



Northland Cats in Balance
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**Comments on and Submission to
the Draft “New Zealand National Cat Management Strategy” Document,
issued on 21 September, 2016 by the NCMSG**

Above all: The paper is called a “Strategy”. Not only a Management Plan, but a Management Strategy. This circumstance requires a clear picture of what is actually intended and attainable.

Commonly “Strategy” (outside the military) is defined as a “System of finding, formulating and developing a doctrine that will ensure long term success if followed faithfully.”

Therefore a good strategy does more than just move forward toward a goal or vision. It honestly acknowledges the faced challenges and provides an approach to overcoming them. It requires a thorough analysis and diagnosis of the challenges which are likely to be faced in the future. If you fail to identify and deal with the obstacles, you don’t have a strategy but you ignore the most crucial handicaps, trying instead to list and accommodate conflicting goals and interests. Such lists of things to do are not a strategy at all. They usually grow out of planning meetings in which a wide variety of stakeholders suggests things they would like to see accomplished. Rather than focus on a few important strategic moves, the group sweeps the whole collection into a document they erroneously call a strategic plan.

To summarize: if you fail to identify and analyze the obstacles, you don’t have a strategy. Instead, you have a list of things you wish would happen.

Exactly this seems to be the case with the paper on hand, notwithstanding that it also does contain several agreeable aims.

In order to show how questionable the offered “strategy” presents itself, we want in Part 1 of the following comments to revise its assumptions by means of practice-orientated reflections in the context of the “strategy's” goals. In Part 2 we will furthermore make suggestions how to better achieve a principle of finding the desired natural balance.

Part 1: “Strategic Vision, Strategic goals and outcomes” versus reality

Reflection # 1: A typical farm household in Parekura Bay/Bay of Islands:

Four cats were found by their guardians as stray kittens on a rubbish dump. Until then there had been no cats on the farm but very actively growing populations of rodents. From the beginning of the cats' life on the farm they were allowed to roam freely for 24 hours per day. Although they always have been fed well, they killed rats and mice as well as the odd stoat and also brought their prey home. After eight months the rats were gone. Not because the cats eradicated all of them but because they didn't want to raise their offspring at such a dangerous place. Very shortly after that many of the previously missing birds returned. Today a multitude of indigenous birds lives there, steadily increasing in numbers and apparently not at all threatened by the cats. Although this farm is next to an “environmentally sensitive area”, in fact part of it, the cats have actually contributed to its wellbeing rather than harmed it.

Conclusions:

There will always be dumped kittens and cats. No education whatsoever will ever change the shortfalls of human character. And there will be kind people too who want to help. Well fed cats also prey, but obviously far less than hungry ones.

Since they are very energy-conscious they mainly go for slow moving animals, living on the ground, e.g. rodents.

When they have caught 10 rats, they have already saved the lives of hundreds of birds. A curfew during the night hours for these cats in question would certainly have been counterproductive.

Reflection # 2: An average family on holidays in Russell/Bay of Islands:

It is Christmas time 2014. The ten year old daughter had one heart's desire which has been met: Happily she can hold a Tabby kitten in her arms. But only a few days later another gift, a modern smart phone has distracted the spoilt kid from her superficially “beloved” animal and the responsibilities which go together with real love. While her parents can't be bothered, she abandons and leaves behind the cat when her family moves out of their holiday home. The cat becomes stray and begins to wander about. Town folk take care of her and she becomes known as “Miss Russell.”

Conclusions:

See above. There is no need for a micro-chip as everybody knows but nobody owns this stray cat who doesn't do any harm to the environment in this urban area. There will be always irresponsible people and therefore also always stray cats. The strategic outcome: “there are no stray cats in New Zealand” therefore remains wishful thinking.

Reflection # 3: Micro-chipped cats, general considerations:

Microchips are being implanted in dogs and cats by veterinarians, animal shelters and breeders for

identification purposes. Microchips are also being implanted by members of the public who have taken a brief microchipping course; either online or in person, not exactly the perfect way to guarantee success.

