

Cat confinement - does it work?

Steven Moore

ABSTRACT

With the introduction of the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act in 1996, Victorian Animal Control Officers were faced with the daunting task of managing cats — not just feral cats but owned cats. Confining pet cats is seen by Councils as a way to address issues such as predation on wildlife, community nuisance and attacks on domestic pets. But is cat confinement the answer? How have Council's been dealing with cat confinement and does it work? The following presentation attempts to visit these questions using the experiences of the Frankston City Council, a Council that has both a Cat Curfew and Cat Free Zones.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994 is to promote animal welfare, the responsible ownership of dogs and cats and the protection of the environment. This legislation requires Animal Control Officers to administer the registration and identification of cats which recognises and promotes responsible ownership and also to protect the community and the environment from feral and nuisance cats.

Council has a responsibility to the community and cat owners to utilise sections within the Act to protect both parties from owned and unowned cats.

For the purpose of this paper I will be using the terms 'owned', 'stray' and 'feral', and I have defined these as follows:

- Owned cats — are generally registered pets that live within a human environment whereby their human owners provide food, shelter and veterinary care.
- Stray cats — are cats that may be wild although still live in a human environment where humans do not directly provide food, shelter and veterinary care.
- Feral cats — are cats that live completely without human intervention. Humans do not provide any food, shelter, veterinary care or even contact for these animals.

BACKGROUND

Under the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994 many sections have been devoted to the responsible ownership of cats. Some sections allow Councils to make orders by Resolution about what areas cats are allowed or not allowed to enter. Councils are given the power to make Local Laws on the number of owned cats per property.

The following sections are very important for Councils to make laws to promote responsible pet ownership and protect the community.

Section 10 requires cats be registered over the age of six months.

Section 23 provides Councils to serve a Notice on a cat's owner if the cat has been present on private property, more than once, without permission.

Section 25 provides Councils to make an order, by resolution, of the hours that a cat must be securely confined or not allowed to wander at large.

Section 26 provides Councils to prohibit the presence of cats in any public place by making an order by resolution.

Section 42 provides Councils to make a Local Law prohibiting the keeping of cats in a specified area where threatened native fauna are at risk of attack.

STATISTICS AND DIARY

My initial role at the Frankston City Council was as Cat Control Officer following the proclamation of the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act in 1994. This paper documents my experiences and the issues faced by Frankston City regarding cat confinement.

The following table provides you with the Frankston City experience regarding registering and impounding of cats.

Year	Number of cats registered	% increase in registration	Number of cats impounded
1996 – 1997	8,702	100%	531
1997 – 1998	8,824	1.4%	353
1998 – 1999	9,122	3.3%	438
2000 (only)	9,218	1.1%	472

1996 – 1997

On 10 April 1996 the first cat was registered at the Frankston City Council Civic Centre. Over the following fourteen months 531 cats were handed in, signed over or trapped by residents.

Frankston City Council initiated a major education program including newsletters, notices in newspapers, presentations to community groups and even a story on the children's program 'Totally Wild' regarding cat issues.

Initially I got the feeling that many people were disposing the cats that they had been feeding for years or even their own cats to avoid having to take responsibility for the animal. These cats were usually handed over in the resident's arms or in boxes. This could be a reason for the large number of cats impounded for the first year of the Act.

Through promotional measures referred earlier, residents became more aware of the opportunity to resolve the nuisance they had had to endure for years by seeking assistance from Council in trapping offending stray cats.

The issues being endured by residents included trespassing cats, spraying of tom cats, cats defecating in yards, cat fights and cats attacking wildlife. I could see the ten traps Council had acquired for residents for trapping purposes were not going to be enough. Council purchased another ten traps to cover the growing numbers of complaints regarding cats.

Council identified natural reserves that may contain native fauna that would be susceptible to the predation of cats.

These eleven reserves were ordered to be 'Cat Free' Zones, meaning cats were not allowed to enter these reserves. In responding to the large number of complaints regarding cats and the high turnover of traps, this did not allow for Council to take proactive measures like trapping stray and feral cats in our Natural Reserves.

1997 – 1998

Even though the numbers of registered cats had basically remained the same, the numbers of cats impounded by Council Officers reduced dramatically from 531 to 353.

I observed a decline in the number of residents handing over cats that possibly could have been their own as I received fewer cats in boxes or cradled in their arms. The reduced number may also have influenced by limited number of traps available for residents to use.

1998 – 1999

Council envisaged that introducing a cat curfew would reduce nuisance complaints regarding owned cats and empower residents further to deal with stray cats. Cat owners also accepted Council's argument that cats kept inside at night are less likely to attack native wildlife, be run over by cars, be attacked by dogs or other cats.

Commencement of the cat curfew saw an increase in the numbers of cats impounded by residents. The cat curfew was introduced in conjunction with an extensive education program in the media, Council newsletters and information in our Registration Notices detailing the many good reasons for keeping your cat in at night. Keeping your cats safe at night was the main message Council sought to convey to residents.

