

Getting cat management wrong **‘Who’s for cats?’**



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We Australians love our pets.

More than 53% of us (that’s over 12 million) share our homes, lives and often our beds, with a dog or cat, or both. We consider them members of our families and spend more than \$4.62 billion every year caring for them [1].

That love extends beyond our own homes too. We all want to see our animals treated well and protected from harm, so we give considerable financial and volunteer support to animal welfare groups. The RSPCA alone has an annual revenue of more than \$100 million per annum and one of the most successful and beloved charity events in the country – The Million Paws Walk.

Given this groundswell of love for animals, there is enormous potential to tap into this compassion to promote effective and humane management of homeless cats and dogs in our communities. Regions the world over are already seeing great results from engaging such pet-loving citizens, so why is proactive humane cat and dog management so rare in Australia?

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A prime example of a perfect opportunity missed

In 2005 the Cat Crisis Coalition of Victoria declared there were 53,000 cats entering pounds in Victoria annually and that this number had remained constant for over 10 years [2]. They also believed there to be half a million cats living on the street [2].

According to the ‘Cat Admissions to Melbourne Shelters’ report [3] submitted to the Bureau of Animal Welfare in 2006:

- 80% of cats entering shelters were non-owned or semi-owned.
- 78.51% of cats were admitted as stray cats by animal management officers or the public.
- Owner surrenders accounted for only 21% of total admissions.
- Kittens comprised 52.76% of all shelter admissions during the study period.
- 72.8% of cats admitted to shelters received an optimal body condition score of 3.
- 2% of cats had fleas, less than 1% had ringworm, and feline AIDS was recorded in very few cats. About a third had cat flu.



At the same time, a study by Monash University revealed that one in four Victorians fed a cat that didn’t belong to them [4] – cat lovers investing their own time and money in caring for free-roaming cats. So, there was literally an army standing by to help animal welfare groups improve cat welfare in the state of Victoria.

With the right campaign to appeal to cat ‘feeders’ to desex the cat they are caring for (and to local vets to get involved) tens of thousands of cats would have been removed from the breeding population, drying up over half the intakes by simply stopping the flow of kittens.

This begs the question, why did the Victorian Government choose to spend over \$220,000 on a two-year cat management campaign that succeeded only in driving up kill rates while demonising free-roaming cats and all those who choose to care for them? The ‘Who’s for cats?’ campaign was hailed a success in changing behaviour by all bodies involved, but the bigger picture reveals some damaging and costly end results.



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The people who asked ‘Who’s for cats?’

‘Who’s for cats?’ was a public awareness campaign created by some of Victoria’s peak animal welfare bodies: The Animal Welfare Science Centre; Australian Veterinary Association; Cat Protection Society; Department of Primary Industries; Lort Smith Animal Hospital; Lost Dogs Home; Monash University; Municipal Association of Victoria; RSPCA; and Victorian Animal Aid.

The campaign was primarily focused on educating cat ‘feeders’, who were cited as a major contributing factor to cat overpopulation in urban areas. It called for them to make a choice – they must either take ownership or call the council.

Ownership under Victorian animal welfare legislation was defined as microchipping the cat, desexing it and, in many places, confining the cat to prevent it from wandering.

Calling the council would involve impounding the cat, which almost universally resulted in the cat being killed.

A failed proposition

The truth is, neither of these options provided an effective solution in practice. In reality, the vast majority of these free-roaming cats were not tame, so bringing them indoors as a new pet was largely impractical. What’s more, many ‘cat feeders’ already owned pet cats, and as the councils limited ownership to just two cats, they were simply unable to comply.

The alternative was not appealing to cat lovers either. They knew that calling their council or trapping the cat and dropping it off at the pound was as good as signing the cat’s death warrant.

In short, the creators of ‘Who’s for cats?’ did little to understand or appeal to the people who were their greatest allies in the effective management of cats. In fact, these groups claiming to be advocates for cat welfare and compassion went one step further by publicly criticising and shaming every cat feeder in the state.

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Meet the heroes and villains

A 12-month awareness campaign was launched in November 2007, featuring TV, press, online and outdoor, including two posters clearly portraying two different behaviours towards un-owned, community cats.

Meet Dave. He sent two cats to his local pound and was hailed a 'hero' – ignoring the fact that his actions would almost certainly have resulted in the death of those cats.



