

Draft updated threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats.

Take the survey

Climate

Response received at:

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Response ID:

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- 1 Confirm that you have read and understand this privacy notice.
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Public
- 3 Published name
Australian Wildlife Conservancy
- 4 Confirm that you have read and understand this declaration.
Yes
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- 9 Who are you answering on behalf of?
Organisation
- 10 Organisation name
Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC)
- 11 Position in organisation
Chief Science Officer
- 12 What sector best describes you or your organisation?
Other: "Conservation organisation (land manager)"
- 13 How did you hear about this consultation?
Word of mouth (someone told me about it)
- 14 Please specify which platform (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram
LinkedIn) and / or who's feed/post.
Not answered
- 15 What state or territory do you live in?
Not answered
- 16 Postcode
Not answered
- 17 What area best describes where you live?
Not answered
- 18 In which state/s or territory/ies does your organisation operate in?
New South Wales

Northern Territory
Queensland
South Australia
Western Australia

19 What area best describes where your organisation operates?

Remote area

20 1. Have you referred to and / or used the current (2015) threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats?

Yes

21 How have you referred to / used the 2015 plan?

AWC's mission is the effective conservation of Australia's wildlife and habitats. Feral cats are a primary threat to Australian wildlife, hence management of cats is a major component of AWC's work. We are the leading proponent of the establishment of cat- (and fox-) free areas at a national scale, and also manage landscapes to reduce the impacts of feral cats outside feral predator-free areas. Our activities were aligned with the 2015 TAP.

22 Why haven't you referred to / used the 2015 plan?

Not answered

23 2. Do you support the objectives and actions listed in the drafted updated threat abatement plan (2023)?

Yes

24 3. Do you have any specific comments on or additional ideas for the objectives and actions outlined in the draft updated threat abatement plan for feral cats?

Yes

25 Please provide specific comments or other ideas here.

In AWC's view, the overarching goal of the TAP, "To reduce the impacts of cats sufficiently to ensure the long-term viability of all affected native species", is not sufficiently

ambitious. This goal could be achieved in fraction of the former range of vulnerable species, leaving most of Australia without a substantial component of the pre-European fauna. While clearly necessary and preferable to extinction, this limited ambition would have long-term consequences for the evolution of the fauna, as species would no longer be exposed to the selective conditions formerly operating across their ranges, and knock-on consequences for ecosystem processes in which the fauna play a key role - soil engineering, seed and spore-dispersal, herbivory and predation.

Given the decadal time-frame, AWC would like to see greater ambition in the TAP - a serious attempt to reduce cat impacts across Australia to facilitate the landscape-scale restoration of species and ecosystem processes. This long-term goal is consistent with the timeline for developing a synthetic biology control.

In relation to Objective 6 (safe havens), AWC supports this objective. We say the Commonwealth could assist by better funding Recovery Plans, improving governance of Recovery Teams, and supporting private conservation entities such as AWC in getting safe havens established and conducting reintroductions. There is currently substantial inertia, even opposition, in some state agencies to this work.

In relation to Objective 7 (protect species mod-high susceptibility), we note that such species often need more than 'suppression' of cats, especially in the semi-arid zone, where extinctions from cat predation have been most widespread. In AWC's experience, a combination of safe-havens and predator-suppression is required for many species in these environments.

26 4. Do you see a role for yourself / your organisation in contributing to the objectives and actions of the draft updated threat abatement plan for feral cats?

Yes

27 In what ways do you see a role for yourself / your organisation?

As noted, AWC is the leading proponent, nationally, of the establishment of cat- (and fox-) free areas to protect threatened wildlife.

Since 2015, AWC has established additional cat- (and fox-) free areas, with new sites in WA, NT and Qld; we also have established two feral predator-free areas in NSW in partnership with NSW government. Consistent with the 2023 TAP, AWC will continue to look for opportunities to expand our safe haven network, both to protect species vulnerable to cats that are not currently in the network, and to protect additional populations of species already protected at one or more sites, to strengthen the resilience of the network, particularly in relation to climate change impacts.