As mentioned earlier, residents became aware of their rights regarding cat issues and cat owners began to understand their responsibilities. The number of complaints rose again and to compete with the demand Council purchased an additional traps, increasing the total number to thirty.

Council organised regular trapping programs in 'Cat Free' Zones. These were however relatively unsuccessful, as many residents wrote in regularly complaining that 'hundreds of feral cats' are wandering in these reserves. Our trapping programs were only yielding one or two cats for a two-week 'free feed and live trap' program conducted in reserves like the Seaford Wetlands.

Councils 'free feed and live trap' programs consisted of 2m x 2m sand pads set up for a week with fresh food placed in the centre of the pad daily. The pad was inspected each day to check if cats were present. The following week the treadle operated cat traps were wired open, so it could not be set off, and placed on the sand pad with the same feed inside. If the cat continued to take the food over a three or four day period the trap was set to catch the cat.

2000

Council commenced collecting data regarding release and rehousing of cats after being impounded.

Table of cat statistics for 2000	Cats	Dogs
Total cats impounded	472	1134
Number released to owners	65	764
Number destroyed	368	286
Number rehoused	26	46
Number left in pound at end of year	13	38

A major cat trapping program was also conducted in the Pines Flora and Fauna Reserve which is a 'Cat Free' Zone. Thirteen cats were trapped in this reserve. In light of the options of shooting and the use of leg traps being not available to Animal Control Officers, this was considered a successful program.

IS CONFINEMENT WORKING?

There are many confinement techniques that Councils can use to deal with issues regarding owned, stray and feral cats. Implementation of Cat Curfews, 'Cat Free' Zones and the prohibition on owning cats in specified subdivisions are all useful tools in a cat management strategy.

A statistic that suggests that confinement techniques maybe working is that during the year 2000, 472 cats were impounded and 394 were not claimed — which equates to 83% of impounded cats not being claimed. Compared with impounded dogs for the year 2000, 1134 dogs were impounded and 332 were not claimed — which equates to 29% of impounded dogs were not claimed.

This result suggests that Council handles more stray and feral cats rather than owned cats. This may be due to cats only having a legal status for five years and Council conducting trapping during these years.

The 'free feed and live trapping' program conducted in the Pines Flora and Fauna Reserve, referred to earlier, is worthy of further explanation as the results were most interesting. The program was conducted over three weeks and thirteen cats were caught. Of the thirteen cats impounded five were unsterilised females, four unsterilised males, three sterilised females and one sterilised male.

The main reason for this program being significant is that the cats did not show feral aggression and could be handled by the Officers. This would suggest that the cats were owned at one point and therefore the owners did not have sufficient attachment to their pet to bother to collect the animal. This would also support the data showing why over 80% of impounded cats are not collected.

HOW DOES SECTION 23 WORK?

Under the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994 section 23 allows Animal Control Officers to deal with cats on private property without permission. Frankston City has used this section effectively to reduce the incident of residential disputes between neighbours over an owned cat nuisance.

If an owned cat has been present on private property on more than one occasion, without the permission of the owner of the property, then the owner of the property may write or speak to the cat's owner to prevent the cat from entering the complainants property.

If, after this verbal or written request the cat continues to enter the complainant's property, then the Council may serve a Notice of Objection on the owner of the cat.

If after the Notice of Objection has been served, the cat enters the complainants property again, the owner of the cat is guilty of an offence and on conviction can be liable to a penalty of \$100 for the first offence and \$300 for any subsequent offences.

THE FRANKSTON CITY COUNCIL'S EXPERIENCE WITH SECTION 23

If a resident has an issue with a cat entering their property after they have spoken or written to the owner of the cat on more than one occasion, then Council requests that the complainant send in a letter detailing their concerns. The letter should make reference to the resident having spoken or written to the owner of the cat.

The Animal Control Officer would meet with the cat owner to investigate their side of the issue and determine if the complainant had spoken or written to them more than once.

If the Cat Control Officer is satisfied that the complaint is legitimate the Officer will request that the complainant complete a statement. The statement should state the cat had been present on their property after the second request.

Alternatively, the Officer will issue a trap to the complainant, to prove the cat is still entering the property.

On receipt of the statement or the trapped cat, the Animal Control Officer would serve a Notice of Objection on the cat owner. (Refer to Appendix A for a copy of a Notice of Objection.)

If the cat enters the complainant's property after the Notice of Objection has been served on the cat's owner, the Animal Control Officer would need to take a statement from the complainant to charge the cat owner with an offence under Section 23.

The Frankston City Council has seen five complainants go through the full process of Section 23. In all, five incidents a Notice of Objection has been served and this has achieved a satisfactory outcome for the complainant. In each instance the cat's owner has kept their pet housebound or built an enclosure.

One complaint resulted in the Police being called after the cat was trapped on the complainant's land and the residents came to blows over the incident. In this case the cat now remains inside the dwelling of the cat owner and both the complainant and cat owner have since re-established a civil relationship.