DAVE JUST CALLED THE COUNCIL TO COLLECT THE THREE STRAYS IN HIS STREET.

Dave's for cats.

Half a million unowned cats in Victoria keep breeding more and more kittens into a life of disease and neglect. Just feeding them isn't the answer. If you want to help you must either take ownership of a cat, or call your local council. Please don't feed a bigger problem. To find out more visit www.whosforcats.com.au or call 136 186.

WHO'S FOR CATS?



Ironically, the 'villain' is a lady showing un-owned cats some kindness by offering food.



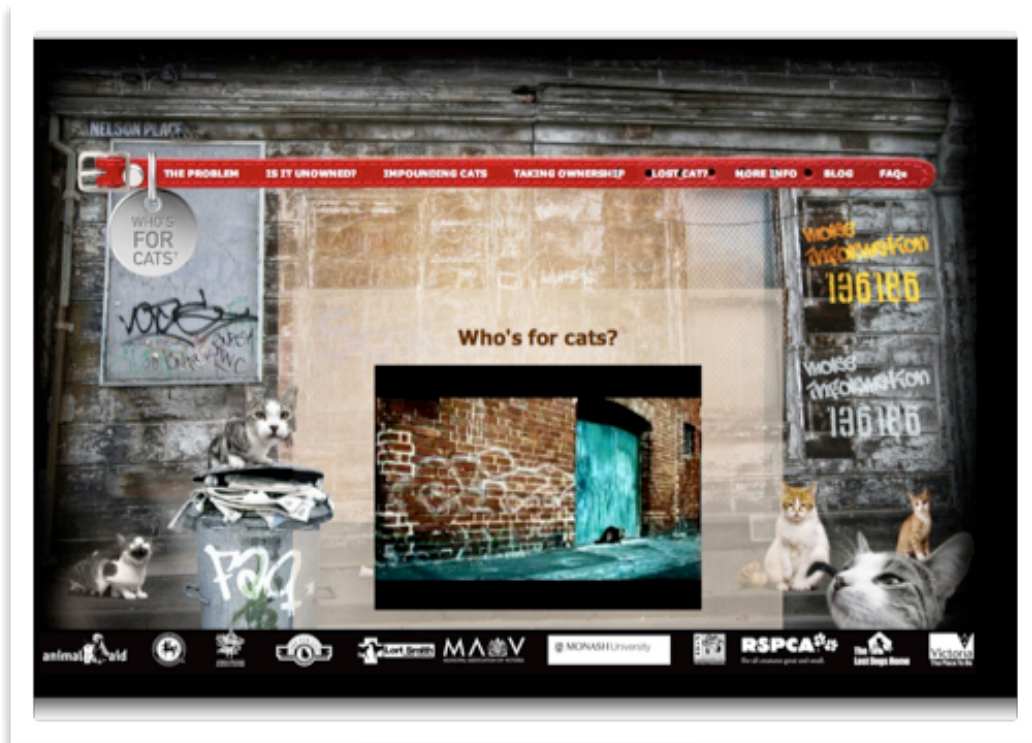
Who's for cats? Not this lady.

This lady thinks she's for cats by feeding a stray but in fact she's feeding a much bigger problem. Half a million unowned cats in Victoria keep breeding more and more kittens into a life of disease and neglect. Feeding them isn't the answer. If you want to help you must either take ownership of a cat, or call your local council. Please don't feed a bigger problem. To find out more, visit www.whosforcats.com.au or call 136 186.



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Even the cats themselves were painted in a dark and shadowy light – presenting them as diseased and dangerous creatures to be despised. The campaign did nothing to promote cat ownership or compassionate management.



Cats + rubbish + graffiti = the 'Who's for cats?' website



[Click to view the 'Who's for cats?' campaign television commercial](#)



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Driving awareness, but at what cost?

In December 2007, the then Minister for Agriculture Joe Helper joined Carol Webb of the Cat Protection Society and Graeme Smith of the Lost Dogs Home to launch the campaign.

At this time, local council briefings were held to encourage councils to incorporate the 'Who's for cats?' program in their domestic animal management plans. Presentations were made to interested groups across the state. The program was even added to the Victorian Government's 'Responsible Pet Ownership Education Program', featured on the primary school curriculum. It's estimated 25,000 children watched the commercial and were sent home with 'Who's for cats?' material to share with their families.

