

Managing domestic and wild cats is likely to remain fraught, new research warns

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Current efforts to protect and restore native biodiversity is being threatened by difficulties in identifying wild and domestic cats, and categorization is likely to remain fraught for the foreseeable future,

experts have warned.

Efforts to restore the native wildcat (*Felis sivestris*) are ongoing in Britain and conservationists in New Zealand are also trying to protect [native species](#). Domestic cats pose a threat to other species in both countries.

The study shows New Zealanders are much less sentimental about pest management to protect native species. As a result [domestic cats](#) are treated very differently in the two countries.

Dr. Alexandra Palmer, from the University of Auckland, and Dr. Virginia Thomas, from the University of Exeter, interviewed those involved with cat conservation in New Zealand and Britain respectively.

In Britain, [public opinion](#) is very much against culling [feral](#) cats, even in the interests of protecting wildcats. Conservationists are responding to this pragmatically, using 'trap neuter vaccinate release' programs to manage feral cats, rather than culling them. Avoiding culling has the added advantage of ensuring that wildcats aren't accidentally killed if they're mistaken for a feral cat. Killing feral cats is legal however, with some game keepers shooting them as part of their predator control programs.

Wildcats are protected and killing them is an offense, but it can be very difficult to distinguish between domestic and wildcats and this is complicated even further by domestic wildcat hybrids which make legal distinction difficult and render prosecution in cases of wildcat persecution almost impossible under existing legislation.

Different values and attitudes towards cats means that a feral cat is often in the eye of the beholder—some people see a cat and assume that its' feral while others might assume that it's a wildcat or even a pet cat.

New Zealanders, New Zealand conservationists and even New Zealand cat welfare organizations tend to accept the killing of feral cats in order to protect native species. Pet cats can be killed by mistake if they are accidentally caught in traps intended for feral cats or other 'pests'. In this case, the legal difficulty is over whether cats are genuinely feral or are stray, and people therefore have a responsibility to protect rather than cull them.

Dr. Palmer carried out 59 interviews and 16 in-depth discussions in New Zealand with conservation project managers and staff, critics of predator control, researchers, Māori stakeholders, and others with relevant interests and expertise. Dr. Thomas visited four wildcat breeding facilities across Britain and carried out 26 interviews with those involved with species conservation and management, including conservation communication officers, consultants, practitioners, project managers, policy experts, and researchers.

Dr. Thomas said, "In theory and in practice, valued companion and wildcats are distinguished from unprotected feral cats, and in-between categories of stray and hybrid cats. Those responsible draw boundaries between cat categories differently. These differences in boundary-drawing reflect the inherent blurriness of category boundaries, practical challenges, and, importantly, differences in values, in particular whether priority is placed on the life of the cat or the cat's potential victim, particularly native or game birds."

"This can mean that laws outlining protections for specific categories of animals have limited effect if, in practice, those encountering cats draw boundaries differently."

"In Britain, it seems unlikely that legal protection of wildcats in theory can be extended to the field without a quick, easy, and [reliable method](#) of differentiating between domestic, hybrid, and wildcats. Reducing

gaps between law and practice would require seeking agreement from those involved in cat management to stick to the letter of the law, despite this potentially bringing difficult practical implications."

Research participants in the UK described the "genetic dilution" of the wildcat and its functional extinction.

In the UK there is no legal definition of a wildcat, which makes protecting them extremely difficult. Meanwhile, [feral cats](#) may legally be killed at any time, although they are protected under the Animal Welfare Act (2006), meaning that any such killing must be humane. Companion cats are classed as property and are protected by property ownership laws.

The research is published in the journal *People and Nature*.

More information: Alexandra Palmer et al, Categorisation of cats: Managing boundary felids in Aotearoa New Zealand and Britain, *People and Nature* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/pan3.10519](https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10519)

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