

Domestic Cat Survey Program - 2017

by

Dave Algar

Department of Parks and Wildlife, Division of Science and Conservation, Woodvale, Western Australia, 6026.

Background

To mitigate the environmental and social impacts of cats on Christmas Island, a “Cat Management Plan” was commissioned. The plan (Algar and Johnston 2010) proposed a strategy to eradicate cats entirely from the island as the de-sexed domestic population died out. As part of this plan, amendments to the Local Cat Management Laws (*Shire of Christmas Island Local Law for the Keeping and Control of Cats 2004 (WA)*) under the *Local Government Act 1995 (WA)* were endorsed in August 2010. These revisions require that all domestic cats in the Shire of Christmas Island are now legally bound to be de-sexed, tattooed, microchipped and registered with the Shire. The revisions were designed to limit domestic and stray/feral cat impact on the native fauna, promote responsible cat ownership, compliance and enforcement of cat management laws and prohibit the importation of new cats. To guarantee all domestic cats are registered, a survey of domestic cats is conducted annually in May. Surveys for domestic cats were conducted prior to veterinary programs in October 2010 (Algar *et al.* 2011a) at the commencement of the “Cat Management Program” and again in May 2011 (Algar *et al.* 2011b). The final veterinary program was conducted in May 2012 following the survey that year (Algar and Hamilton 2012; Algar *et al.* 2014). Subsequent surveys have been conducted each May in 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016 (Algar and Hamilton 2013; 2014; Parks Australia 2015; Algar *et al.* 2016). In 2016 prior to the domestic cat survey, it came to our attention that a number of unregistered cats were being kept as pets. It was decided by the “Cat Management Steering Committee” that a short-term amnesty on pet cat ownership be invoked so that these animals could also be de-sexed and registered. A final veterinary program was endorsed and fines were to be issued to those residents who wanted their cat to be de-sexed and registered, otherwise unregistered cats could be handed in and destroyed without charge.

Methodology

Domestic cat survey

The survey for domestic cats is conducted across the entire residential area. The survey process involves door-knocking at each permanent residence (n= 500+) and questioning the adult inhabitants as to whether they have any domestic cats. All residences are surveyed and, as added insurance, neighbours are also asked whether domestic cats are present in adjoining houses. All surveyed people are informed of the risk of not declaring the presence of a domestic cat and it not being subsequently registered. The survey records the number of owned cats per household, the sex, age and coat colour. Accordingly, the database of registered cats can be updated annually with addresses and cat deaths noted.

Results

Domestic cat survey

One hundred and fifty-two cats (72 females, 80 males) were recorded during the initial survey in October 2010 of which 136 were registered as domestic pets (Algar *et al.* 2011b). Since October 2010, 184 cats have been registered following the various veterinary programs. The total number of domestic cats registered each year, the sex population structure, the number of new registrations and number deregistered are presented in Table 1. At the conclusion of the veterinary program in June 2016, 93 cats remained registered (Algar *et al.* 2016). The survey for domestic cats conducted in May 2017 revealed that there were 74 domestic cats remained registered, of these, one cat was present but had no official owner as the previous owner was no longer on-island. One cat recorded as missing by its owner since January 2015 was located, returned and re-registered. A further four cats (3 females, 1 male) were recorded as missing and these cats are believed to be dead by their owners. Of the 93 cats registered in 2016, 16 (8 females, 8 males) died prior to the conclusion of the May 2017 survey. Of these animals, 12 died from natural causes associated with old age and four as vehicle fatalities. Three un-registered cats were located during the survey, one was removed by the Shire Rangers and the other two are to be confiscated.