In total, more than 150,000 campaign brochures and posters were distributed across Victoria. 50 'Who's for cats?' traps were provided to councils to assist with cat collection. And, over the two financial years from 2007 to 2009, the campaign cost approximately \$220,000, exceeding the original \$203,500 budget.

By the start of 2008, the real cost of the 'Who's for cats?' campaign was beginning to show.

Now puss is getting the boot

Don't feed stray cats

Own up or scratch cat

Cats going feral

Shire struggling with cat plague

Avoid feral behaviour

Animals top list of complaints to shire

Cats run feral cry

Controlling killer cats

Get cats off the streets

It's not mean to keep stray cats lean

Who's for Cats? sparks a media frenzy of anti-cat headlines

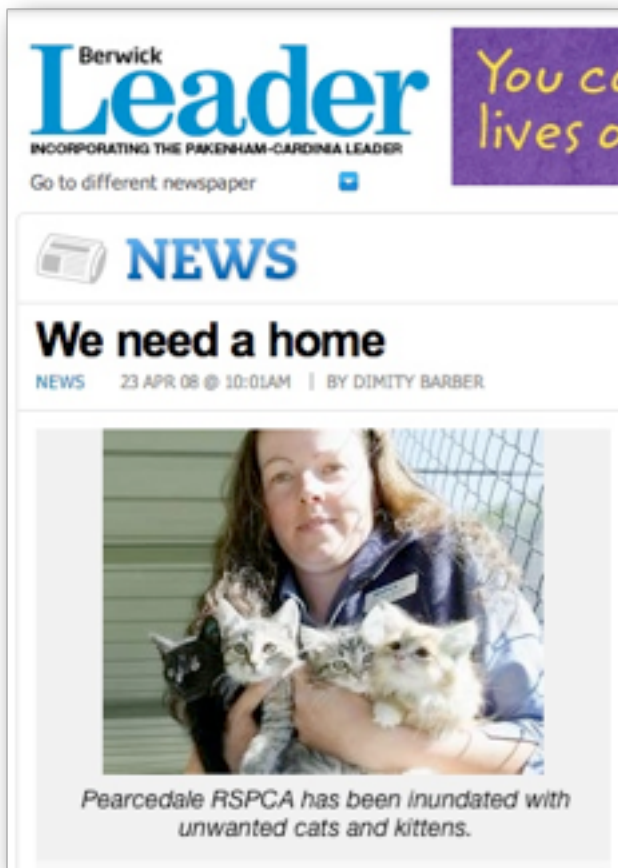


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The results start rolling in

From late 2007, many council pounds and animal shelters across Victoria were reporting record numbers of cats being impounded and brought in for surrender, coinciding with the launch of the campaign. And by early 2008, it had reached crisis point in many cases.

So, if the aim of the campaign had been to drive up shelter intakes and killing to record levels, there’s no question that it succeeded.



Apr 23, 2008 – Pearcedale RSPCA inundated with impoundments

Shelter supervisor Carrie Mudge said... “The dramatic increase was likely the result of the Cat Crisis Coalition campaign to reduce the number of unregistered and fertile cats roaming in the area.”

The ‘Who’s for cats?’ campaign is asking people to stop feeding the problem and either take full ownership of the cat, or to do the humane thing and bring it to a shelter.

“And judging by the huge increase we’ve seen this month, the campaign is working.”



Apr 29, 2008 – Record impoundments at RSPCA Peninsula

It’s raining cats and no dogs at the RSPCA Peninsula Shelter. Manager Carrie Mudge said that, as of last night, 382 cats and kittens had been handed in to the shelter this month... Ms Mudge said the recent ‘Who’s for cats?’ campaign encouraging Mornington Peninsula residents not to feed cats was to blame for the record numbers.

“We are struggling. We are trying to get as many as possible adopted, but every day more and more cats are getting handed in,” Ms Mudge said.

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Skyrocketing impoundments and complaints

When 'Who's for cats?' released its campaign update in August 2008 [5], the stats revealed record numbers of complaint calls relating to cats, as well as an increase in surrenders/impoundments compared to 2007 figures.