Microchip implants are marketed as a safe and permanent form of identification that lasts the lifetime of the animal. They are also marketed as a way to reunite lost or stolen pets with their owners, to significantly reduce the number of pets in shelters, and in future probably to identify and punish owners of cats gone stray.

Reasons used to promote and sell implantable microchips may sound appealing. Before being enticed by carefully crafted advertising that is being used to not only convince people to have their animals microchipped, but also to implement mandatory animal chipping legislation, we should examine the facts and risks.

Consumers are repeatedly told that microchip implants are safe. So safe, in fact, that pharmaceutical giant Meriel says scientific studies show that microchip implants are totally painless, perfectly well tolerated by the animal and that there is no risk of itchiness, allergic reactions or abscesses. Meriel even claims that European experience shows that microchips are never rejected from the body.

However, published scientific studies and adverse microchip reports recorded by the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) prove otherwise.

Scientific studies involving mice and rats show that test animals have developed aggressive and lethal microchip-induced cancerous growths.

Scientific reports also show that chipped zoo animals have developed microchip-associated cancerous growths.

Medical reports and scientific studies also reveal that dogs and cats have developed aggressive cancerous growths at the site of their microchip implants.

Many advocates of microchipping say the risk that pets will develop cancer from a microchip implant is “negligible” to “nonexistent.”

But shouldn't we ask ourselves how negligible the microchip-cancer risk is if it's our pet that develops cancer? Shouldn't we ask ourselves why decades of scientific data prove that an object implanted in the body can cause cancer, yet nay-sayers of the microchip-cancer risk claim that microchip implants cannot cause cancer?

Although microchip implants are marketed as a permanent form of identification they can stop working or be expelled from the animal's body. Microchips are also known to migrate and become lost within the body, making identification difficult.

Animals have also experienced neurological damage as a result of microchips and have died due to the microchip implant procedure. In 2004, the BSAVA reported that a kitten died suddenly when it was chipped. “During the postmortem examination the microchip was found in the brain stem,” writes the BSAVA.

Also, unbeknownst to the majority of pet owners, microchip numbers can be duplicated: more than one animal can have the same identification number.

Another well-known slogan used to sell microchips is: “Microchips help reunite lost and stolen pets with their owners.” But this catchy phrase is deceptive and provides a false sense of security for pet owners who believe that their pet's chip can be read by all microchip scanners.

As a matter of fact not all scanners are created equal. Some are better than others at reading a wide variety of microchips. That means a pet may get lost, found, scanned and euthanized if the scanner comes up ‘empty.’”

What’s then the point of having your pet microchipped if you can’t get him back?

Real-life evidence shows that microchip implants are an unreliable and potentially dangerous form of identification. In spite of the risks, microchip companies and advocates of microchipping continue to mislead pet owners by saying that microchips are reliable and safe. Nevertheless, mandatory animal microchipping legislation continues to be enacted.

Another and very important argument against general micro-chipping of cats is their alleged immunity against euthanasia after being caught outside certain areas. In fact it implies two kinds of problems: firstly the obvious discrimination of cats like in examples # 1, 2 and 4 where micro-chipping would be pointless or impracticable and secondly the deceptive presumption, microchipped cats would be safe. In fact, any microchipped but nevertheless unwelcome cat can be destroyed and disposed of by any cat hater without consequences.

Moreover: Compulsory microchipping as suggested and/or night time curfews would be extremely difficult to enforce.

Conclusion:

Although microchipping can have advantages, there is no need for it to become compulsory, it should be left to everybody to decide individually whether to use it or not.

Reflection # 4: Cats with poor people in Kawakawa/Northland

There is this family of seven: Mum and Dad, two kids and three cats. Mum suffers from a chronic disease, bedridden. Dad was a truck driver, has recently lost his job. Despite all available social welfare the family is facing an economical disaster. But they love their pets. Especially for the kids the three cats are their only joy. The costs of keeping a cat on average amount to \$ 466/year. They have already paid \$ 150 for the sterilisation of each cat, but should they now have to microchip them for around \$ 50 each- this would be impossible. Who could blame them for ignoring relevant laws? Moreover, because of limited space the cats have to live mainly outdoors.

