to be effective in preventing hunting, although conclusions are difficult to draw as owners are more likely to place bells on cats which are proven hunters.

Those cats which spend most of their time around the home tend to hunt less.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

No information was available about the author

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