Further evidence of the campaign resulting in behavioural change comes from a recent RSPCA Inspectorate report. The report states that, compared to the previous financial year, there has been a 41.9% increase in the number of calls regarding cats and that "the increase began around January and has continued throughout the 'Who's for cats?' campaign".

Figures collected by the Cat Protection Society and the Lost Dogs' Home for the 12-month periods pre and post-campaign launch, showed an increase from 24,122 cat impoundments/surrenders (November 2006 – October 2007) to 28,565 post-launch (November 2007 – October 2008).



Something more sinister emerges

By painting cats as vermin that need to be 'removed', the campaign diminished the worth of cats and made them targets for abuse.

ABC – Nov 12, 2009 – Police probe cat decapitation

Warrnambool police in south-west Victoria are investigating the death of a domestic cat found on a nature strip on Tuesday morning with its head and tail cut off. The tortoiseshell cat was not microchipped and its owners have not been found. The attack, in Couch Street, comes less than two months after a pet cat in Maryborough was shot 13 times in the head with a slug gun. The Victorian president of the RSPCA, Dr Hugh Wirth, says violence against cats is increasing.

"Well it's an example of an outbreak of animal cruelty that is going on all too frequently in recent months," he said. "There are animals being mutilated, animals being put to death in very nasty, nasty circumstances."

Empowering the cat haters

A second survey conducted for the 'Whos for cats?' evaluation in March 2009 [6] revealed the campaign wasn't increasing the number of 'responsibly owned' cats in any significant manner. Most people activated by the campaign were 'cat haters' who trapped and brought cats to the shelter.

With the majority of people responding to campaign messages choosing to impound rather than take ownership of stray cats, it seems that 'non' owners have had the biggest impact by getting un-owned cats off the street.

Focus group research results provide further evidence that the majority of people taking action were not the semi-owners of cats themselves, but rather members of the wider community who were experiencing nuisance associated with un-owned cats. Focus group participants thought the 'Who's for cats?' campaign gave people 'moral permission' to have stray cats impounded.

In conclusion, the report emphasised the importance of communicating to the 'Daves' in the community who are more likely to respond to the campaign messages – people who are experiencing nuisance behaviour associated with un-owned cats. They also acknowledged that many semi-owners have a bond with the cat they are feeding, and may therefore be unlikely to ever have it impounded.

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Blaming the surge on the sunshine

Victoria's initiative continues to drive up impoundments and kill rates, with no positive impact on responsible ownership. That's not a good look. So, the groups involved quickly realised they needed a new scapegoat to explain the problem.

Despite undeniable evidence that the 'Who's for cats?' campaign was responsible for the rise in impounds, the groups introduced the idea that global warming was responsible for changing the reproductive behaviours of cats.

This theory didn't stand up to even the most basic scientific scrutiny, but that didn't stop groups using it extensively to explain the surge.



[Watch video on global warming vs 'Who's for cats?'](#)



September 15, 2008 – Adopt cats you feed

"We've seen a 25 per cent increase in stray cat numbers this year compared to last year," Dr Smith said. With Melbourne's stray cat population exceeding half a million, Dr Smith said the reason for the rise in strays was uncertain.

"There has been some suspicion that it's climate change, so with warmer weather the breeding season is much longer," he said.

September 17, 2008 – Global warming blamed for cat boom

The RSPCA claims climate change is producing a boom in the number of feral felines prowling streets in Melbourne's leafy east.

The society, based in Burwood East, said warmer seasons encouraged breeding and urged moggy lovers to lock up their cats and stop feeding scraps to strays.



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Major supporter encounters a major problem

As a major supporter of the 'Who's for cats?' program, The Lost Dogs Home experienced a 40% increase in cat impoundments in 2008 (compared to 2007 figures). Prior to the campaign launch, their facility had focused on accommodating dogs. Now they found themselves ill equipped and in desperate need of a bigger cat pound.

So, they appealed to the cat-loving public (the villains) to donate to their capital works campaign.



Our New Stray and Adoption Cat Facility...
Providing a higher level of care for vulnerable cats and kittens.

click the kitten to view our cat cam

Support our Capital Cat Shelter Appeal

Capital Campaign website – <http://catcondos.com.au/>

February 9, 2009 – Shelters expand operations to cope with the influx of cats.

“Thousands of cats and kittens are being culled and hundreds turned away as animal welfare shelters struggle with a stray cat crisis.

