

# Australian Community Cat Program: Managing domestic cats humanely & scientifically



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THE UNIVERSITY  
OF QUEENSLAND  
AUSTRALIA

COMMUNITY CAT PROGRAM  
Protecting people, cats & wildlife



**80,000-115,000 healthy and treatable cats are killed annually in shelters and council pounds**

**Half are kittens**

**Most are urban strays = semi-owned**

**Average % of intake euthanased:**

**Dogs = 12%**

**Cats = 52%**

Chua et al 2017, Rand et al, 2018



# **It's not just the animals -**

**“The effect on mental health is a very real problem, and veterinarians were the most affected – it was terrible to see the impact on them”**

**“I have seen so many people's lives damaged by having to kill a never ending stream of kittens and cats”**



- General agreement that fewer free living cats in cities & towns would be advantageous





# Definitions – feral vs urban “stray”

- **Non domestic / feral cats**
- Get no food or support from humans
- At least more than 2–3kms from habitation



- **Domestic – owned, semi-owned, unowned**
- Get food intentionally or unintentionally from humans
- Urban & periurban areas



# Where are “stray” cats coming from?

- Wandering owned cats
- Lost owned cats
- Abandoned cats – moved house
- Unowned
- Semi-owned cats = largest group – 3-9% of adults feed daily one or more cats they don't perceive they own
- 250,000 -300,000 stray cats in Gtr Melbourne or Sydney – most semi-owned
- Most stray cats are socialised to people
- Only 1-2% “feral” based on assessed  $\geq 3$  days



behaviour



# What are our management options for stray cats?

1. Continue what we are doing – accept strays from public & provide traps for complainants

– Kill approx. 2-5% of urban stray cat stray population annually



-> vacuum created is rapidly filled by immigrants + increased survival of juveniles = same number or even more kittens & cats next year

- Low level killing (30% pa) can increase numbers (Lazenby)

= farming cats & harvesting juveniles



*Insanity is doing the same thing, over and over again, but expecting different results ~ Albert Einstein*

# Does it work?

## Cats: Council trends over time (NSW)

Agencies	Intake	Euthanasia	Euthanasia %	Year of data
Dept of Local Govt	24,586	16,605	68%	2008-9
	25,982	17,407	67%	2009-10
	26,477	17,991	68%	2010-11
	24,641	16,145	66%	2011-12
	22,714	13,351	59%	2012-13
	24,992	13,250	53%	2013-14
	24,080	12,507	52%	2014-15
	= 173,472	= 107,256	62%	



# What are our management options for stray cats?

## 2. Lethal control

- Requires killing 30-50% of the stray cat population every 6 months for at least 10 years to overcome reproductive capacity (Miller 2014)

**= Kill 15-20 times more of stray population/year**

**-> Community unlikely to support it, and will sabotage attempts to trap**

**- Councils will need to do most of trapping – 4-6 nights/cat to get whole colony**

**= \$\$\$\$\$\$ & increase complaints**

**Who will pay for it?**

# To decrease cat numbers by culling: Kill 30-50% every 6 mths >10yrs

City of 5 million in 1<sup>st</sup> year alone

Need to kill 200,000 cats

Cost \$100m (\$500/cat)

Plus build facilities to hold for mandatory period



Miller *et al* 2014

# What are our management options for stray cats?

## 3. Feeding bans

- Who will police it?
- No city where a feeding ban has succeeded in eliminating cats
- Can't ban compassion
- Not enough officers
- Cats will find food
- Cost!!!



