

## **FERAL CATS AND DOGS POSITION STATEMENT**

*Wildlife rehabilitators around the globe have at least one thing in common—they can all expect to be presented with the victims of cats (*Felis catus*) and dogs (*Canis domesticus*) – be they birds, mammals, or reptiles, over the course of their practice. Free-roaming cats and dogs, whether feral or pets, will stalk, chase, hunt, and kill prey if given the opportunity. The impacts of cats and dogs may be seen or felt directly through injury and predation. Other impacts may be less obvious such as behavioral disturbance and disease transmission. The intensity and effects of those interactions between domestic and wildlife populations varies, depending on context and other stressors on a particular wild population, but the impact of cats and dogs on individual birds, mammals, and reptiles is indisputable.*

*The policy of the IWRC on this matter is as follows:*

- *The IWRC supports any move to license cat and dog breeders to aid in population control;*
- *The IWRC encourages all owners to neuter non-breeding cats and dogs;*
- *The IWRC promotes programs that educate cat and dog owners and the general public about their impacts on wildlife and what measures can be taken to reduce these effects;*
- *Cats should be kept indoors; if allowed outdoors they should wear collars with devices designed to prevent them hunting and should be supervised at all times. No cat should be allowed to roam.*
- *Dogs should be kept confined when unsupervised. When outside they should be walked on a leash unless in an area where any impacts on wildlife can be reduced or eliminated. No dog should be allowed to roam freely;*
- *To diminish potential for infectious disease transmission to wildlife, dogs and cats (particularly in rural and suburban areas) should be vaccinated and treated for worms;*
- *To reduce potential predation upon wildlife, pets should be fed properly<sup>1,2</sup>*
- *The IWRC supports the humane removal of feral cat and dog populations, including feral cat colonies, through the rehabilitation and adoption of suitable animals into domestic environments and humane euthanasia of animals that cannot be rehabilitated and rehomed.*

### **Context**

- Both cats and dogs are domestic animals that have been domesticated by humans worldwide. They are “subsidized” by humans, therefore their populations are beyond environment carrying capacity, resulting in damage to wildlife.<sup>3</sup>
- There is an increasing amount of scientific evidence recording the numbers of wild animals taken by cats and dogs and the impact this has on wild populations.<sup>1,3-11</sup> This has resulted in many calls for both domestic and feral cat and dog populations to be controlled.<sup>10</sup>
- Numbers of feral and owned cats varies from country to country:
  - UK - 10 million owned, domestic cats<sup>11</sup> and over 800,000 feral cats
  - Canada - 10 million owned, domestic cats and between 1.4 and 4.2 million feral cats<sup>12</sup>

- Estimates of numbers of animals taken by cats each year also varies:
  - UK – estimated 25 - 29 million wild birds each spring and summer<sup>13</sup>
  - Canada – estimated 100 and 300 million birds taken<sup>12</sup>
  - US – estimated between 1 and 4 billion birds<sup>14</sup>
- Four wildlife centres in England admitted a total of 71,940 casualty wild animals between 1st January 2005 and 31st December 2009; 54,665 (76%) were birds, 16,755 (23.3%) were mammals. Of the birds admitted to the centres, 4,975 were either identified as being attacked by another animal when presented, or were found to have injuries consistent with an animal attack on subsequent examination.<sup>15</sup> Figure 1 shows that by far the main culprits were cats, accounting for 60% of these casualties.
- The removal of feral cat colonies and dog packs are emotive issues. Many do not support the use of euthanasia to remove them so sterilization programs for cats have been practiced for some time, but their value is debatable. Outcomes of trap-neuter-release (TNR) have been contradictory, with some studies showing effectiveness at 55% neuter rate<sup>16</sup> and others not without a 100% neutering of adult females (RSPCA unpublished). However many ecologists suggests that TNR is not effective at reducing, and ultimately, removing feral cat populations, especially if contact with owned cats cannot be prevented.<sup>17</sup> A further problem is that TNR may be selecting for cats that are more 'wild', as these cats are less likely to be caught and so sterilized. As a result, the progeny of feral cat colonies is less likely to be suitable for rehoming in a domestic environment.
- Dogs are the world's most common carnivores, introduced by humans across the globe.<sup>18</sup> Particularly free-ranging dogs (owned or not owned dogs that roam unsupervised) interact with wildlife and may have diverse impacts on wild species such as predation, behavioural disruption and disease transmission.<sup>18-28</sup>
- Dogs can cause serious damage to wildlife, particularly important in endangered species. Dogs have preyed upon protected iguanas in Galapagos Islands, destroying 27% of the egg production by year.<sup>23</sup> Dogs and cats are important predators of the endangered adult kiwi in New Zealand, where a single dog ate 500 kiwis in a short period.<sup>24,25</sup> In Chile, three owned dogs killed more than 175 penguins.<sup>26</sup>
- There is limited data concerning the impact of dogs in admissions to wildlife rehabilitation centres. The only example found in the literature was recorded in Chile, where the first reason of admission of the small endangered deer pudu (*Pudu puda*) to rehabilitation centres was dog injuries (Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> RSPCA data shows that their wildlife centres recorded 263 individual animals being admitted as a result of dog attacks between 2005 and 2009 (*unpublished data*). There were 36 different species affected with the species most affected being mute swan (*Cygnus alor*) with 57 admissions, followed by wood pigeons (*Columba palumbus*) with 51.
- Transmission of infectious disease from domestic dogs and cats to wild species has to be considered as an emerging threat for wildlife conservation. There is robust evidence of dogs as a source of important outbreaks of rabies and distemper in wild populations from Africa, Latin America and Asia.<sup>19-21, 27, 28</sup> In addition, there are shared infectious agents between domestic cats and wild felids such as pumas and bobcats.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, rehabilitators may admit wild animals that were infected with a disease of domestic dog or cat origin.
- Cats and dogs also have an impact on their victims' welfare: (i) Direct impacts such as the injuries sustained, subsequent bacterial infections, stress from the capture; and (ii) Indirect effects that include loss of dependent juveniles if an adult animal is taken, increased predator pressure,<sup>30</sup> and a gradual decline in populations by sustained "hyperpredation".<sup>31</sup>

