



Responsible Pet Ownership

Many Australians keep pets. They can be wonderful companions and can contribute to the health and wellbeing of their owners and those around them. Most people are aware of the potential problems that domesticated pets can pose to native wildlife. This Note shows how being a responsible pet owner can make a significant contribution in protecting native wildlife.

How do domestic pets impact wildlife?

Hunting and territorial behaviour are the main ways in which pets can harm native wildlife. While many pets seem unlikely to attack wildlife, it is often instinctive for them to hunt and protect their territories.

Pet dogs and cats can attack a wide variety of native animals including possums, kangaroos, wallabies, bandicoots, Koalas, snakes, geckos, skinks, lizards, birds and many different invertebrates. In particular, cats tend to hunt and attack small ground dwelling birds (e.g. doves, wrens, young brush turkeys and finches), small reptiles (e.g. geckos and skinks), small nocturnal mammals (e.g. mice and antechinus) and invertebrates such as moths, butterflies, cicadas and grasshoppers.

Dogs are more likely to chase, frighten or catch wildlife they consider to be threatening their territory. This can include wallabies, Koalas, large birds (like herons and brush turkeys), possums, and large reptiles (such as Lace Monitors, snakes and lizards). Some dogs, especially those which are not adequately confined, can join roaming packs of neighbourhood dogs that hunt and prey on wildlife. Research also indicates that the scent of dogs may deter some wildlife from utilising habitats that dogs visit.

Being a responsible pet owner

Here are ten tips to protect wildlife:

1. Know where your pet is at all times. Ensure they are kept in a yard or secured area on your property.
2. Confine pets at all times, not just at night. While some native animals are nocturnal, many native species are active during the day, including birds, lizards and frogs.
3. Desex cats and dogs. This will help curb their roaming and territorial behaviour.
4. Identify your pets with a collar, tag, microchip or tattoo. This will help track them if they roam or cause nuisance when you are not around.
5. Avoid taking your dog into bushland. If you do, ensure it is on a lead.
6. Train dogs from an early age that chasing animals is not acceptable behaviour. Enrol your dog in obedience training if necessary.
7. If you find you no longer have enough time for your pet, find them a new home or take them to the RSPCA. Never dump an animal in bushland.
8. Report all stray animals to your Council or the RSPCA.
9. Attach several bells to your cat's collar so that birds and mammals may hear the cat approaching. Unfortunately, bells will not alert most reptiles or invertebrates as most lack a sense of sound.
10. Support cat and dog controls, such as identification, registration and curfew.



Help protect wildlife and your cat by being a responsible pet owner.

Avoid familiarity between pets and wildlife

It is recommended that you don't feed wildlife because amongst other things, wildlife may develop a sense of familiarity with domestic pets (for more information on feeding wildlife, see *Land for Wildlife Note A5 - Alternatives to Feeding Wildlife*). If you encourage wildlife to visit your property, you should ensure that pets and wildlife are separated. Wildlife can develop a sense of familiarity around domestic animals, which can make them more vulnerable to attack when you are not around or if they venture on to neighbouring properties.

Confining your cat can be difficult

Cats don't need to roam, rather they need exercise, play, and lots of sleep. De-sexed cats will be content to live in enclosed areas if you provide for these needs. This doesn't mean your cat needs to stay indoors. Cat enclosures are areas within your own property where cats can be permanently confined. There are a number of ways to design enclosures to meet your cat's needs while protecting wildlife. They will also keep your cat safe. Enclosures can be as simple as enclosing your verandah (see image right), or they can be elaborate external caged areas with run-ways and access to climbing areas (see image below). You can build your own or seek assistance from a commercial supplier.

Remember that confining cats at night isn't enough! Wrens, finches, honeyeaters, frogs and skinks including the Blue-tongue Skink are all active during daylight hours and fall prey to domestic cats that are not confined.

Pets and disease

Toxoplasmosis is a disease caused by the protozoan blood parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. Cats are the definitive host, and intermediate hosts include many species of wildlife, and humans. Affected cats do not show any visual external signs of the disease.

Toxoplasmosis can affect wildlife, sheep and humans causing a lack of co-ordination, blindness, erratic movement and unnatural daytime activity. It is often fatal for infected wildlife and may also predispose affected wildlife to predation and road trauma.