Conclusion:

You can't generalize life or treat all alike. Cat curfews or containments cannot be enforced everywhere.

Reflection # 5: Cat Colony in Paihia/Bay of Islands:

For more than 13 years a group of elderly residents had taken care of a small colony of abandoned, former companion cats. The animals were all desexed, fed regularly at a feeding station on the Village Green and treated by local Veterinarians when necessary. Although all of them were “too old to fend for themselves” as FNDC had stated in an official media release, the feeding station was removed, two of the cats were trapped and the rest was scattered and is now probably starving or has become feral.

Not only did the Council force the persons in charge of the poor animals to break the Animal Welfare Act, they also acted against common sense and public interest only because they had been lobbied by a group of self-appointed, so-called environmentalists.

Conclusion:

How can we pursue a strategic goal like “The protection of our native species and ecosystems is enhanced through the humane management of cats” or a strategic outcome like “Cat owners understand their legal obligations” when not even our Local Governments are capable of comprehending the basic relevant requirements?

Reflection # 6: “Mambo”:

Mambo lived next to Paihia Primary School. This cat just loved school children and began daily visits, usually found waiting on the office doorstep to greet the Caretaker when he arrived. Morning tea time would see Mambo seated on a chair in the Staff Room and other times he would mix with the children in playground and classrooms.

Mambo’s guardian would have to go to the school at close of day and carry him home and one day she apologised to the Headmaster for the cat being there. The Headmaster, then assured her that he was happy to have the cat visit and that he was using Mambo to teach the kids “Kindness” to animals.

Conclusion:

There are positive effects of cats on human health, especially on their mental health. These effects can't be overestimated. In this case, when children learn kindness to animals by being kind to a stray cat, their education nearly inevitably also leads to kindness to people.

Reflection # 7: Orchards and Poison:

There are mainly two poisons which are used to control so-called pest birds, like Sparrows, Blackbirds, Mynahs and Starlings on or around orchards in New Zealand: Avitrol (4-aminopyridine) and Alphachloralose (poison wheat). When used, they actually kill not only the targeted species but any other birds which take them in. Avitrol®, promoted as a “flock frightening agent” or “repellent,” is a nervous system toxicant. It readily and indiscriminately kills birds, and is dangerous to mammals and other animals. It causes birds who eat it to suffer convulsions, fly erratically, sometimes striking structures, vocalize repeatedly, and eventually die. From 2002 to 2006, 151-175 pounds of 4-aminopyridine were sold in the U.S. annually—enough to kill more than 200 million birds each year. For New Zealand -characteristically enough – no relevant figures are available. But for the application of Alphachloralose the **Northland Regional Council** recommends:

“Bread laced with alphachloralose poison paste is the best method of control. Birds should be pre-fed non-toxic bread bait for around a week, preferably at the same time and place each day, before the poison is added.

Alphachloralose renders the bird unconscious and lowers its body temperature.

The best time to poison is during the colder months, in the evening, when lower night temperatures will kill the birds before they regain consciousness.

Otherwise all unconscious birds must be recovered and killed before they revive and escape. Non-target species can be kept warm until they recover, and then released.

Uneaten toxic bait must be removed and disposed of safely as it may pose a threat to domestic animals or children.

Alphachloralose is available from most stock and station or farm supply stores. For further information on how to poison birds contact the Northland Regional Council pest management staff.”

This is revealing stuff, isn't it?

Recently staff members of a Kerikeri Nursery observed cats of that place bringing dying birds into the showroom. Obviously they were shocked and angry with the cats until they found out where the birds actually came from. The cats had picked them up -still convulsively moving - from the ground around trees of an adjacent Persimmon orchard. And amongst them were not only the targeted nuisance birds but also Finches, Thrushes and even Tomtits, an endemic species.

Conclusion:

This sheds some new light upon the whole matter, doesn't it? How many of these claimed millions of birds killed by cats every year have actually to be booked in human accounts? Like the elimination of nuisance birds on airports and runways, on boats, on rubbish dumps, beaches, boardwalks and urban parks?