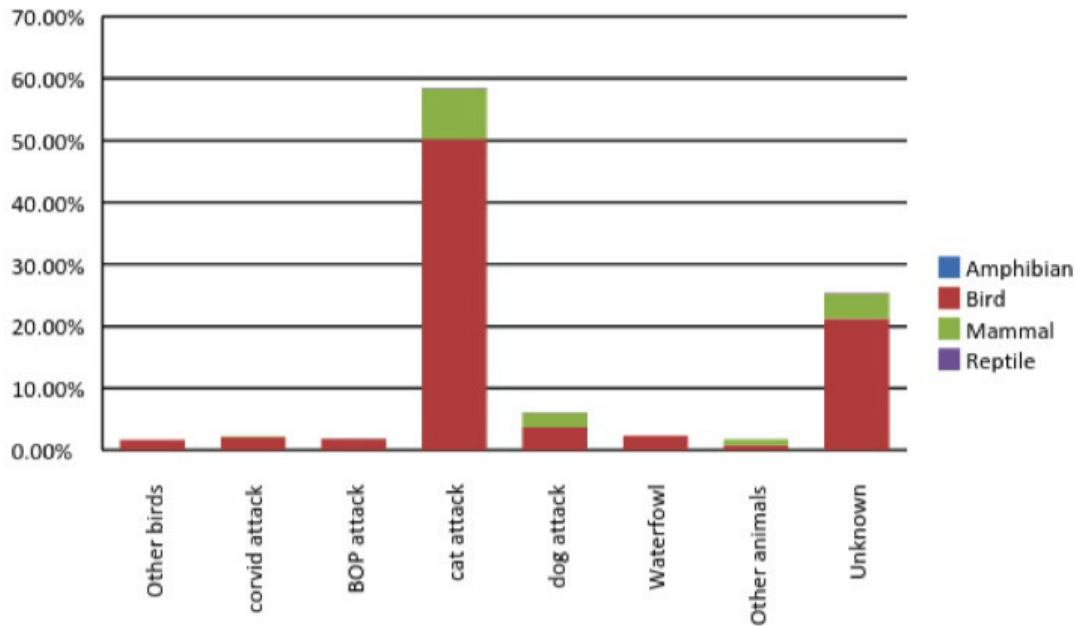
- There is no doubt that this is as much a welfare issue as it is a conservation issue, and we must accept that humans, as cat and dog owners, are responsible. It is also wrong to consider the impacts on wild animals at only the population level; the individual wild animals caught by cats and dogs are capable of suffering a great deal when attacked.

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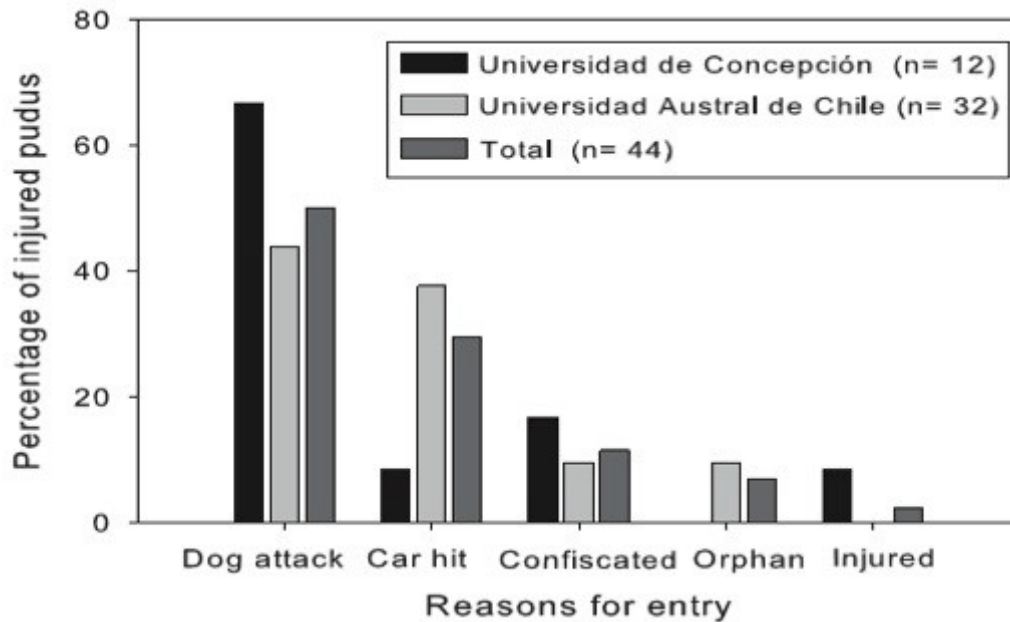
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Figure 1. Casualties presented to four Wildlife Centres in England as attacked by another animal.<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup> Reproduced with author's permission<sup>15</sup>

Figure 2. Percentage of pudu received at two wildlife rehabilitation centres in southern Chile (2005-2008), categorized according to the reason of admission.<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup> Reproduced with author's permission<sup>8</sup>