

## **Keep it or kill it? How the behaviour of domestic cats (*Felis catus*) impacts upon perceptions of their value and management methods**

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The domestic cat is the most commonly owned companion animal both in New Zealand and globally. Recent dialogues around the impact and value of cats have once again brought them into the spotlight and this presentation seeks to discuss these New Zealand based dialogues using a behavioural framework. Generally cats are thought to live in three broad categories: 'Feral', 'Stray' and 'Companion' and how a cat is attributed to these categories will depend upon its behaviour in and around human habitation. Other behavioural qualities such as predatory behaviours, which are not considered human-centred, are shared across all cats and have the potential to substantially impact upon cat treatment and welfare.

Behavioural temperaments are constructed over the lifetime of an animal and, consequently, how a cat behaves and how it is labelled will be directly related to the degree of care historically provided to it. Cats in New Zealand have no enforceable ownership requirements that function to reduce their likelihood of becoming lost or abandoned. As a result they are far more likely to be abandoned than dogs. In part this may be because they are seen as being behaviourally independent and as having a need to roam.

As a result of historic loss or abandonment 'feral' cats become behaviourally and reproductively autonomous. They are, therefore, freely and necessarily controlled through lethal means. 'Stray' cats are also euthanized frequently in order to manage the population, especially if they are behaviourally unable to be adopted.

This presentation seeks to draw together prior research and prospective research ideas to generate a discussion around public perceptions of what a 'cat' is, both as a construct of their behaviour and as constructs of the New Zealand society in which they reside. A better understanding of cat behaviour could lead to improved management, reduced abandonment and therefore a decline in our need to kill cats.

Mark is currently completing his PhD at Massey University focussing on cat behaviour and assessment of pain. In his role as a senior lecturer at Unitec Institute of Technology he has been researching the status of cats in New Zealand since he 'stepped of the boat'. In 2013, and in recognition of his expertise in cat behaviour and welfare, he was invited to join (and joined) the editorial board of *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*.