

**Submission by Coalition of Animals Protectors (CAP) re:  
"Proposed changes to the Pest Animals Declaration"**

CAP considers the concept of "pest animals" to be inherently hostile to animal welfare. We strongly recommend that the ACT "pest" animal policy and legislation in its entirety be reviewed in relation to its compliance with the purpose and spirit of the Animal Welfare Act.

We also consider that there is abundant evidence that the lethal control usually favoured by governments in Australia is demonstrably counter-productive when applied to the fast-breeding animals generally declared as "pests", and must therefore be reviewed in terms of its compliance with the spirit and purpose of the Nature Conservation Act.

On both welfare and ecological grounds, we oppose any extension of "pest" animal declarations until the inherently flawed thinking behind these declarations is independently reviewed by welfare and genuine ecology experts (ie not ACT government employees), and the whole approach to unwanted animals in the ACT re-developed to recognise both welfare and environmental imperatives.

We are especially opposed to the current proposals to declare abandoned domestic cats to be wild animals – presumably for the purpose of declaring them "pests" - and to prohibit the keeping of foxes as pets. The former would be a further betrayal of animals who have already suffered horrifically at human hands. The second has no possible ecological value, and will simply ensure that rescued foxes, when they are healed and well, will have to be returned to the wild. That would be completely counter-productive, assuming the objective of the declaration is to reduce the number of foxes living in the wild in the ACT.

**Inherent welfare issues**

The word "pest" has the very specific effect of setting this class of animals apart from other domestic or wild animals. Once you call something a "pest", it becomes possible to ignore the animal's sentience, its capacity for suffering, and its right to humane treatment. Thus the most horrific forms of cruelty can be dismissed as "necessary" or unimportant when they are directed against "pest" animals.

For example, the poison 1080 which is routinely used against foxes in the ACT causes the following symptoms: anxiety, salivation, nausea, vomiting, incontinence, twitching, auditory hallucinations, organ congestion, renal tube degeneration, respiratory problems, spinal pressure, citrate

accumulation in the tissues, convulsions and coma prior to eventual death. Animals poisoned with 1080 may take several hours or longer to die (*Animals Australia website: Fact Sheets*).

It cannot possibly be argued that causing these impacts on an animal, or the full range others forms of suffering caused by routine “pest” control measures is consistent with the purpose of the Animal Welfare Act.

### **Inherent ecological issues**

It is it well known that, unless complete eradication can be achieved, culling of the fast-breeding species almost always results in a higher, rather than a lower population of the animals. This is primarily because the presence of an established and successful individual within a population of fast-breeding animals suppresses the survival and fertility of younger individuals within the population, thus maintaining a stable population. When this established individual is killed, a healthy, highly fertile younger generation has the opportunity to mature and breed and compete for the dead animal’s niche.

Ultimately, another individual will succeed in becoming dominant and a stable population will be re-established at more or less the level it was at before the death occurred (so you have killed the animal for nothing anyway). But until that happens, you have many more animals grazing on the vegetation, or preying on the native animals than you had before you killed the original animal.

Since “pest” animal controllers agree that eradication of fast breeding animals (ie those who produce litters or clutches, and/or breed more than once a year) is unachievable, lethal control must therefore be making the problem worse.

Lethal control of “pests” is therefore contrary to the spirit and purpose of the Nature Conservation Act.

Even if eradication were possible, the animals generally declared to be “pest” species are almost always naturalised species that have created their own role in the ecosystem, through grazing, predation, and/or providing prey for others, as well as other forms of ecosystem “engineering”. While some of the original impacts caused by the arrival of these species in Australian ecosystems might have been negative, killing large numbers of them now they are naturalised might well prove even more disastrous to what remains of our natural systems and native animals and plants.

Without careful observational study of the ecological role of naturalised species, it is not logical to assume that killing them is better for the ecosystem than leaving them be. Removing naturalised species may, in some cases, remove the last hope of survival of some native species. At the moment there appears to have been little or no study of the ecological contributions of naturalised species in the ACT.

### **Unowned cats**

CAP is appalled at the proposal to declare unowned cats to be wild animals, thus enabling them to be treated to the same horrific cruelty to which other unwanted wild animals (“pests”) are subjected.

Unowned cats in the ACT are **not** wild animals (except in so far as no cats have ever been fully domesticated, but rather have been our allies in protecting us from other animals that compete for our food, carry disease and mess up our homes). There is no evidence that any of Australia's original, naturalised cat population ever made it this far east.

All the unowned cats in the ACT are the victims of human cruelty and neglect. Some have been deliberately abandoned to fend for themselves when an "owner" decided that keeping the animal had become inconvenient. Some are kittens of "owned" cats for which the "owners" never took responsibility. Some have been treated so badly that they have been forced to escape at the first opportunity. Some are not unowned cats at all, but lost cats. Some much loved cats who have been stolen and abandoned.

The simplest and most humane solution to address an unwanted stray cat population has been proven hundreds of times around the world and across Australia. Stray cats are captured, neutered, vaccinated, wormed and returned to their territory. Over time, this process can be used to eliminate an entire population of stray cats, when all its members have been neutered, and hold their territory until they eventually die of natural causes. Alternatively, the same process can be used, if preferred, to maintain a stable, healthy stray cat population (eg for rodent control).

While it is understood that around 97 per cent of ACT cat keepers already neuter their cats and that most do so before the cat is sexually mature, programs are also needed, through education and subsidised desexing, to address the three per cent who leave their animals entire. If this troublesome human minority can be educated and assisted to do the right thing, it will reduce any chance of any new generation of unowned, entire cats establishing itself in the ACT.

The idea of allowing abandoned animals, who have already suffered so much at human hands, to be declared "wild" animals and therefore subjected to the extreme cruelties permitted to "pest" animals, is nothing short of monstrous.

## **Pet foxes**

The government must be aware that decent people who find injured or orphaned fox cubs in the ACT (as anywhere else in the world) usually feel obligated, by both native compassion and ethical imperative, to care for these animals and restore them to health. This will not change because of any government declaration.

In some cases, rescued foxes, once they are fully recovered, are not confined within an owner's property, even though they are still treated as pets when they appear for feeding or affection. These animals are not being "kept" and are therefore not relevant to this discussion. They already face the same risks as wild foxes.

However, in other cases, because of the danger these animals would face if they were returned to the wild and/or because of concerns for their potential impacts on wildlife, people who rescue and rehabilitate fox cubs do not release them back into the wild. They get them neutered and keep them as pets, confined within their own premises.

If this keeping of neutered foxes as pets were to be prohibited, people would have no choice but to release these foxes back into the wild, where both they and their prey animals, must take their

chances. Aside from the enormous emotional impact this would have on both the animals and their carers, this is obviously not the outcome the government is hoping for in proposing the prohibition.

We strongly urge that if any prohibition of “keeping” foxes is to proceed, it refer only to entire foxes, not to neutered foxes or rescued foxes as yet too young to be neutered. At that very least, any person currently keeping a fox as a pet, must be exempted from this declaration for whatever remains of the animal’s natural life.

We will be grateful if these comments are taken on board before any further action is taken to lock the ACT into further cruel and counterproductive measures against alleged “pest” animals.

Yours sincerely

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on behalf of CAP