AWC will continue to conduct and publish research on issues related to the establishment

of safe havens, including optimal reintroduction methods, genetic management and population management more generally, including releases outside fenced areas. AWC will continue to provide advice to governments, community groups and the private sector on issues relating to the establishment of safe havens, to facilitate effective implementation.

AWC will continue to conduct and publish research on the consequences of safe havens for extant fauna and vegetation, and for ecological processes. We will continue to participate in public discussions on these issues, given there remains a degree of misunderstanding on the costs and benefits of safe havens vs other control techniques. AWC will continue to manage landscapes to reduce the impacts of feral cats outside feral predator-free areas. To understand and improve outcomes, we will continue to conduct research on the efficacy of a range of cat-control techniques including landscape-scale fire and feral herbivore management, baiting, trapping, shooting and Felixers. AWC will continue to collaborate with researchers looking for effective landscape-control of feral cats, including the potential application of synthetic biology.

28 Why don't you see a role for yourself / your organisation?

Not answered

29 5. Do you have any ideas or suggestions for ways to mobilise stakeholder engagement and action in implementing the draft updated threat abatement plan for feral cats?

Yes

30 Please share your ideas with us about ways to mobilise stakeholder engagement and action in implementing the draft updated threat abatement plan for feral cats.

The Commonwealth needs to be realistic about the capacity of stakeholders to implement actions listed in the TAP. For example, in AWC's view, the Commonwealth's previous funding round for safe havens did not adequately address requirements for demonstrated capacity in implementation and long-term management of havens by proponents, a fundamental criterion for the effectiveness of such projects. In this round, AWC was approached by many small conservation groups/ community organisations, many with nil experience in building/ maintaining conservation infrastructure, conducting reintroductions, monitoring populations, managing genetics, etc. The Commonwealth needs to recognise that major conservation interventions require high-level capacity and work with leading entities such as AWC in designing and implementing an expanded safe-

haven network.

Related to this, the Commonwealth need to recognise that the design of an expanded safe-haven network (Objective 2.3) is not an academic exercise, but instead needs to incorporate the existing plans and interests of leading conservation entities, such as AWC, who have the capacity to build, maintain and operate the infrastructure, reintroductions and associated conservation science. Previous Commonwealth-funded research on design of the safe-haven network (Ringma et al 2019, NESP 1) did not adequately engage with AWC and as a result presented a network design 'solution' that overlooked projects we had already planned/ begun, and projects we were considering - as a result, there has been little or no take-up of that research, at least by AWC (and we are the leading proponent!). Instead, AWC has had to conduct our own design work on this issue.

In relation to Objective 2.8 (support management), AWC is happy to contribute information and lessons from our experience to other practitioners - however, clearly mobilisation would be more effective if the Commonwealth funded position/s in AWC to that end (currently provided pro bono).

31 Section 1 – Summary

We support the general principles. In AWC's view, however, given a 30 year horizon, the 'viability of all affected native species' is not sufficiently ambitious. Viability could be achieved in fraction of the former range, leaving extensive areas without a substantial component of their pre-European fauna, with knock-on consequences for ecosystems. In our view, the ambition should extend to a sufficient reduction in cat density/ impacts across Australia to facilitate the landscape-scale restoration of species and ecosystem processes.

32 Section 2 – Introduction

Not answered

33 Section 3 – Cat definitions, ecology, distribution and abundance

Not answered

34 Section 4 – Cat impacts

Section 4.1.2 - which ecological communities are most susceptible to cats - agree that arid/ semi-arid ecosystems are highly affected; think it worth pointing out that these ecosystems cover the majority of the Australian landmass.

35 Section 5 – Cat management

Not answered

36 Section 6 – Guiding principles for plan development and implementation

Not answered

37 Section 7 – Long term goal

As noted above, in AWC's view, the 'viability of all affected native species' is not sufficiently ambitious for a 30 year horizon. Viability could be achieved in fraction of the former range, leaving extensive areas without a substantial component of their pre-European fauna, with knock-on consequences for ecosystems.

In our view, the ambition should extend to a sufficient reduction in cat density/ impacts across Australia to facilitate the landscape-scale restoration of species and ecosystem processes.