Reflection # 8: Old Macadamia Plantation near Paroa Bay/Bay of Islands:

When the new owners of this property moved in, they were appalled at the number of big rats which had been attracted by the tasty Macadamia nuts over the previous years. But it wasn't only the unpleasant presence of the vermin that attracted their attention but also the nearly complete absence of birdsong. There were a few Tuis and Blackbirds, Mynahs and Sparrows of course and some Fantails, but that was more or less all.

Not even a year later the situation had changed dramatically and resembled very much the one in reflection # 1 because two kittens had grown to respectable hunters and sorted the problem out: The rats were drastically decimated and the birds had returned. Today the warbling of birds delights owners and guests from the early morning hours until sunset. There are now in addition to the above mentioned : Wekas and Kiwis, Blue Penguins, Shags, Herons, Shelducks, Grey Ducks, Grey Teals, Brown and California Quails, Pheasants, Banded Rails, Crakes, Pukekos, Dotterels, New Zealand Pigeons, Rosellas, Cuckoos, Moreporks, Kingfishers, Swallows, Skylarks, Thrushes, Tomtits, Silvereyes, Fernbirds, Finches and Starlings.

Conclusion:

Free roaming domestic cats can – what a surprise - be a blessing for birdlife.

Reflection # 9: The Raglan Cat killer:

Excerpts from “Stuff Headlines” (18/12/2013) and “Newshub” (21/01/2014)

The misguided logic of a Raglan cat killer is having disastrous and unintended consequences for a community's local birdlife, an ecologist says.

Residents in Raglan West, a tiny neighbourhood of around 20 houses, have had 16 cats go missing from the neighbourhood over the past year, according to a Raglan veterinary clinic.

The disappearances are turning neighbours against each other and leading to suspicion, threats and intimidation. But the alleged killings are also having unintended consequences for the local bird population, residents say.

Adrienne Livingston, a private ecological consultant and former ecology lecturer at Northland Polytechnic, is concerned about the number of half-eaten eggs and dead chicks she is finding strewn across her back yard.

"I am now observing the effect the marked absence of cats is having on this suburban ecosystem.

The cat killers are known to be birdlife enthusiasts, but instead of helping native birds, they are enabling the rodent population to rob bird nests unchecked."

She said, cats were the apex predator in the immediate area, but their absence had allowed rats to flourish. "The jagged teeth marks on the eggs," Ms. Livingstone said, "and the fact the nests were on thin branches proves rats are to blame."

She says her findings have been backed up by other studies on areas following cat eradication programmes.

"If you take out a top predator, then the next predators down in the food chain will increase."

Livingston said, she was only monitoring about four bird nests in her backyard, but evidence from the small sample size suggested "total annihilation".

Landcare Research wildlife ecologist John Innes said it was possible the removal of cats in an urban area could have a net bad outcome for wildlife.

"Ship rats are the tree climbing rat that decimates most native birds in New Zealand and they're a major item of cat diet."

Ms Hill and some of her neighbours say: "It's not just somebody with a problem and they've killed a feral cat – they've actually wiped out the population of cats here and beyond," .

"They think if you wipe out cats then the bird population will go up, but what they don't realise is that when you wipe out the cats you get an influx of rats."

Conclusion:

see (in a reciprocal way) reflection # 8.

Reflection # 10: Windows :

Windows on residential homes and city skyscrapers are deadly to birds and every year many birds come into bird rescue centres after having hit windows. Indeed research indicates that daytime window collisions with low-level structures account for anywhere from one hundred million to one billion bird fatalities--of both migrant and resident species--in the United States each year. What is more, any single, tall building could be killing 2,000 birds a year. The research has also shown that these collisions occur during all seasons, all times of day and with windows facing any direction. There are again – strangely enough - no figures available for New Zealand, but individual experience would indicate a similar massive problem.

