

Cats, Community and Cameras: A New Era in Free-Roaming Cat Management

Dr Jacquie Rand, BVSc (Melb), DVSc (Guelph), MANZCVS, Diplomate ACVIM (IM)

Executive Director & Chief Scientist, Australian Pet Welfare Foundation

Emeritus Professor of Companion Animal Health, the University of Queensland

Abstract

Traditional urban cat management in Australia has relied heavily on impoundment and of cats not reclaimed or adopted. Evidence shows this approach is both ineffective and harmful for animal and human welfare. A One Welfare framework, which recognises the interconnected wellbeing of people, animals, and the environment, offers more effective solutions. Community Cat Programs (CCPs) use targeted desexing, microchipping, support for semi-owners, and return-to-field strategies to reduce shelter intake, euthanasia, and cat-related complaints. Evidence from Queensland demonstrates substantial improvements, consistent with recent published evaluations of CCPs in both urban and rural contexts (Cotterell et al. 2025a; Rand et al. 2024).

Introduction

One Welfare highlights the close links between human, animal, and environmental wellbeing. When these are addressed together, management strategies become more effective and sustainable. In cat management, failing to consider these links has led to high euthanasia rates, negative community outcomes, and no reduction in free-roaming cat numbers (Cotterell et al. 2025b). This summary outlines the results of targeted CCPs in Queensland, which align with One Welfare and provide a practical alternative to traditional methods.

Problems with Current Approaches

Impoundment and euthanasia of cats not reclaimed or adopted remains the dominant management strategy in much of Australia. Nationally, one-third of cats entering shelters and pounds are euthanised. One quarter of council-operated pounds in NSW and Victoria receiving more than 50 cats a year euthanise 67–100%. Most cats entering shelters and pounds are healthy, young, and labelled “strays.”

The human toll is significant: veterinarians, shelter staff, and animal management officers experience compassion fatigue and trauma associated with killing healthy and treatable animals. Carers (semi-owners) whose cats are killed report long-term distress (Scotney 2023). Despite the large number of cats and kittens killed, the number of cats impounded remains stable or increasing, indicating no environmental benefit (Cotterell et al. 2025b).

Community Cat Programs as a Solution

Evidence shows that CCPs are effective in reducing shelter and pound intake and euthanasia (Rand et al. 2024). Core strategies include:

1. Targeted Desexing for owned and semi-owned cats (cared for by caregivers who do not - perceive ownership)

- Focused on disadvantaged suburbs with high intakes or cat-related calls
- Free cat desexing and microchipping aimed at stopping kittens being born to die or become strays.

2. Supporting Semi-owners

- Encouraging adoption of timid and shy cats reduces impoundments.

3. Managing Multi-cat Sites

- Desexing, microchipping, and caregiver support.
- Legislative reform is needed to enable these cats to be desexed and returned to their caregivers (semi-owners).

4. Return-to-Field Programs

- Allow impounded cats that are healthy but fearful cats to be desexed, ear-tipped, and returned to their home location rather than be euthanised.
- When return is not possible because of danger to the cats or their home location is unknown, cats may be relocated as working or barn cats.

5. Assistive and supportive approach as a first response to resolving cat-related complaints rather than an enforcement and punishment approach. An approach aligned with One Welfare balances and optimizes the wellbeing of humans, animals and their physical and social environments.

Outcomes in Ipswich, Queensland

In three targeted suburbs, program evaluation showed:

- 63% reduction in intake by year three.
- 70% reduction in euthanasia.
- 4500 cats desexed, most from owned or semi-owned households.
- 54% decline in free-roaming cat sightings using camera traps.

These results are consistent with broader urban evaluations (Cotterell et al. 2025a) and mirror outcomes from rural CCPs (Rand et al. 2024).

Discussion

Community Cat Programs deliver measurable improvements across animal, human, and environmental welfare, making them a clear One Welfare success story. Their effectiveness relies on:

- Targeting high-intake suburbs.
- Micro-targeting within suburbs to locations most at risk of cats being impounded (often multi-cat sites).
- Providing free desexing and microchipping.
- Supporting semi-owners and caregivers.

