

FERAL CATS

The domestic cat has the unique position of being able to enjoy two worlds, the captive and the wild.

At home the family will see their pet cat as a well fed, warm, and lovable animal completely happy and content in his surroundings. Outside the house the same animal has the complete capability of reverting to its natural instinct by becoming a creature of the shadows that can hunt and kill prey in an instant.

While the domestic cat is maintained and looked after by his adopted family in the city, it can be assumed that his natural maraudings and consequent destruction of native animals is minimal.

On the other hand the domestic cat in rural areas has caused great concern to naturalists and biologists throughout Australia. Since the first settlers came to W.A., cats have become established as a feral species throughout the State.

Early rural pioneers gave their pets the run of the homestead and more often than not, unchecked breeding and semi-wild communities were allowed to establish.

Dr. Andrew Burbidge, Officer in-Charge of the Department's Wildlife Research Centre at Wanneroo, estimates that the feral cat population reached a peak some 50 years ago and by that time irreparable damage had been done to the indigenous fauna of the State.

The disappearance in some known localities of marsupials such as the Woylie, Numbat and Bandicoot is thought to be directly attributable to feral cats.

Recently a Dibbler was "brought in" by a cat at Jerdacuttup. It was a tremendous discovery, but the animal was "dead-on-arrival".

With most of our small mouse-like mammals being located in all types of habitat throughout the entire State of W.A. it is possible that a species could have been exterminated before being recorded.

In 1974 a biological survey of the Prince Regent River Reserve in the North West Kimberley of W.A. revealed feral cats in areas never before visited by man.

While the State generally has a stable feral cat population, there is no doubt from Honorary Wildlife Officers' Quarterly Reports that certain areas are experiencing a build up in numbers.

The problem of cats is not a new one, especially in the north of the State. Temporary or permanent abandonment of some stations have in the past resulted in cats going bush to the detriment of many Spinifex Pigeons.

Honorary Wildlife Officers in the Mandurah district have reported as many as forty animals scavenging at night on the Council rubbish tip. During the day, Wagtails, Blue Wrens and Robins have been observed being taken in the district by these predators.

The Shire of Kelmscott has also indicated a similar problem and an eradication programme may have to be implemented.

The Department does not see any easy answer to the situation. Feral cats are not declared vermin so there

is no requirement that they be destroyed. Killing the animals will raise a storm of objections from many people as it is another of the emotion-charged situations with which we are faced. In the meantime the indigenous fauna suffers again from the effect of an introduced species.

The only time the Department is able to take positive action is when feral cats go on to Nature Reserves. The Wildlife Conservation Act specifically forbids the introduction of any non-indigenous species on to Reserves, and the Department can take appropriate action to destroy such animals.

The following statement was taken in part from a special pamphlet produced by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of N.S.W. and is also applicable in every way to Western Australia.

"The domestic cat gone wild (the feral cat) is a great destroyer of wildlife. It can climb trees, stalk native animals, steal their young and take eggs from nests both in trees and on the ground.

Feral cats can multiply rapidly. Unlike most Australian native animals, the feral cat produces several litters a year with up to eight kittens in each. In the wild in their countries of origin, very few of the young would survive but because the cat is a recently introduced animal in Australia, the natural checks on its population are not present.

One of the main checks on the population of cats is the availability of food. In Australia there is an abundant supply of prey, most of which is easily caught by cats. Not only are cats able to live on birds, small mammals, reptiles and insects but also, because they are so adaptable, they survive on scraps left in picnic areas and garbage tips. From these areas of plenty they maraud into the surrounding natural bush.

Their efficiency as hunters not only means they destroy native birds and animals but they also compete with the native carnivores, which normally fulfil this function.

Cat owners who, for various reasons, no longer wish to keep their pets, frequently prefer to dump them in the bush rather than dispose of them in other ways. They believe it is cruel to destroy surplus cats and kittens. Yet, when these cats are released into the bush, they destroy a great many native birds and animals in their fight for survival.

A cat released in the bush loses the qualities of a domestic pet. It becomes very cunning and ferocious and its muscular system becomes very well developed.

Strangely enough, most dumpers of cats choose national parks and nature reserves for their dumping. This is quite contrary to the aim of such places which is to conserve native animals in their habitat.

If you want to dispose of a cat, ring your local vet, or the R.S.P.C.A.

It is hoped that in time this exotic animal will be eradicated from our bush and that in the future, cat owners will adopt a more responsible attitude with their pets.