There are 1,800,000 private dwellings in NZ. If we, for instance, assume that only 2,5% of them (mainly in NZ's 15 cities) belong to the tall category, we end up with 45,000. Multiply this figure with 2,000 and you have 90 million dead birds per year – the remainder of 1,755,000 buildings not even taken into account!

However, some birds more than others, seem to be susceptible to window strike. The New Zealand pigeon is a frequent casualty as well as the kingfisher and they are both native birds which environmentalists want to be protected from cats.

Conclusion:

see reflection # 7, similar problem. How many birds do actually survive the human impact? The question arises how many of them remain for cats to be killed, doesn't it? Or are we just looking for a scapegoat whom we can blame for our own failure?

Northland Regional Council for instance estimate that cats kill up to 100 million birds in New Zealand each year. If we compare this figure with the above mentioned we'll find that there is a remarkable and suspicious coincidence.

Reflection # 11: Other human related, disastrous effects on wildlife, cats can barely be blamed for:

Having survived ice-ages, numerous volcanic eruptions and huge earthquakes, our native species have endured some life-changing circumstances, but nothing has been more disruptive than the arrival of humans.

One major threat to the survival of our native species has been the human introduction of mammalian pests such as stoats, possums, rats and deer. ("Forest and Bird New Zealand"-website explicitly doesn't name cats!)

Other human-induced threats to our native wildlife include -

- felling of native forests for timber
- damming of lakes and rivers for hydro-electric development
- destruction and contamination of native habitats by mining, roading and other construction work
- clearing of native vegetation and draining of wetlands for farmland
- over-fishing and "by-catch" of marine mammals in our oceans
- run-off of fertiliser and effluent from agriculture in our waterways
- etc.

Conclusion:

The NCMSG's paper, ambitiously and rather bombastically called "Draft New Zealand National Cat Management Strategy – Strategic Implementation Consultation Document" claims to be based on scientific data. On page 24, under "The impact of cats on biodiversity" it specifies examples when the eradication of cats apparently only has had positive outcomes:

For instance:

- Once cats were removed from Mangere Island in the Chatham Islands, Forbes parakeet and white-faced storm petrels recolonised the island (New Zealand Department of Conservation 2001; Bell et al. 2003). Chatham Island snipe were successfully reintroduced from Rangatira Island (Dowding et al. 2001).

- The eradication of cats allowed tuatara to be successfully introduced to Motuihe Island in the Hauraki Gulf (New Zealand Department of Conservation 2016).

This is all very well and much appreciated. However, naming only cases which fit perfectly to the preferred view of how nature functions, is very unscientific and certainly insincere. The authors have, you see, just “forgotten” to mention the following, contrary example:

(from “New Scientist”, 14/01/2009)

“Good intentions have rarely gone so awry. When conservationists tried to save an island’s birds by culling its feral cat population, they overlooked one critical consequence: rabbits. A new study reveals that removing just 160 feral cats triggered a boom in Macquarie Island’s rabbit population from about 4000 in the year 2000 to 130,000 in 2006.

The rampant rabbits have since then devastated vegetation of over 40% of the island. Clearing up the mess is expected to cost at least \$24 million, and it remains unclear whether the island will ever fully recover. A landslide in 2006 that badly damaged a penguin colony has been blamed on rabbit destruction of the vegetation.

A World Heritage Site, the Macquarie Island case is a tragic demonstration of why agencies in charge of conservation need to analyse **all** aspects of an eradication programme. “We need a culture change,” says H. Possingham of the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. “It’s a generalisation, but people who do environmental work are often adverse to mathematics (sic!), and so avoid quantitative risk assessments.”

Reflection # 12: Other benefits wildlife receives from cats, or: How cats actually help prey animal species to survive.