# What are our management options for stray cats?

## 4. Community Cat Programs (CCPs)

**“Stray” cats are caught, desexed, left in their home location and supported**

- adoptable cats & kittens rehomed
- vaccinated, wormed, flea control
- microchipped & ear tipped





# Desexing: Does it work? Gainesville, FL

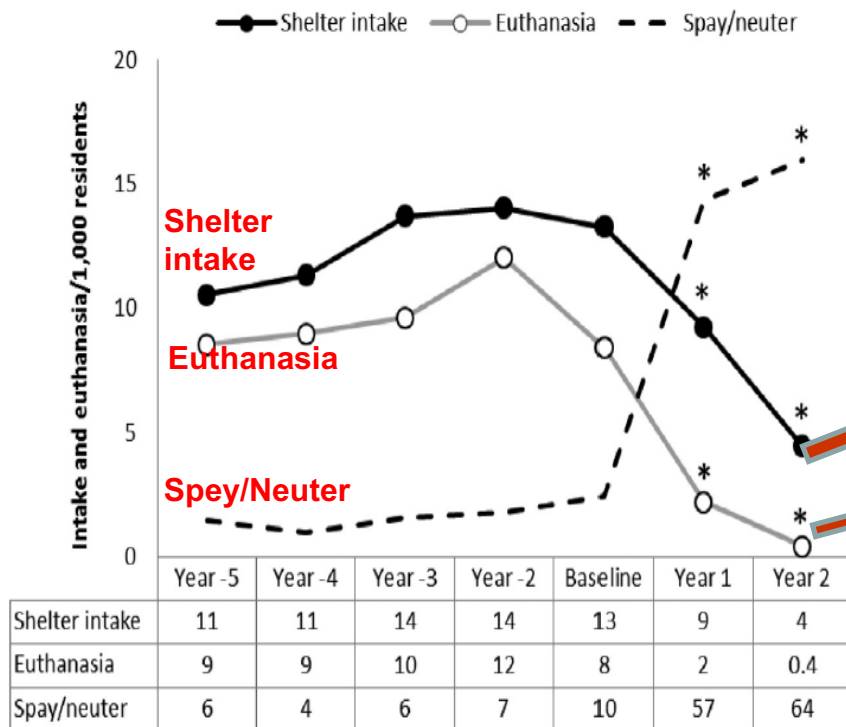
Targeted area: Desexing of 2,366 cats over 2 yrs with adoption of social cats & kittens

= 60 cats desexed/1000 residents = 54% of unowned cats

Control area: Non-targeted desexing = 8 cats/1000 residents

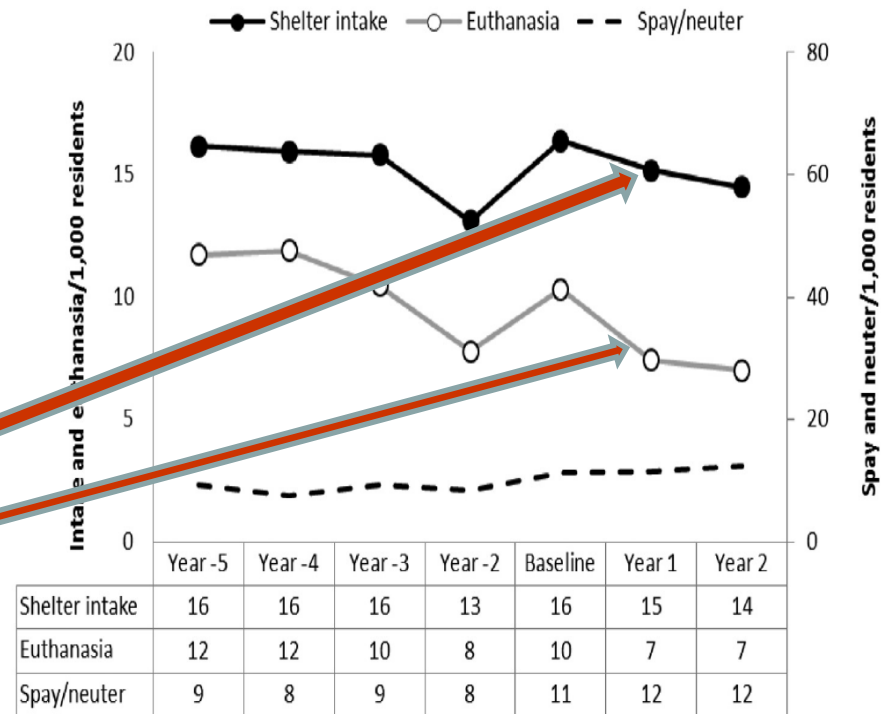
A

Target Area



B

Non-Target Area



Intake reduced 66% - 3.5 times higher in control area (14 vs 4 cats/1000 residents)

