

Reevaluating feral cat management strategies in Australia

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Abstract

The introduction of feral cats to Australia by European settlers has led to significant ecological challenges, impacting native wildlife and contributing to the extinction of numerous species. Through qualitative research methods, including interviews and ethnographic studies, this study explores the contentious ethical debates surrounding feral cat management, juxtaposing traditional conservation approaches with the emerging compassionate conservation approach. Compassionate conservationists advocate for methods that (1) minimize harm to animals, (2) treat all animals equally, (3) prioritize the welfare of individual animals, and (4) promote co-existence. These tenets are meant as an alternative to the collectivist, nativist, and instrumentalist tendencies that compassionate conservationists identify in traditional conservation approaches. The paper analyses the divide between the collectivist and nativist orientations of traditional conservation, which often justify lethal interventions, and the individualist, harm-averse stance of compassionate conservation. However, it also highlights areas of potential overlap, such as a shared recognition of intrinsic values of nature, critical reflection on current practices, and preference for non-lethal management strategies when feasible. Noting many conservationists' concern for individual animal welfare, albeit with differing understandings and priorities, this study challenges the binary opposition between traditional and compassionate conservationists.

Keywords: animal welfare, biodiversity, compassion, conservation values, environmental ethics

Introduction

The introduction of cats to Australia by European colonizers between 1824 and 1886, initially for companionship and rodent control, inadvertently led to the establishment of widespread feral cat populations (Burrows, 2018). The presence of these feral cats has had a significant impact on Australia's native wildlife, particularly affecting small to medium-sized mammals. It is estimated that feral cats have played a role in the extinction of approximately 25 native mammal species, primarily through direct predation (Woinarski *et al.*, 2019).

The ecological impact of feral and domestic cats is causing a complex ethical problem, that relates to the much-debated issue of weighing welfare and rights of individual animals against the overarching objectives of biodiversity conservation. The dominant approach in conservation biology prioritizes diversity, ecological complexity, evolution, and the intrinsic value of biotic diversity (Soulé, 1985). Consequently, conservation has predominantly concentrated on endemism, phylogenetic uniqueness, and the overall health of ecosystems and species populations (Vane-Wright *et al.*, 1991). In this context, many conservationists argue for the necessity of lethal measures to safeguard native species and preserve ecological integrity (Fleming and Ballard, 2019).

This approach is now being questioned by compassionate conservation, which advocates for recognition of the intrinsic value and the protection of animals as individuals rather than mere representatives of their species (Ramp and Bekoff; 2015; Wallach *et al.*, 2018). Lethal strategies in conservation have faced criticism on multiple fronts, and the principles of compassionate conservation have further intensified the ongoing ethical debate regarding the harm or killing of certain animals for the benefit

Section 5

of others. This debate leads to a tension that seems unlikely to result in productive collaboration, and underscores the critical need for research that not only explores these diverging perspectives but identifies potential common ground for viable solutions. This is important since the critique from compassionate conservationists resonates with a wide audience, especially in light of the growing recognition of animal sentience and sapience, emphasizing concerns about animal welfare.

This research aims to unravel the underlying assumptions and values of individuals engaged in current feral cat management to identify the roots of disagreement with compassionate conservation. It then evaluates the validity, legitimacy, and feasibility of critiques against current conservation methods and the alternatives suggested by compassionate conservation, providing insight into whether and how principles of compassionate conservation can be reconciled with conservation practices. The methodology, outlined in the following section, encompasses interviews and ethnographic studies. In subsequent sections, current management strategies for feral cats in Australia and the alternative perspective offered by compassionate conservation are explored, followed by the presentation of the results of the empirical research and preliminary conclusions.