- They kill other animals that cause harm to the biodiversity. See Macquary Island example. Often also rat populations rose exponentially where feral cats were eliminated. As stated above rats are notorious for eating bird eggs and nestlings, and as a result of being overrun by rats, bird populations not only on islands were decimated.
- They kill predominantly the weakest and slowest animals. By eating birds that don’t have the health and vitality to survive, or that lack the ability to camouflage themselves, cats help to assure that prey animal populations become stronger and more adapted to their environment. This circumstance is confirmed by most evolutionists.
- They make prey animals smarter. Prey animals that learn that cats are to be avoided teach this lesson to their offspring. Those that get the clue will survive, and therefore the population as a whole will become smarter and more likely to live to reproduce.
- They help to maintain the ecosystem. If prey populations rise too high, the impacts on the environment can be profound. See also Macquarie Island example.
- They increase biodiversity. Because predators are more likely to kill animals that have a higher population, they make room for other animals that fill the same ecological niche. Rodents and birds both eat worms, for example, but if the rodent population rises high enough to threaten the birds’ ability to eat, feral cats will come to the rescue: they’re much more likely to eat rats or mice since there are so many more of them and much easier to catch, therefore leaving more food for the birds.

Conclusion:

Bruce Kornreich, a feline health expert at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine, said removing cats could have unintended side effects for birds.

"It is undeniable that cats do prey on birds, and that in some cases this predation can have negative impacts on native bird populations," Kornreich said in a statement. "It is important to point out, however, that some studies have shown that birds are much more adaptable to predation than initially thought, and that, in fact, feline predation may impart a survival advantage to native bird populations by controlling rodent or other potential predator populations."

Reflection # 13: New Zealand has never been a predator-free country:

The Haast's Eagle for example is an extinct species that once lived in the South Island. It was the largest eagle known to have existed. Its massive size is explained as an evolutionary response to the size of its prey - the flightless moa, the largest of which could weigh 230 kg. Haast's eagle became extinct around 1400, after the moa were hunted to extinction by Maori.

Furthermore there were the Laughing Owl and Eyles's Harrier, both also extinct.

Today there are eight, perhaps even nine birds of prey (not counting Skuas and the Black Backed Gulls which rob eggs from other, ground nesting birds like the protected Dotterels!): The New Zealand Falcon, the Swamp Harrier and the Morepork Owl, which prey on **other birds, small animals, lizards, frogs, fish and insects and nobody would call them pests**. Wekas eat **lizards, eggs and the young of other groundnesting birds**. Kingfishers eat **fish, frogs and other amphibians, lizards, birds and little mammals and nobody would call them pests either**. And there are: The native Barn Owl, the Nankeen Kestrel and the Little Owl, which all feed on small birds, mice and insects and they neither **would be called pests**. **Although for example, the Weka can certainly become a nuisance**.

The Pukekos however, certainly are a pest, because they uproot seedlings, destroy crops and whole gardens. They are very territorial and aggressive and they also feed on **eggs, frogs, fish, chicks and small mammals**. In the past they even have been culled to protect threatened species, but today they are -strangely enough-protected because they are native birds.

Conclusion:

Freedom of predators is a hypocritical human vision which is meaningless in an evolutionary sense. Not only do we exclude ourselves from the consideration although we are the worst predators, but we also ignore the fact that predators are actually necessary to keep nature in balance.

Reflection # 14: The "strategy"- paper's contradiction between its envisaged outcome "There are no Stray Cats in New Zealand" and its explicit concession that "Cats also provide benefits to society as working cats...on farms":

How do cats work on farms? Contained and under a 24 hour or nightly curfew as suggested? To such an extent restricted, their "work" would certainly be made impossible. Any farm cat has to be free roaming, which implies of course at least a certain "stray effect." Moreover: Many farm cats are actually stray – in the term's true sense, as they only come "home" for their daily milk allowance, the odd treat and cuddling with the farmer's kids.

Conclusion:

As pointed out, this paper doesn't tackle its task as a program to solve the problem in a satisfactory, i.e. conclusive way.

Reflection # 15: On pages 21/22 of the “Strategy-Paper” 14 points are mentioned which suggest responsible cat-ownership. Most of them are based on pure illusion as the majority of ordinary people will not – not even after well meant advice -follow their implications.