Euthanasia – 17.5 times higher – 7 vs 0.4 cats/1000 residents (Levy 2014, *The Vet J*)

# Community Cat Programs: Do they work?

**Newburyport, MA** 1<sup>st</sup> community-wide CCP program in U.S. – 300 free-roaming cats along the riverfront in 1991, zero today

**Albuquerque, NM** – after 3 years of an intensive Community Cat Program, intake to the municipal shelter dropped 39% and euthanasia decreased by 85%

**6 Municipal Shelters – serving 200,000-2 million**

- 71,311 desexed & returned to their location of capture (83%) or adopted (15%) over 3 yrs.
- Intake decreased 32%
- Euthanasia decreased 83%



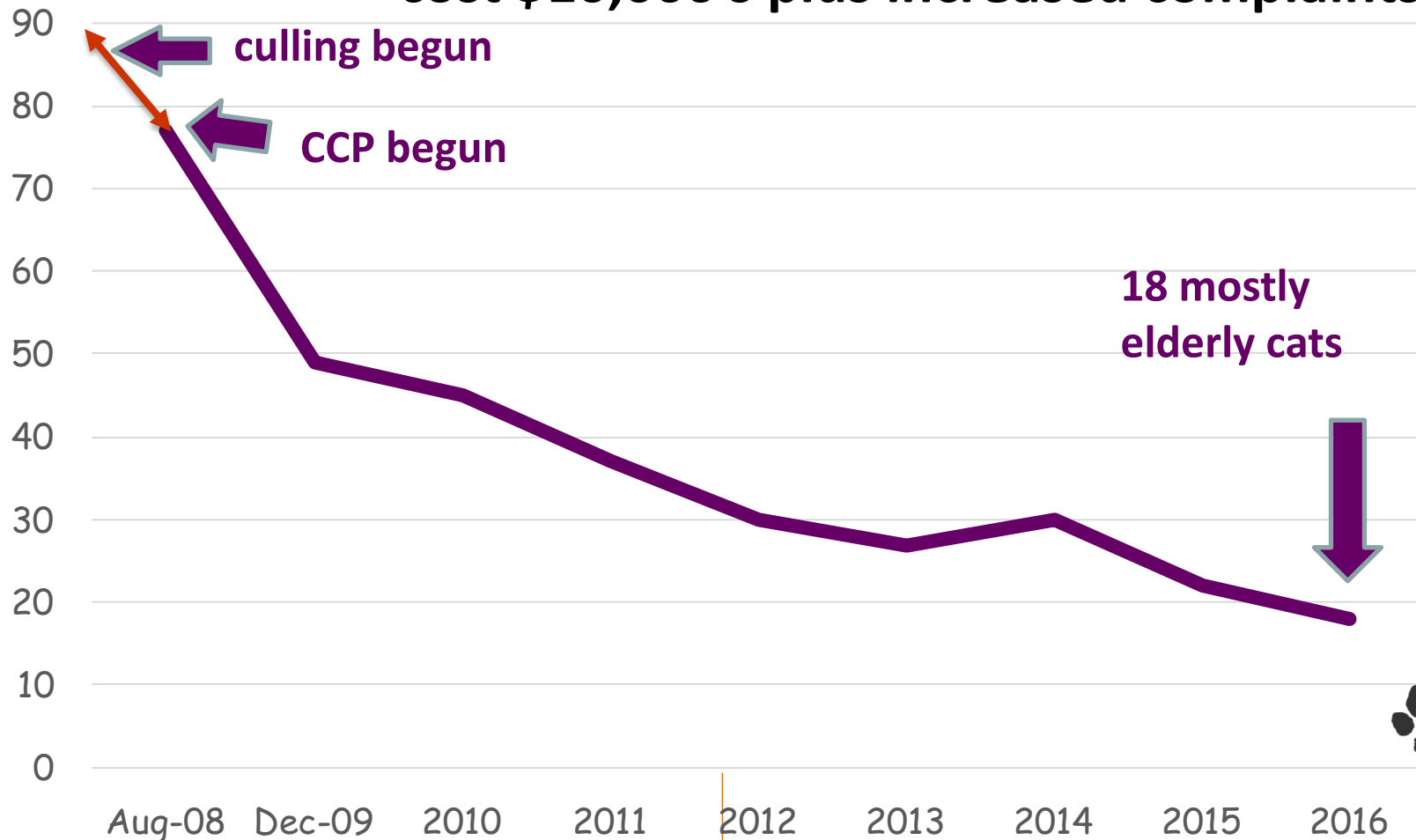
# Desexing: Does it work in Australia?