The types of enclosures that have been used by cat owners vary from commercially built Pet Parks, converted bird aviaries to home made enclosures. All these types of enclosures have been effective and it was suggested by some cat owners that a home made enclosure means the cat owner can give it a personal touch.

CONCLUSION

Section 23 has been very successful on the occasions where Officers have used the Notice of Objection as a tool to satisfy residential disputes over cats entering private property. This section does not satisfy however the overall need of the community with regards to nuisance cats.

Frankston City has been reasonably successful in using a cat curfew, 'Cat Free' Zones and prohibition on cat ownership in specified subdivisions to deal with nuisance cats in the municipality. Our cat management strategy has allowed Animal Control Officer to consistently impound more than one cat per day since the Act came into force.

The positive outlook for cat owners from impounding is the low rate of collection suggests the cat are unowned.

If 80% of cats impounded are stray or feral this suggests that four out of five cats wandering in Frankston City are not being cared for and can be a vector for cat disease or community nuisance.

I believe that Frankston City's cat education program has been the most effective part of the cat management strategy. It has provided most useful practical guidance to residents. This has been supplemented by material from the State Government, Pet Food Companies and Veterinarians about cat welfare and responsible cat ownership. When I have discussed cat issues with residents, most appreciate that cats out at night are more susceptible to dangers such as cars, dogs, other cats and abuse by humans.

In the short period that Councils have been required to deal with cat issues, Frankston City appears to have more issues regarding unowned cats rather than owned cats. Responsible cat ownership requires a balanced approach between education and enforcement to achieve the goal. Educating residents has in my opinion equally important as the combined effect of trapping, curfews and prohibiting cats in specified areas.

WHAT'S GOING ON IN OTHER COUNCILS?

I wanted to get a feel for what is happening around the State regarding cat management issues. I emailed a questionnaire to all the Councils across Victoria asking about numbers of registered cats, number of residents, number of rateable properties, etc. For comparative purposes the results are contained in Appendix B. I would like to

thank all of the Councils who responded to my email and answered the questions. I trust this material is of interest to those involved in cat management issues.

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Steven Moore has a degree in Applied Science from Monash University (Caulfield Campus) and has been employed with the Frankston City Council for the past five years. From 1992 until 1996 Steve was a Technical Officer with the Department of Natural Resources and Environment working in the Vertebrate Pest Research Unit. In 1996 Steve took on the role of Cat Control Officer with the Frankston City Council. In 1997 Steve was appointed to the position of Senior Animal Control Officer and was responsible for developing and implementing the animal management programs for the municipality. Steve is about to take up the position of Local Laws Coordinator with the City of Kingston.

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APPENDIX A

APPENDIX B

Metropolitan					
Municipality	Number of Cats Registered	Number of Residents (approx.)	Rateable Properties (approx.)	Number of Cats Impounded	Cat Curfew(Yes/No)
Banyule	7000	119486	47189	500	No
Boroondara	10000	145000	60000	50	No
Darebin	9726	125000	55000	1082	No
Frankston	9218	114000	42000	430	Yes
Hume	4026	136899	49246	1300	No
Kingston	8000	133000	60000	296	No
Knox	8900	141200	46484	50	No
Manningham	6390	112051	41584	83	No
Maroondah	6500	96000	N/A	N/A	No
Melbourne	1000	52000	34000	125	No
Moreland	8026	137258	65026	443	No
Stonnington	4151	84300	48500	27	No
Whittlesea	4930	110000	37000	1600	No
Wyndham	3600	80000	52000	400	Yes
Yarra	4617	65000	37528	160	No

Non-Metropolitan					
Municipality	Number of Cats Registered	Number of Residents (approx.)	Rateable Properties (approx.)	Number of Cats Impounded	Cat Curfew(Yes/No)
Ballarat	5043	85000	36500	300	No
Bendigo	4500	86000	40885	498	No
Campaspe	1832	35000	18000	170	No
Colac-Otway	2363	33500	13500	143	Yes
Delatite	3000	20000	13000	180	No
Gannawarra	500	11922	6463	100	No
Geelong	12000	185000	92000	0	No
Glenelg	1950	18000	12000	0	No
Golden Plains	961	14500	7800	30	No
Hindmarsh	779	6900	4850	30	No
Indigo	869	5667	7163	40	No
Latrobe City	5000	70000	32300	500	Yes
Mildura	2700	50000	N/A	160	No
Mitchell	2500	27000	11000	360	No
Mount Alexander	1136	16800	9300	25	No
Murrindindi	675	9174	8500	10	No
Northern Grampians	930	13500	9000	30	No
Queenscliff	308	3416	2666	30	No
Shepparton	1933	58000	25700	400	Yes
Strathbogie	513	9000	6000	50	Yes

Surf Coast	1500	20000	15014	50	Yes
Swan Hill	759	22000	10800	375	No
Towong	650	6500	4200	8	No
Wangaratta	2060	26200	12500	265	No
Wellington	2439	41338	28800	104	No
Yarra Ranges	13500	139000	58000	250	Yes
Yarriambiack	929	8302	6502	0	No

