

Are pet cats bad for wildlife?

PET cats receive bad press from conservationists. This is partly because there is an obvious link between pet cats and feral cats, and predation by feral cats is widely regarded as a key threatening process for endangered species of small vertebrates in Australia. There is also a perception, however, that pet cats are directly responsible for declines in wildlife populations, particularly around urban areas. As a consequence, many local government authorities have introduced regulations aimed at controlling cats, ranging from night-time curfews and confinement to complete prohibition of cat ownership. Greenaway (2010) discusses the approaches taken by local and state governments to control pet cats throughout Australia.

But how strong is the evidence that pet cats affect the abundance or diversity of wildlife? Certainly many studies have found that pet cats can kill large numbers of wild animals, but does this mean that predation by cats causes wildlife declines? A study by Maggie Lilith and colleagues in this issue of *Pacific Conservation Biology* (Lilith *et al.* 2010) addresses this question by comparing the species diversity and abundance of small and medium-sized native mammals in urban subdivisions with different regimes of cat regulation. They found no differences in diversity or abundance between subdivisions with no cat regulations, compulsory bellings and night curfews or complete prohibition of cat ownership.

Lilith *et al.* (2010) acknowledge the limitations of their study and are careful in their interpretations. Nevertheless, their results confirm what a number of other studies have found for native mammals and birds in urban and semi-urban areas; pet cats have little impact on wildlife diversity and abundance, which are much more likely to be affected by factors such as housing density or the amount of remnant bushland in an area (e.g., Barratt 1998; Grayson *et al.* 2007).

What does this mean for attempts to regulate the ownership of pet cats? On animal welfare grounds and to reduce the transition from pet to stray to feral, there is a strong case to be made for compulsory registration, identification, desexing and perhaps confinement of pet cats. The case for measures such as curfews or prohibitions on owning cats, which are primarily aimed at reducing predation by pet cats on wildlife, are less strong. There may be many good reasons for controlling pet cat populations

in urban areas, but it seems that there is little evidence that conserving wildlife is one of them.

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Alan Lymbery

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