Number of cats on Uni of NSW campus

Cat-related complaints led to lethal control

- reduced cats from 90 to 77 over 1<sup>st</sup> half of 2008

cost \$10,000's plus increased complaints



# Objections

- What about their welfare?





# What about their welfare?

- Neutering and return to site is associated with an improvement in health, body condition and longevity, or at least no deterioration (RSPCA 2001, Robertson, 2008, Jessup 2004)
- Health & welfare not different from owned cats (Zito 2019)
- Death rate same as pet cats (approx 8%/yr) in managed colonies (Swarbrick 2018)



# Objections

- What about wildlife?



# 2 options to decrease cat numbers

Kill 30-50% every 6 months & spend \$100M in 1<sup>st</sup> yr in city 5 million

OR

CCP – desex, adopt or leave in home location



# What about wildlife?

- Yes returned cat might catch a bird
- BUT in 2 years will 100 entire cats or 66 desexed cats catch more birds?



**Current Cat Management**



**Community Cat Program**

# Support from WIRES (Wildlife Information and Rescue Service)

- ***WIRES CEO Ms Leanne Taylor “WIRES will be following the results keenly, and we hope that this approach will lead to long term benefits to wildlife in cities and towns throughout Australia by reducing the impacts on native animals.”***





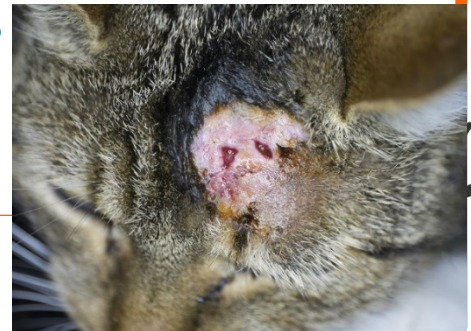
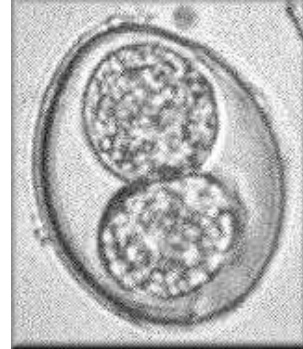
# Objections

Cats spread disease to humans and  
pets



# Reduced spread of disease to humans & pets cats by desexing

- Once infected, cats shed toxoplasmosis oocysts for 2-3 weeks, then become immune for life
- Most new infections and shedding occur in cats < 1 year old
- Reducing kitten births reduces environmental contamination by toxoplasmosis oocysts – and risk to humans and wildlife
- Desexing reduces fighting which decreases cat bite abscesses & spread of FIV to pet cats



# Objections

Will the community support it?