Methodology

This study adopts a comprehensive qualitative approach to investigate feral cat management in Australia, integrating a literature review, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic observations. From February to May 2023, 19 interviews were conducted with a varied group of practitioners and researchers in Australia, including wildlife biologists, ecologists, and government officials, to gather diverse perspectives on feral cat management practices and their ethical, ecological, and societal impacts. Purposive sampling was used to ensure a breadth of insights, continuing until thematic saturation was achieved. Further depth was added through an ethnographic approach volunteering with Bush Heritage Australia, visits to field sites and participation in (local) meetings. The selection of researchers, practitioners, and volunteers focused on individuals actively involved in or with experience in feral cat management, to ensure a representation of current management practices. Their perspectives will be examined through the lens of compassionate conservation's criticisms and principles, to reconsider current approaches and explore proposed alternatives.

Current management strategies

The control of feral cats in Australia employs various methods such as (indigenous) hunting, shooting, trapping, and poison baits to mitigate their impact on native species and ecosystems (Johnston and Algar, 2020). Hunting, shooting, and trapping are effective on a small scale, but their impact diminishes over larger areas due to cats' elusive nature and extensive ranges (Fisher *et al.*, 2015). Poison baiting (1080 and PAPP) presents a more economical option for large-scale control (Algar and Burrows, 2004). Bait types are tailored to regional ecosystems, for example by utilizing Eradicat (1080) to target feral cats while minimizing risks to non-target species, particularly in southwestern Australia where native fauna have developed a tolerance to such toxins (Woinarski *et al.*, 2019). Despite their effectiveness, baits require strategic placement and continuous application due to cats' preference for live prey and environmental factors that may reduce bait attractiveness (Algar and Burrows, 2004; Fisher *et al.*, 2015). Fenced sanctuaries offer a solution for protecting some vulnerable native species, though they come with high costs and maintenance demands and restrict the movement of artificially fragmented populations (Hayward *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, fenced areas and islands may cause issues such as overabundance issues, lack of genetic diversity, and possible long-term effects such as a further decrease in predator awareness and avoidance behaviors (Woinarski *et al.*, 2019). Non-lethal alternatives, such as habitat management, offer low-cost, welfare-friendly options but may not significantly impact species highly susceptible to cat predation (Woinarski *et al.*, 2019).

Compassionate conservation

Compassionate conservation challenges the core orientations of traditional conservation practices as identified by Wallach *et al.* (2018): instrumentalism, collectivism, and nativism. Instead, they advocate for methods that 1. do no harm, 2. prioritize the welfare of individual animals, 3. treat all animals equally, and 4. promote peaceful coexistence (Ramp and Bekoff, 2015; Wallach *et al.*, 2018). Central to compassionate conservation is the commitment to minimize harm to animals (Wallach *et al.*, 2018). Proponents advocate against the intentional or indiscriminate killing of sentient beings to minimize this harm (Ramp and Bekoff, 2015). Wallach *et al.* (2018) argue doing nothing may, in some cases, be better than risking harm. They also urge the recognition of the intrinsic value of these animals, and reject prioritizing instrumental value for human benefit or conservation (Wallach *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, while not rejecting the value of collectives, Wallach *et al.* (2015) argue compassion is inherently directed toward individuals. Killing is often legitimized based on an animal's species, origin, or ecological function. Compassionate conservation posits all animals, regardless of their category, deserve equal consideration (Wallach *et al.*, 2018). In the case of introduced species, killing is legitimized based on their origin. This is criticized on the basis that commitment to historical ecosystems is unrealistic and ignores nature's resilience. Compassionate conservation also promotes the principle of peaceful human-wildlife coexistence. Arguing for the least harmful and minimally invasive interventions, it suggests prioritizing changes in human behaviour and land use as initial steps (Lynn *et al.*, 2019).