38 Section 8 - Objective 1

Not answered

39 Section 8 - Objective 2

Not answered

40 Section 8 - Objective 3

Not answered

41 Section 8 - Objective 4

We see an important role for the Commonwealth in facilitating and funding the development of synthetic biology controls.

AWC supports research into improving outcomes for the release of cat-susceptible species outside safe havens, but think the evidence of loss of predator-awareness in safe-havens is often overstated (see Kanowski et al. 2023 'Perverse outcomes' or premature interpretation: response to Harrison et al. (2023), "Loss of antipredator traits in a havened mammal population." *Biological Conservation* 286, 110263. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2023.110263>), as is the evidence for 'rapid gain' of anti-predator mechanisms. So we caution over-reliance on this approach ('accelerated selection') in the TAP.

42 Section 8 - Objective 5

Not answered

43 Section 8 - Objective 6

AWC supports this objective. While it is true to say (p54) that 'havens are currently managed by many types of organisations', in truth the same could be said about grocery stores - however, no one would pretend there are not two main players in that sector. In the conservation sector, AWC is the major developer of safe havens nationally - it has been to the detriment of the delivery of an expanded safe haven network that the Commonwealth and the research it funded via NESP did not/ has not engaged with AWC as the 'market leader'.

We believe the Commonwealth could assist organisations like AWC deliver an expanded safe-haven network, by

- ensuring organisations like AWC are closely involved in designing an expanded network (rather than planning being solely an academic exercise),
- co-funding the expansion of the network, ensuring that grant schemes are well-designed to ensure support is delivered to organisations with requisite technical and financial capacity,
- promoting improved governance of Recovery Teams, many of which are currently captured by state agencies, to ensure that good private sector safe haven projects and associated reintroduction programs are supported rather than inhibited.

In relation to specific details of targets:

- AWC has already established a safe haven for the Northern Bettong at Mount Zero Taravale, Qld, with reintroductions conducted in 2023
- in relation to the Carpentarian Rock-rat, given its location on one pastoral property, we believe the initial priority is a dedicated conservation program in-situ, with ongoing monitoring, fire management, feral animal management, cat control as required. A safe haven may take too long to negotiate with the pastoral owner. We also think additional effort should go into surveying potentially suitable habitat, such as in the upper Robinson River, to determine whether any other populations exist outside Wollogorang.

44 Section 8 - Objective 7

Many species rated as 'high' (rather than 'extreme' susceptibility) are likely to require a mix of safe havens and releases to predator-suppressed 'halo' zones if they are to be re-established in the arid/ semi-arid zone. Suppression alone won't be enough. Many 'highly' susceptible species, such as the Numbat, do not persist outside safe havens in the arid/ semi-arid zone.

- 45 Section 8 - Objective 8**
While good habitat management is to be welcomed, to what extent good habitat management will be sufficient to 'reduce the burden of cat predation' for cat-susceptible species is poorly known. Where susceptible species have collapsed - there is little evidence that habitat management will be sufficient for recovery and particularly for reintroductions. Again, a mix of safe havens, couple with predator suppression and habitat management outside safe havens, is likely to be required for many species.
- 46 Section 8 - Objective 9**
Not answered
- 47 Section 9 – Duration, cost, implementation and evaluation of the plan**
Not answered
- 48 Section 10 – Planning links**
Not answered
- 49 Section 11 – Guidance for regulators**
Not answered
- 50 Section 12 – Continuity and adaptation**
Not answered
- 51 Appendices**
Appendix 3. Action 4.10 'Develop novel control methods'. Ideally, the plan for gene drive would be developed and appropriately funded.
- 52 Glossary**
Not answered
- 53 List of abbreviations used**
Not answered
- 54 References**

Not answered

55 7. Do you have any feedback to provide on the background document?

No

56 Please share your feedback with us by clearly referencing the section / page number to which your feedback relates.

Not answered

57 8. Rate your overall impression of the draft updated threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats

Usefulness: Excellent

Ambition: Good

Comprehensiveness: Excellent

58 Have you removed any identifying information from your submission?

Not answered

59 Upload a submission

Not answered

60 Upload supporting files

Not answered