

Cat problem can only be solved by owners

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Conserving wildlife is not very different from improving public health. They both involve (sometimes nasty) debates between people with different opinions and values. In health, some most value the enjoyment they get from smoking or unprotected sex, while others value stopping the illnesses caused by these behaviours. In conservation, some value the management of predators above all else, while others value animal

control that does not use poisons or is less cruel or they find value in the comfort of a pet cat.

In [public health](#), a compromise has been found using a type of research called behaviour prioritisation, so my colleagues and I wondered if this same approach might work in the controversy over the conservation of native [wildlife](#) and [pet cats](#). The [research process](#) is simple, but potentially profound.

First, we looked at ways [cat owners](#) might reduce the killing their cats do and found nine possible approaches they could take. They could, for example, de-sex their cat or make them wear a collar with a bell. They could also fence their cat in or build them an enclosure, or even keep the cat inside 24-7.

We then asked cat owners which of those they already did or would be willing to do, and then asked vets which actions they would most support and which would be best for cat welfare. We also asked animal conservationists which of the possible actions would best protect wildlife.

We entered all this information into a behaviour prioritisation algorithm—a fancy way of saying that we multiplied them together to come up with a score for each of the nine cat-[owner](#) actions. The higher the score, the more likely the action would be accepted and implemented as well as reduce the impact of cats on wildlife.

Overall, keeping cats inside at night (from before dusk until after dawn) received the highest score. Of course, keeping cats inside always would be the most effective way to prevent them killing wildlife, but this action was not supported by cat owners or vets. However, about 30 percent of cat owners already keep their cats inside at night, so conservationists could count on their support of this conservation action.

Already I can hear a chorus of conservationists saying: "Oh, but the cats will still kill some wildlife, and keeping them inside at night will stop them killing the rats that kill birds—this solution is worse than useless!" And they may be right, although there has been no research with domestic cats in suburban landscapes to show this is true. That work still needs to be done.

Also, more importantly, my colleagues and I recommend keeping cats in at night because it is the behaviour cat owners are most likely to adopt and implement. This action engages constructively with cat owners and begins a positive conversation between conservationists and cat owners that diffuses conflict and opens the door to future progress.

Pursuing the actions that give the greatest conservation benefit but will never be adopted by cat owners risks failure and future polarisation of the debate. Focussing instead on achievable, smaller actions in the short-term is a recipe for incremental progress.

Australia is miles ahead of us in this regard. A decade ago, only a third of people kept their cats inside at night and keeping cats inside 24-7 was considered cruel. More recent studies show that over 80 percent of cat owners keep their cats inside at night, with nearly 40 percent keeping them inside all the time. A quarter of Australian cat owners have also built outdoor enclosures for their cats. This progress has happened because the values and needs of cat owners were understood and they were involved in a dialogue with conservationists towards a solution.

We could make the same progress in New Zealand. Conflicts over wildlife conservation need not be antagonistic and disrespectful. Science and scientists, and good social science, can make sure the values and opinions of both sides are heard and respected, and can accelerate compromise and create a pathway to progress for our leading environmental issues. Perhaps we can also apply this approach to the

contentious debate about 1080 to help resolve that long-standing conflict?

More information: Wayne L. Linklater et al. Prioritizing cat-owner behaviors for a campaign to reduce wildlife depredation, *Conservation Science and Practice* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/csp2.29](https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.29)

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