Secure enclosures, such as this one made by Catmax, protect both cats and wildlife. Photo by Melissa Procriv.



Cat enclosures can be designed to allow cats to go outside, enjoy the sun and get exercise while also protecting wildlife.

Aquariums and pet fish

Many unwanted pet fish and other aquatic animals (e.g. snails) and aquarium plants end up in our local waterways. This causes problems as, once introduced, a few pet fish can increase to thousands of individuals that compete aggressively with native fish for food and space. Some aquarium plants, such as Cabomba, have become serious environmental weeds in waterways and dams. Waterplants in outdoor ponds can also be easily transported to creeks and rivers by waterbirds or during times of high rainfall and floods.

Help protect local waterways by being a responsible fish owner:

- Choose native fish species and native water plants for all indoor aquariums and outdoor ponds. Your Land for Wildlife Officer can help advise on appropriate native fish and aquatic plant species.
- Do not dispose of any unwanted or dead fish in local waterways.
- Do not dispose of aquarium plants in local waterways. Instead, put aquarium plants out in a sunny spot to dry and die, bag them and place in the rubbish.

Ponds and dams

A permit is not required to stock fish in artificially created waters on private land, such as dams or ornamental ponds, provided the water is stocked with locally occurring fish species.

From an ecological risk point of view, the escape of inappropriate native fish species from ponds or dams can have just as severe an impact on natural systems as stocking fish directly into these systems. To avoid this happening, use native fish species local to the area. Your Land for Wildlife Officer can help advise you on appropriate fish species.

Pet birds

Do not release unwanted pet, aviary or domesticated birds into the wild, even if they are a native species. It is unfair to the birds as they may die when released, and if they don't, they may breed and become pests such as the Common (Indian) Myna, Mallard, Spotted Turtle-dove and Nutmeg Mannikin.



The Red-eared Slider is a common pet turtle overseas, but it is a declared Class 1 pest in Queensland and should be reported immediately to Biosecurity Queensland (ph. 132523) if found. It is an aggressive turtle and has the potential to severely deplete native fish and turtle populations if released into the wild. Photo by Biosecurity Queensland, Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation (2010).



Some birds such as the Grey-crowned Babbler are declining throughout Australia. Babblers are vulnerable to hunting by cats. Photo by Tom Oliver 2009.



Some pet birds can become pest animals, such as the Common (Indian) Myna shown above, if released into the wild.

Unconventional pets

A recent change to legislation now allows people to keep unconventional animals. There is growing popularity in keeping snakes and other reptiles, amphibians and even invertebrates as pets. This change in the law, combined with easy access to overseas pet markets via the internet, is resulting in a wide range of new and exotic pets being kept by animal enthusiasts all over Australia.

Unfortunately, sometimes when people tire of these pets, or can no longer care for them, the pets are released into the wild. Unwanted pets should never be released into the wild including local parks, bushland, dams, creeks or waterways as they can seriously threaten native wildlife.

What you can do

- ✓ Confine your pets at all times in humane and healthy ways.
- ✓ Choose pets that are appropriate for your property.
- ✓ Use a harness for your cat when walking it outside.
- ✓ Create 'pet free' areas on your property.
- ✓ Never release unwanted pets (including fish and turtles) into the wild.

References and further reading

Department of the Environment and Heritage & Arts (2004) *Protecting our Wildlife: Responsible pet ownership*.

There are numerous commercially available cat enclosures available. Ask for advice from your local pet shop or search for cat enclosures on the internet.

Petnet, a website for promoting socially responsible pet ownership www.petnet.com.au



Unconventional pets such as scorpions are increasing in popularity, but should never be released into the wild as they may threaten native wildlife.



About 300 Koalas are killed every year by dogs in South East Queensland. More than 75% of dog attacks on Koalas are fatal. If you live in Koala habitat and own a dog, make sure your dog is humanely confined especially during the Koala breeding season from September until March. Also make sure that Koalas can escape from your yard by attaching timber beams to your fence so that Koalas can easily climb over them. Photo by Department of Environment & Resource Management.

Land for Wildlife is a voluntary program that encourages and assists landholders to provide habitat for wildlife on their properties. For more information about Land for Wildlife South East Queensland, or to download *Land for Wildlife Notes* free of charge, visit www.lfwseq.org.au

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