Table 1. Total number of domestic cats registered each year, the sex structure, the number of new registrations and number de-registered

| Date | No. registered | | | New/re-registers | | | De-registers | | |
|--------------|----------------|--------|------|------------------|--------|------|--------------|--------|------|
| | Total | Female | Male | Total | Female | Male | Total | Female | Male |
| October 2010 | N/A | N/A | N/A | 136 | 66 | 70 | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| May 2011 | 138 | 69 | 69 | 18 | 10 | 8 | 16 | 7 | 9 |
| May 2012 | 135 | 66 | 69 | 12 | 5 | 7 | 15 | 8 | 7 |
| May 2013 | 111 | 53 | 58 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 24 | 13 | 11 |
| May 2014 | 101 | 50 | 51 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 5 | 5 |
| May 2015 | 87 | 45 | 42 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 14 | 5 | 9 |
| May 2016 | 75 | 41 | 34 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 14 | 5 | 9 |
| June 2016 | 93 | 49 | 44 | 18 | 8 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| May 2017 | 74 | 38 | 36 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 20 | 11 | 9 |

Discussion

At the conclusion of the domestic cat survey this year, there were 74 registered cats. Attrition of pets on the island is high and as a consequence there is the prevailing issue of people trying to acquire new animals as pets. The community is well aware that no further cats will be de-sexed and registered. Should any unregistered cat be found, the Shire will remove the animal and fine the owner the maximum penalty. Failure to remove these animals and not taking a strong stance will likely jeopardise the success of the eradication program.

A proposal was submitted to the "Cat Management Steering Committee" in 2016 to investigate the option of an alternative pet to the cat to further reduce the incidence of unregistered animals entering the domestic population. Environmentally friendly species, without negative cultural/religious significance, is being considered. This proposal is to be taken to the general community later this year for discussion and consideration.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Christmas Island Phosphates (CIP), Parks Australia (PA) and the Christmas Island Shire (SOCl) for their financial and logistical support. In particular, we would like to thank Joy Wickenden, Khaliesha Mohamed Amin (CIP), Scott Suridge, Rob Muller, Caitlyn Pink (PA), Colin Wheadon, Yit Meng Sho and Garry Foo (SOCl) for their assistance. In addition, we would like to extend a special thanks to Barry Haase (Administrator, Indian Ocean Territories) as Chair of the "Cat Management Steering Committee" for supporting and facilitating this program. The warm welcome and assistance of the whole Christmas Island community during the domestic cat survey was much appreciated.

References

- Algar, D. and Hamilton, N. (2012). Report on Stage 2 of the 'Christmas Island Cat and Black Rat Management Plan.' Unpublished Report to the Shire of Christmas Island and Christmas Island National Parks, Western Australian Department of Environment and Conservation. 33 pp.
- Algar, D. and Hamilton, N. (2013). Report on Stage 2(c) of the 'Christmas Island Cat and Black Rat Management Plan.' Unpublished Report to the Shire of Christmas Island and Christmas Island National Parks, Western Australian Department of Parks and Wildlife. 21 pp.

- Algar, D. and Hamilton, N. (2014). Report on Stage 2(d) of the 'Christmas Island Cat and Black Rat Management Plan.' Unpublished Report to the Shire of Christmas Island and Christmas Island National Parks pp 19. Western Australian Department of Parks and Wildlife.
- Algar, D., Hamilton, N. and Onus, M. (2011b). Interim report on Stage 2 of the 'Management plan for cats and Black Rats on Christmas Island'. Unpublished Report to the Shire of Christmas Island and Christmas Island National Parks, Western Australian Department of Environment and Conservation.
- Algar, D., Hamilton, N., and Pink, C. (2014). Progress in eradicating cats, *Felis catus*, on Christmas Island to conserve biodiversity. *Raffles Bulletin of Zoology* Supplement No. 30, 44–52.
- Algar D., Hilmer S., Nickels D. and Nickels A. (2011a). Successful domestic cat neutering: first step towards eradicating cats on Christmas Island for wildlife protection. *Ecological Management and Restoration* **12(2)**, 93–101.
- Algar, D., Nickels, D. and Algar, K. (2016). Domestic Cat Survey and Registration Program – 2016. Unpublished Report to Christmas Island National Parks pp 6. Western Australian Department of Parks and Wildlife.
- Algar D. and Johnston M. (2010). *Proposed Management Plan for Cats and Black Rats of Christmas Island*. Western Australian Department of Environment and Conservation.
- Parks Australia (2015). Report on feral cat and rat baiting program. Unpublished Report to "Cat Management Steering Committee" pp 24. Parks Australia, Christmas Island.