

AUSTRALIAN CATS

I am calling today for the total eradication of cats in Australia!

—Richard Evans, member of the Australian Parliament¹

The common house cat is at the center of a major environmental controversy in Australia. Cats are being blamed for the extinction or decline of many endemic species of animals throughout Australia, a continent with a particularly high proportion of unique endemics (that is, animals that are both native and unique to Australia).

Cats were first introduced into Australia by English settlers in the eighteenth century. At that time, Australia and Antarctica were the only continents on Earth that did not have any members of the felid family. During the nineteenth century, large numbers of cats were deliberately released into the wild in an attempt to control mice and rabbits, which had also been imported to Australia from elsewhere. Today, feral cats are found in all Australian habitats except for a few of the wettest rain forests. Wildlife experts estimate that there are now about 18 million feral cats in Australia, more than six times the number kept as pets. Some experts say they are the most destructive of all the nonnative species in Australia. If Evans has his way, pet cats will be eliminated, too. The only difference between feral cats and pet cats, he said, is "one meal." His proposal would require that all pet cats be neutered, ensuring their elimination within ten years.²

The cat's formidable skills as a predator, including its stealth and its ability to kill animals as large as itself, have gotten it into trouble with both environmentalists and the government. Under the Australian Endangered Species Protection Act of 1992, feral cats qualify as a "key threatening process" for two independent reasons: their predation of endangered and vulnerable species and their role as a biological vector spreading parasites and diseases to endangered and vulnerable species. As a result, Australia's Endangered Species Advisory Committee mandated the development of a "threat abatement plan" to protect the endangered and vulnerable species threatened by feral cats.

It seems very unlikely that the final abatement plan will call for the complete eradication of feral cats—not because eradication is regarded as undesirable but because it is regarded as unfortunately impossible. According to the National Feral Animal Control Program, the eradication of feral cats is well beyond the capacity of available techniques and resources because the species is so well established across such a vast area.

There is also some public resistance to the abatement plan, and not just from urban cat lovers. As the draft plan notes, "Aboriginal people recognize introduced animals as part of the landscape and see them as newcomers rather than as feral. . . . [The feral cat] is also a preferred food item for some groups. With the decline and extinction of many arid zone mammals . . . introduced mammals are viewed as a welcome addition to their diet."³

DISCUSSION

The general issues raised by exotic species are discussed in Case 23: *Have You Seen This Fish?* This case adds a new dimension to those issues: the interestingly different understandings of "exotic" held by Euro-Australians and Aboriginals. Case 25: *Hawaiian Feral Pigs* also illustrates the ways in which native peoples may be more concerned to protect interlopers than their more recently arrived fellow citizens.

QUESTIONS

1. In what ways are the issues raised by this case similar to the issues raised by the other exotic species cases in Case 22: *Saving Mink, Killing Volcs*, Case 23: *Have You Seen This Fish?*, and Case 25: *Hawaiian Feral Pigs*? In what ways are they different?

2. Compare the Australian government's description of feral cats to the Aboriginal peoples' description. Can both descriptions be correct? Is one better or more true than the other? Is it morally relevant that, unlike the Aboriginal peoples, the European population of Australia is itself entirely composed of "newcomers"?
3. Are the ethical issues in this case affected in any way by the fact that the cat, unlike the exotic species in the other cases, is a "domestic" animal? Are they affected by the fact that the domestic cat is itself the product of thousands of years of deliberate human breeding?
4. Obviously, Mr. Evans believes that as long as cats are kept as pets, they will escape into the wild and exacerbate the problems caused by feral cats. Is this a sufficient reason to justify eliminating Australia's domestic cats by requiring that all be neutered?
5. In 1996, the Australian government released into the environment a virus intended to kill many of its 150 million wild rabbits. Rabbits were themselves introduced to the Australian wild by early European settlers. Suppose that a virus is discovered or designed that, after extensive testing, seems to infect and kill only feral cats. And suppose that a vaccine is available that will protect domestic cats from the virus. Should Australia release this new virus as well?

NOTES

1. "Australia Urged to Wipe Out Its Cats," *Seattle Times*, October 17, 1996, available at <http://archives.seattletimes.nwsource.com/cgi-bin/texis.cgi/web/vortex/display?slug=cats&cdate=19961017&qquery=Australia>.
2. "Australia Urged to Wipe Out Its Cats."
3. Australian National Feral Animal Control Program, *Draft Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats*, available at www.anca.gov.au/plants/threaten/cats/1.htm.

SOURCES

- Australian National Feral Animal Control Program. *Draft Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats*. Available at www.anca.gov.au/plants/threaten/cats/1.htm.
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