- Council adoption of a supportive and assistive approach as a first line of response to cat-related nuisance calls rather than an enforcement and punishment approach

Conclusion

CCPs provide a humane, sustainable, and evidence-based pathway for urban cat management. Unlike traditional methods, CCPs reduce shelter intake, protect staff and community wellbeing, and address the environmental impacts of free-roaming cats. Implementing these programs widely would bring Australia closer to a national model of One Welfare in practice.

References

1. Urban Cat Management in Australia—Evidence-Based Strategies for Success

Cotterell J, Rand J, Scotney R. *Animals*. 2025;15(8):1083, 1–28.

Key findings: We assessed the impact of a Community Cat Program on cat intake and outcomes in local shelters. Across various locations nationwide, this program was associated with a 41-60% decrease in cat intake, an 82-85% reduction in numbers euthanised and 36-91% fewer cat-related calls to the local council. These findings suggest that high-intensity, targeted sterilization programs significantly decrease shelter intake and euthanasia and thus alleviate the psychological burden on staff. This publication received a “most notable article” mention by *Animals* journal in November.

Article link: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/15/8/1083>

2. Rethinking Urban Cat Management - Limitations and Unintended Consequences of Traditional Cat Management

Cotterell J, Rand J, Scotney R. *Animals*. 2025;15(7):1005, 1–18.

Current legislative measures to manage free-roaming cats in Australia are costly, resource-intensive, and fail to address root causes while also resulting in low compliance and high rates of complaints and euthanasia, as well as financial strain on affected communities. Alternate programs that increase financial support for sterilisation and microchipping benefit both cats and their owners, as well as reduce strain on councils and improve wildlife protection.

Article link: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/15/7/1005>

3. Outcomes of a Community Cat Program Based on Sterilization of Owned, Semi-Owned and Unowned Cats in a Small Rural Town

Rand J, Saraswathy AM, Verrinder J, Paterson MBA. *Animals*. 2024;14(21):3058, 1–33.

Free-roaming cats in rural areas pose a risk due to their behaviour, disease transmission, and harm to wildlife. To manage, cats are trapped and euthanised, despite no improvements in complaints and impoundments. An alternative management strategy providing free sterilisation, healthcare, and microchipping to all cats in a rural town aimed to reduce

impoundments and euthanasia. After three years using the alternate strategy, impoundments reduced by 60%, euthanasia by 85%, and complaints by 39%.

Article link: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/14/21/3058>

4. Impact of a Local Government Funded Free Cat Sterilization Program for Owned and Semi Owned Cats

Cotterell JL, Rand J, Barnes TS, Scotney R *Animals*. 2024;14(11):1615, 1–26.

Free-roaming cats are a frequent complaint in suburban areas and as a result are trapped and impounded. Of these 7% are reclaimed by their owner as the rest are reclaimed or euthanised as they have no owner. To reduce complaints and euthanasia rates, stray community cats were sterilised, microchipped, and registered with owners resulting in a 66% decrease in impoundments, 82% decrease in euthanasia, and 36% reduction in complaints, while also saving the council AU\$440,660 with the program costing AU\$77,490.

Article link: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/14/11/1615>

5. Cat Caring Behaviors and Ownership Status of Residents Enrolling a Cat in a Free Sterilization Program

Dutton-Regester K, Rand J. *Animals*. 2024;14(20):3022, 1–22.

Many owned and semi-owned cats entering shelters are less than 12 months old, typically from low socio-economic areas, of which 33% are euthanised per year. To reduce euthanasia and increase ownership, cats were sterilised, provided healthcare, and microchipped for free. In the study, 88.5% indicated being owners, while 11.5% were semi-owners. For 93% of semi-owners, the transition to owner was made due to emotional attachment and access to free sterilisation services. The study indicates that accessible sterilisation and healthcare is necessary for semi-owners to become owners, which improves cat welfare.

Article link: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/14/20/3022>

6. The Impact of Lethal, Enforcement-Centred Cat Management on Human Wellbeing: Exploring Lived Experiences of Cat Carers Affected by Cat Culling at the Port of Newcastle

Scotney R, Rand J, Rohlf V, Hayward A, Bennett P. *Animals*. 2023;13(2):271.

Key findings: In 2020, authorities in Port Newcastle, Australia, killed free-roaming cats using methods like shooting. Researchers interviewed six caregivers of such cats and found that they had strong emotional bonds with the cats and that the culling caused significant psychological distress, affecting their mental health and quality of life. The study suggests using more care-based approaches, such as helping caregivers neuter and support cats instead of culling. It also calls for laws to better protect cats cared for by people.

