

CATS

WHO NEEDS THEM?

by Anne Thomas



The debate is on. Is one of our most popular pets really a cruel killer?

Hello, kitty!

You've just got your new kitten. She's fluffy and very cute, and you fall in love with her right away. Then you discover that she has sharp claws and even sharper teeth. Sometimes she scratches and bites you when you play with her.

One day, she brings her first dead bird into the house. She's really proud, but you're not. You start to see that there might be two sides to your cute new friend.



Two sides to cats

Cats are one of New Zealand's most popular pets. We have nearly 1.5 million of them. In fact, New Zealand has more cats per person than any other country. Almost half of our homes have at least one cat.

Cats provide company and comfort to many people, but cats can also be killers. They catch small animals, insects, and birds. And sadly, they don't care if the bird they kill is a common sparrow or an endangered black robin.

Because there are two sides to cats, people have different views about them. Gareth Morgan, a well-known businessman, believes that cats are "serial killers". He says that they kill too many of our native birds. Gareth Morgan thinks that we should get rid of these **predators** from New Zealand completely. However, Bob Kerridge of the SPCA says that only about 50 percent of cats actually hunt. "Although they may hunt some native birds," he says, "they're fussy about what they go after. Rather than birds, their first choice of **prey** is usually an animal that lives on the ground, such as a rat, a lizard, or an insect."

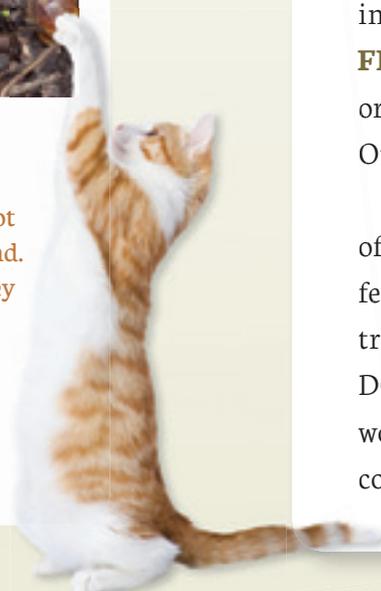
Controlling cats

The law states that there are three kinds of cats – companion cats, stray (or colony) cats, and feral cats. (You can read more about the three kinds of cats on page 29.)

However, not everyone agrees. Some people believe that all cats are the same and want more laws to control them. They say that cats are not native to New Zealand. Our native birds and animals were here first, and they have adapted to an environment with few predators. Some birds can't fly, and others nest on the ground, which makes them easy to catch. They need to be protected from introduced predators.



Native birds and animals like the weka, short-tailed bat, and tuatara spend a lot of their time on the ground. This makes them easy prey for cats.



Kinds of cats

The **Animal Welfare Act** says that there are three kinds of cats.

COMPANION CATS are the cats that live in our homes. They are fed and cared for, taken to the vet when they're sick, and are like a member of the family.



STRAY (OR COLONY) CATS often live in groups in places such as parks and reserves. These cats may have been dumped by their owners or become lost – maybe when their owner moved house.



Stray cats depend on people for their food, so they live close to where people live. They are sometimes called community cats. They are usually shy and frightened, so they might hiss or spit at anyone coming close to them. Bob Kerridge says that stray cats might seem to be “wild”, but they're not really.

The SPCA is studying these cats. They want to find out how many live in colonies and who looks after them. There are at least two hundred cat colonies in Auckland alone. About 120 **volunteers** take care of these cats.

FERAL CATS are truly “wild” cats. They mostly live deep in the bush or forest where they are never seen. They have to find their own food. Other wild animals, such as possums, also survive in this way.

Because native animals and birds are their main diet, the Department of Conservation (DOC) says that feral cats are pests. DOC workers trap and kill these cats. Each year, DOC spends around \$2 million working out the best way to control cats and other pests.



The SPCA used to **put down** most stray cats that were brought to them. Now they run a TNR (Trap, **Neuter**, and Return) programme. When a stray cat is caught, it is neutered to stop it from having kittens. Then the cat is returned to where it came from. The SPCA says because these cats can no longer have kittens, there will be fewer stray cats over time.

However, some people don't like the TNR programme. They say that when the cats are put back into their old environment, they can keep on killing wildlife.

Protecting our wildlife

People have thought of many other ways to help protect our native birds and animals from cats. One thing that might help is to put a **microchip** in all cats. Microchips contain all the owner's details. It means that if someone finds a lost cat, it can be returned home, and it will not become part of the stray cat population.

Some other ideas are:

- keeping cats indoors when possible
- having cats neutered to stop them having too many kittens
- putting a collar and bell on every cat
- making sure all cats are well-fed and cared for.



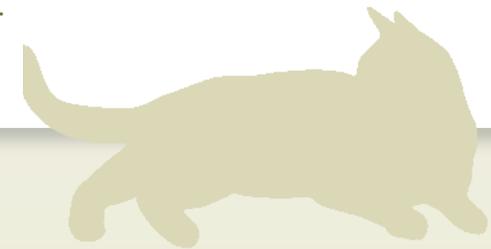
Ancient cats

It's thought that people first tamed cats around four thousand years ago. Cats were useful because they got rid of rats and mice. Over time, they became companions and household pets as well.

In ancient Egypt, people worshipped cats. Mummified cats have been found in Egyptian **tombs**. One cat goddess was called Bastet.



This mummified cat is now held in the Louvre museum in Paris, France.





In summary

Cats make wonderful pets, but they are also very good at hunting. They can do a lot of damage to our native wildlife. Some people think we should get rid of every cat. Others think that cats should be free to go where they like. Still others think that we can have cats as well as our native wildlife as long as cats are carefully controlled. What do you think?



Glossary

Animal Welfare Act: the law that protects animals and says how they must be treated

microchip: a tiny piece of hard material (usually silicon) that stores information

neuter: to stop an animal from being able to have young

predator: an animal that hunts other animals

prey: an animal that is hunted by another animal

put down: a painless way of killing an animal, usually done by a vet

tomb: a special building where dead people are buried

volunteer: a person who does a job without being paid for it

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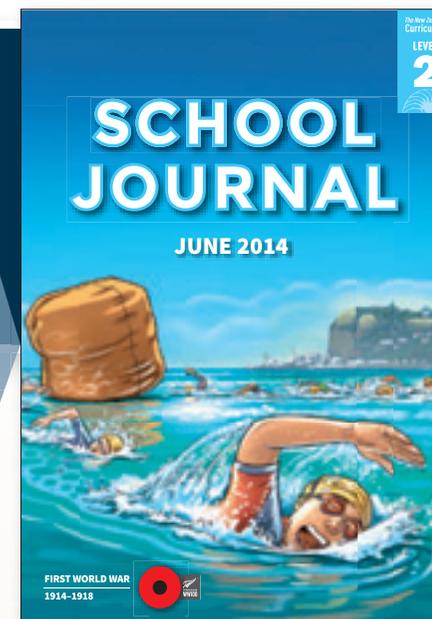
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