The Lost Dogs Home – determined to remain positive during the crisis – last week installed a \$70,000 condominium to boost its cat capacity by 50%.

June 5, 2009 – The Lost Dogs Home claims ANOTHER 40% increase

The Home has seen a 40% increase in the number of cats and kittens admitted to its shelters throughout 2009.

This significant increase in cat and kitten admissions can be attributed to longer periods of warmer weather enabling cats to produce two to three litters of kittens each year, instead of the usual one or two.



THE LOST DOGS HOME

The Lost Dogs' Home's Stray & Adoption Cat Shelter

The floor plan includes areas such as: CAR PARK, PUBLIC ACCESS, PLAY, ADOPTION, ISO, STRAY, WAITING, PUBLIC, VIEWING, RECEPTION, OFFICE, HOLD, EXAM, HOLD, STORE, PROCESS, STAFF & CAT ACCESS, and EXISTING OFFICE.

Lost Dogs Home website – <http://dogshome.com>

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Happy to pat themselves on the back

“It appears to have worked,” says the conclusive ‘Who’s for cats?’ report [6].

This has demonstrated to the rest of Australia, and potentially the world, how these problems can be tackled effectively using a cooperative approach. It's terrific to see Victoria out in front of the field.

Evaluation measures have demonstrated high awareness in the community about the cat overpopulation problem and the consequences of feeding un-owned cats.

Since the launch of the campaign, evidence of behavioural change has become apparent through an increase in the number of cats entering shelters and pounds, and in the number of public queries about cats that have been received by government and welfare organisations.

The feedback from stakeholders involved in the campaign has been extremely positive. All stakeholders agreed that the cooperative campaign approach was effective, and that they would be willing to continue participating in this type of joint project in future.

It appears, the ‘success’ of the campaign has been measured based on the key performance indicators of ‘changing behaviour’ and ‘community collaboration’.

It brushes aside the wider, longer-term problems resulting from shelters and pounds being filled to bursting point. It ignores the cold truth that The Cat Protection Society in Victoria killed 91% of the 12,491 cats it received in 2009 (just 1,143 left the organisation alive).

And, of course, they are still left with a major challenge – they’ve alienated the cat-loving public and yielded no results in changing the behaviour of semi-owners.



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Bringing the obvious solution into focus

Why are so many headaches and so much heartache caused by urban and suburban cat management programs? Well, for one, cats are Australia's second favourite pet, making lethal management programs hugely unpopular with the public.

And crucially, they fail to solve the problem of stray cats.

The reason they fail miserably is simple. When cats are removed from a location to be rehomed or euthanised, other cats quickly move in to the vacant environment. In short, cats live where cats can live. And they've lived like this for as long as we've lived in cities.



'OC' a responsibly cared for Community Cat
www.communitycats.com.au

The 'Who's for cats?' program failed to acknowledge this reality. It also failed to work in harmony with cat lovers in the community. It simply expanded and amplified doing what we know doesn't work, at great cost to cat welfare.

Since the Victoria campaign came to a close in 2009, there has been talk of rolling out the 'Who's for cats?' campaign in other states and even on a national scale [7].

If you hear even a whisper in your community, it's worth speaking up.

Share some proven examples of how wide-scale desexing programs, instead of killing, are good for the community and for cats. Successful programs all over the world and right here in Australia are using desexing as a highly effective way of managing cat populations and improving the welfare of cats already living in our communities. Here's all the proof you need:

[Humane Cat Management - http://www.petrescue.com.au/library/articles/humane-cat-management](http://www.petrescue.com.au/library/articles/humane-cat-management)

['The Secret Cat Society' Community Cats Program - www.communitycats.com.au](http://www.communitycats.com.au)

Please take the time to read and present these examples of humane cat management to your local council and community groups. Your act of advocacy today could avoid the unnecessary killing of cats, get the stray cat issue under humane control and put Australia on the path to a no-kill future.

References

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- [4] Characteristics of Pets Visiting Vets - Dr Linda Marston and Dr Pauleen Bennett, report to the Animal Welfare Science Centre, 2009
- [5] 'Who's for cats' campaign evaluation August 2008
- [6] 'Who's for cats?' campaign evaluation March 2009
- [7] The Australian Animal Welfare Strategy - <http://www.australiananimalwelfare.com.au/content/who-s-for-cats>