Article link: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/13/2/271>

7. A Purr-suasive Case for Sterilization: How Sterilizing Working-Cats Supports Farmers' Wellbeing, Improves Animal Welfare and Benefits the Environment

Crawford C, Rand J, Forge O, Rohlf V, Bennett P, Scotney R. *Animals*. 2025;15(6):766, 1–25

Working cats are an effective way to manage rodent populations on farms however there are wildlife and environmental risks without proper management. Due to time and financial limitations, management options are reduced leading to the use of lethal methods therefore alternative management strategies were investigated. Through utilising suitable sheltered cats and providing sterilisation programs, farmers saw positive impacts for the farmers wellbeing, cat behaviour, and management of cat and wildlife populations.

Article link: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/15/6/766>

8. Feline Farmhands: The Value of Working-Cats to Australian Dairy Farmers – A Case for Tax Deductibility

Crawford C, Rand J, Forge O, Rohlf V, Bennett P, Scotney R. 2025;15(6):800, 1–25.

Cats are a more affordable, efficient, and safer alternative for rodent control as opposed to traditional rodenticide methods. Farmers found companionship, effective pest control, and reduced impact on wildlife, as well as time and financial savings while using cats on their farm. Working cats as tax deductions for farmers would reduce the financial pressure while maintaining value on the farm and improving both cat and farmer wellbeing.

Article link: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/15/6/800>

9. Situational Analysis of Cat Ownership and Cat Caring Behaviors in a Community with High Shelter Admissions of Cats

Rand J, Scotney R, Enright A, Hayward A, Bennett P, Morton J. *Animals*. 2024;14(19):2849, 1–22.

Stray cat management in urban areas often leads to these cats being euthanised. The study found 91% of owned cats were sterilised, dropping to 74% in cats 4 - <12 months, with 51% being always contained and 18% only at night. At least 3% of residents cared for one or more cats they did not perceive they owned and were considered semi-owners. To reduce euthanasia rates, sterilisation, containment, and ownership programs are recommended for wildlife and cat protection.

Article link: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/14/19/2849>

10. A Situational Analysis of Attitudes toward Stray Cats and Preferences and Priorities for Their Management

Rand J, Scotney R, Enright A, Hayward A, Bennett P, Morton J. *Animals*. 2024;14(20):2953.

Current urban cat management in Australia is outdated, ineffective, and differs from community preferences. Residents of Ipswich suburbs observed stray cats (71%), of which 38% described as a moderately serious-serious issue, with concerns regarding wildlife (35%) and noise (33%). Residents indicated prioritising management focusing on sterilisation (94%), harm to native wildlife (91%) and reducing the spread of disease (~88%). Overall, residents preferred management through sterilisation (65%), compared to euthanasia (35%).

Article link: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/14/20/2953>

11. Attitudes and Beliefs of a Sample of Australian Dog and Cat Owners towards Pet Confinement

Rand J, Ahmadabadi Z, Norris J, Franklin M. *Animals*. 2023;13(6):1067.

Key findings: Cats and dogs entering shelters are classified as strays, and admission to these facilities can be caused by a lack of confinement and can lead to euthanasia. When 2,100 Australian pet owners were surveyed, the majority of dog owners (98%) supported confining dogs to the owner's property when unsupervised, whilst cat owners mostly (89%) supported confining their cats only at night. These findings can help design effective strategies (such as improved fencing, night-feeding, etc.) that can help reduce stray pet numbers and euthanasia rates.

Article link: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/13/6/1067>

12. Stray and Owner-Relinquished Cats in Australia-Estimation of Numbers Entering Municipal Pounds, Shelters and Rescue Groups and Their Outcomes

Chua D, Rand J, Morton J. *Animals*. 2023;13(11):1771.

Key findings: This study estimated that in Australia, around 180,000 cats enter pounds, shelters, and rescue groups each year, with stray cats making up the majority. Many cats admitted to municipal pounds, shelters and rescue groups are not reclaimed. The outcomes of these impoundments vary, with some being adopted, others transferred to rescue, and a significant number are euthanised, particularly in pounds with limited resources. These findings highlight the need for better data collection, desexing programs, and community-based support to reduce shelter intake and euthanasia.

Article link: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/13/11/1771>