Interviews

Do no harm vs "the ends justify the means"

The interviewees' comments reveal an internal conflict between their respect for animal lives and the ecological necessity of controlling feral cats. One interviewee candidly expressed this internal struggle: "Do I struggle with the fact that we're killing a lot of animals? Yes. Do I think that the ends justify the means? Yes." Multiple interviewees highlighted the personal emotional toll such actions take, stating things like: "I don't like seeing animals suffer. It's horrible" and "It's traumatic to see an animal suffer." Some participants even expressed admiration for cats, with one interviewee stating: "I love cats. I think they're an incredible species. I think they're fascinating, and I've come to have a deeply felt connection to a lot of these animals". This admiration counters the common misconception that conservationists are antagonistic towards cats. One participant addressed this directly: "I think it's a big barrier for us that people think we just don't like them. Even at the conference where we're secretly telling each other we have a cat at home, and then everyone got excited and showed each other pictures. So we even think that about ourselves, yeah no wonder that the general public thinks we hate cats."

Prioritize the welfare of individual animals vs "everything is interlinked"

The majority of participants stressed the importance of collective values in conservation, moving beyond the direct, human-centric benefits like ecosystem services. Rather, they conveyed respect for nature and collective ecological entities, emphasizing values informed by relational, aesthetic, spiritual, and ecological dimensions. An interviewee expressed a personal connection to the natural environment, lamenting its ongoing degradation: "I've got a really strong connection to our environment and to our wildlife and I see things just being reduced and reduced and reduced, you know, knocked out by a thousand cuts." Another participant underscored the spiritual significance of nature in contemporary society, stating, "Particularly now, getting on and understanding the value of spirituality in a world where religion is increasingly failing. I see nature as being a logical alternative to helping society have robust values."

Section 5

A focus on wildlife individuals in conservation was critiqued: “You can’t only focus on individuals. We know that some individuals are always going to be faring worse and some are going to be fitter, so we tend to focus on the overall level of populations.” Another participant pressed the interconnectedness and complexity of natural ecosystems: “Everything’s interlinked. You can’t save one without saving the whole ecosystem. We have no idea the ramifications of one species going extinct in that certain ecosystem could be the one thing that holds everything together and then it’s just going to collapse after that.” Multiple participants accused critics of overly focusing on cats. One participant said: “They don’t care about the native wildlife, they care about cats because they represent a relationship. It is not only about the cats. They prioritize them above everything else.”

Inclusivity vs “protecting what is uniquely Australian”

Almost all interviewees mentioned saving native species and ecosystems as their main, or even sole motivator for their involvement in feral cat management. The uniqueness and irreplaceability of Australia’s wildlife were highlighted: “The reality is that Australia has animals that exist nowhere else and will never exist ever again.” What is special about Australian ecosystems was poetically described by one respondent: “Australia is heaving with life, but it’s very subtle. It’s very quiet. It’s very old. It doesn’t declare itself. It’s just there, existing. It’s playing the long game because that’s what it has always done, and I like that feeling. (...) Coming here, moving here with cats, and just letting them roam just feels rude, almost.”

Some participants justified their preference for native species by highlighting species relationships “These amazing mutualistic symbioses that exist in our native ecosystems. Evolutionary drivers that have worked for hundreds of thousands of generations to end up with that intimate relationship. What we see with introduced species, we don’t have those relationships.” Another participant noted: “Potentially, I think every species is amazing and unique. But I think there is a particular danger when they’re in the wrong places because almost without fail, some of those will go on to destroy that ecosystem they are in.”

Participants also reflected on our responsibility for the presence of feral cats and the protection of native species, with one stating: “As humans, we’re responsible for them... Because we put them here.” Another participant argued: “Australia has some really unique wildlife that are found nowhere else in the world that we have a responsibility to protect. We have a choice to make between protecting what is uniquely Australian or not. I don’t want to see them lost on my watch.” Another participant said: “If these species go extinct, and we were watching it happen, and nobody was doing anything or not enough to save them, that is a huge legacy to leave behind, and we don’t have the right to do that.” Lastly, some participants argued the presence of cats in Australia is unfair to native species: “I think cats are cool. It’s just, you know, native wildlife weren’t playing by these rules. They weren’t interacting with these wildlife for ages.”