# Community Support

- **Survey 1239 respondents**
- **70% said cats had a negative effect on wildlife in their area (24% for dogs)**
- **“Overseas, programs exist where stray suburban cats are captured, desexed (spayed/neutered), then returned to where they were captured. These programs have been shown to reduce the number of complaints about these cats and to reduce the numbers of stray cats and kittens put to sleep in shelters. Would you support a trial project like this in a specified area near you?”**
- **82% of respondents said YES**



# What are the alternatives?

- Keep doing what we are doing = farming cats & harvesting kittens
- Lethal control & increase killing by 15-20 X
- Ban feeding
- Magic wand
- Desex, adopt or leave at their home
- ✓ Decrease population of stray cats
- ✓ Decrease intake of cats into shelters & pounds
- ✓ Decrease killing in shelters & pounds
- ✓ Decrease cat-related complaints
- ✓ Decrease impact of killing on staff
- ✓ Decrease costs to community





# Australian Community Cat Program: Managing domestic cats humanely & scientifically



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# Diverse & expert multidisciplinary team:

**Veterinarians**

**Ecologists**

**Economists**

**Shelter experts**

**Psychologist**

**Infectious disease expert**

**Animal behaviour, welfare & ethics**

**Biosecurity**



# Diverse & highly respected partners

**5 major Australian universities** (Queensland, New South Wales, Sydney, Adelaide and La Trobe)

**4 local governments** (Melbourne, Banyule, Greater Shepparton, Ipswich)

**10 Australian welfare and rescue groups** (RSPCA Qld, RSPCA NSW, RSPCA SA, AWL Australia, AWL Queensland,, Maneko Neki, Cheltenham Cat Rescue, PetRescue, Sydney Dogs' and Cats' Home, Australian Pet Welfare Foundation)

**3 veterinary care, diagnostics and pharmaceutical companies**, (Greencross, IDEXX, MSD Animal Health)

**1 international partner**, Neighborhood Cats.



# Aim

- To investigate effects of a community cat management program (CCP) based on desexing
- For semi-owned and unowned urban stray cats & owned cats in target area



# **Aim: Evaluate Outcomes of a Community Cat Program on:**

- Proportion of semi-owners that perceive themselves as owners & increase in responsible cat caring behaviours**
- Intake and euthanasia rates of cats and kittens**
- Community attitudes to urban stray cats, and cat-related complaints received by councils**
- Mental health and job satisfaction of pound/shelter staff**





# **Aim: Outcome Measures**

- **Costs and benefits, compared to current “business as usual”**
- **Relative risks of spread of infectious disease to pet cats, humans and wildlife**
- **Numbers of free-roaming urban stray cats**
- **Wildlife predation and cat roaming behaviour**



# **Methods: Community Cat Program (CCP)**

- Stray cats in target area are captured, desexed, health care, microchipped
- Adopted if homes readily available
- Other healthy cats will remain in their home location after desexing, and where possible, with identified carer to support them
- Where consent given, semi-owners converted to owners – registered on the microchip database
- Offering free / subsidized desexing for owned cats in target area



# Methods: Community Cat Program (CCP)

- Unowned and unclaimed cats brought to the shelter by members of the public or council officers, desexed and returned home if not immediately adoptable
- Community education –desexing, confinement, microchip, collar with ID tag
- Best practice in resolving cat related issues in the community
- Community cat watch – for undesexed cats or are injured or sick cats with ear tip



# WHERE?: CCP

## Victoria

- City of Banyule: Heidelberg West, Bellfield (test) and Heidelberg Heights (control)
- Greater City of Shepparton
- City of Melbourne (desexing LDH)

## SA

- South Australia – Whyalla or Port Lincoln

## NSW

- Sydney Dogs' and Cats' Home

## Queensland

- City of Ipswich

# Community Cat Programs

## Example of potential benefit:

- LDH – received 9,938 cats; killed 4,755
- If desexed 6,600 cats/year for 3 yrs in areas contributing most to intake = disadvantaged areas
- In 3 years go from killing <5,000 to <500 cats & reduce intake by more than 30%





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# It's time!

## Managing domestic cats scientifically & humanely to decrease cats and costs



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