Peaceful co-existence vs “it’s a trade-off”

Many participants expressed doubts regarding the possible co-existence of native and non-native species and the effectiveness of non-lethal methods: “They want this to work at all costs because it sounds nice, it makes you feel good. And if it means that somebody’s not having to kill an animal, it’s worth reaching for. I agree with that completely. But it’s not based on science, it’s based on delusion.” Regarding a do-nothing approach, one participant remarked: “You can’t pretend that it’s all going to get better by itself. It needs to get done. Somebody has to do it.”, and another said: “When you choose not to do something, and that is an active choice, there are also implications, and very rarely do we think about that.” In this regard, participants discussed the trade-off between the lives of feral cats and wildlife. “I’m sad that cats are going to die. Millions of cats are going to die. But if millions of cats die, then billions of animals don’t die. And that’s the trade-off.”

One participant highlighted the potential of habitat modifications, that change the landscape to disadvantage cats and benefit native species, but noted: “It’s unlikely that that will be enough.” Another participant explained the effectiveness of grazing and fire regimes, as examples of such habitat modifications, depends on the susceptibility of the prey species: “There’s a whole bunch of species that just can’t co-exist with cats. And it doesn’t matter what you burn, doesn’t matter what you do, no matter how good you do it, cats will just kill everything.” On the question of prioritizing changes in human behaviour, participants reflected: “It doesn’t mean that I don’t also think that we don’t need to, (...) there’s a whole suite of things that we need to be doing. But, you know, I’m just one person.” Multiple participants argued a narrow focus on cats is flawed, by stating: “I think the way we were polarized is that cats have been destructive in Australia, but the biggest offenders in Australia are us.”

A couple of participants questioned the effectiveness of current methods they are or were involved in: “No matter how much cat control I did, the cats would just kill them all.”, and “I don’t know if I’ve done a single bit of difference. (...) Unless you’re killing more than they’re recruiting, it’s meaningless.” Islands and areas were often mentioned as exceptions: “Islands are fantastic because islands have a plan to how to deal with a re-invasion. (...) If you don’t have a plan for that, then you’re just killing for killing’s sake.” Participants mentioned seeing “no real alternative”, “reducing the collective intelligence of cats” and “losing options in the future that we now still have” as reasons to continue cat control on the mainland, with some hoping for the development of new techniques. Multiple participants pressed the importance of management that aligns with “clear goals and outcomes”, is “routinely monitored” and is done “consistently over time”.

Conclusions

This research delves into the complex dynamics between traditional conservation efforts, which prioritize native species and ecosystem health, and the emerging compassionate conservation approach, which values individual animal welfare. The insights from the interviews with conservationists, contrasted against the four principles of compassionate conservation, show a commonality in collectivist and nativist tendencies. Yet, these are not as heavily based on instrumental values as their critics suggest. Participants recognized the value of native animals in conservation efforts, and some emphasis was put on aesthetic, recreational and especially relational aspects of native species and ecosystems. Other instrumental values, such as economic benefits, were rarely mentioned. Despite their primary concern for native species, most participants were mindful of individual animal welfare. However, their understanding of animal welfare and human responsibility diverges from those of compassionate conservationists. Preferring a consequentialist approach, participants evaluated the impact on all involved animals rather than adhering to absolute rights, or the virtues of compassion and care. Many participants also expressed a sense of responsibility for the presence of feral cats in Australia, viewing these cats as an extension of humans, an unnatural presence in the ecosystem. In contrast, compassionate conservationists do not categorize animals based on how they were introduced. These differences reflect deep-seated convictions which, if left unexpressed, can lead to further communication barriers and misunderstandings.

Participants’ reflection and criticism of their own practices challenge the notion that they operate with a single-minded focus or lack of compassion. While finding mutual understanding is challenging, there may be possibilities to find common ground in practice. These include a shared commitment to the least harmful methods, along with ensuring that management plans are thoroughly coordinated and monitored to minimize purposeless killing.

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