- How many people would, for instance, think of “undertaking some advance preparation to ensure the cat's well-being in the case of an emergency or disaster, including assembling an evacuation kit” if they don't even think of themselves re such matter?
- How many people would ever consider “an alternative arrangement for the cat if for some reason it is no longer possible for the owner or carer to look after the cat” if they don't even make such arrangements for themselves in case they become disabled, but rather rely on their community?
- How many people would think about “adequate and appropriate socialisation, training, exercise and mental stimulation appropriate to the cat's age, breed and health status?” if they even neglect their own needs in those respects?
- How many people would really prevent their cats “from negatively impacting other people, animals and the environment”... in regards of “proper waste disposal, noise control...etc”, if they are indifferent to those issues themselves?

Conclusion:

As long as people don't even accept the necessary responsibilities for themselves, their families, their community, their country and environment, there will be never such an ambitiously responsible cat-ownership as requested. We must not forget: Many people are quite reluctant to learn.

Part 2: How to find a realistic way towards the desired natural balance

As explained, the ideas of the presented paper are not a strategy. They are at best wishful thinking, because they ignore important, but contradictory facts. However it can not be denied that NZ's nature with its wildlife and biodiversity has become badly balanced. But the impact of cats is certainly much less significant than especially the human one or the damage unquestionable pests like rodents and stoats do to it.

Of course, cats do kill birds and lizards. However, if there were no cats – the truth is that the status of many bird and reptile species would change to endangered, or they would even disappear all together.

It is true that flightless birds and ground nesting birds are especially prone to feline attacks. This is a particular issue in New Zealand, where so many species are flightless. However, cats or no cats – the most significant threat to birds are habitat loss and pollution.

If cats vanished, some bird population numbers would actually take a nosedive – which is the opposite of what you may think at first, or what bird supporters suggest. Rats and other vermin love to eat bird eggs and baby birds. Ground nesting and flightless birds would have no defense against what would then be an out-of-control rodent population, because it is an outright lie and preposterous thinking that man could ever control rat populations by himself.

See also in this context from “Stuff” (26/07/2016): “The Prime Minister's goal to rid New Zealand of predators could end up being a huge mistake,” says NZ First. “The lofty goal of making the country pest-free by 2050 is based on “unsubstantiated” claims, not science,” NZ First outdoor recreation spokesperson Richard Prosser said.

“No human society in history has succeeded in exterminating the rat, and it is highly unlikely that we will be the first,” he said.

The bottom line is that cats are an easy target. And as “anti cat” squawking has flourished in social media, cats as scapegoats have become an unfortunate fundraising tool for bird groups. Meanwhile, aside from unveiling exploitative misinformation (sometimes disguised as “science”), bird groups do nothing in the real world to help diminish feral cat numbers, such as participate and support trap, neuter, return (TNR) or assist with effective, unbiased ecological education.

The Animal Welfare Act classifies cats into 3 categories: Companion Cats, Stray Cats and Feral Cats. Seemingly there are no reliable figures available about the overall damage all cats in general do to New Zealand's wildlife. There are only unqualified estimates and claims. But there is scientifically well-founded evidence for the corresponding behaviour of single Companion and Stray Cats.

This is the question: How much killing does the average cat do? And just how damaging is it to our native birdlife?

One study, published in 2010, (“Seventeen years of predation by one suburban cat in New Zealand,” in: “New Zealand Journal of Zoology, 2007, Vol.34: 289-296”) looked at just that, and the results speak for themselves:

This study of itemising every piece of prey is a mammoth piece of work, but that’s exactly what Zoologist Dr John Flux did.

He lives on a suburban property in Lower Hutt and for almost two decades has recorded every animal caught by the family cat, Peng You.

- Of the 558 items caught over Pen You’s lifetime, 221 were mice.
- Then there were 63 rats, 35 rabbits, four hares and two weasels, quite a feat, since an intensive trapping program in the adjacent Belmont Regional Park failed to catch any!
- Over 17 years 223 birds were caught, but just 54 of them were natives. Of those natives, 43 were silvereyes, which are of little conservation concern.

Importantly the 63 rats caught by Peng You on the property outnumber all the native birds she caught, and each rat would have been capable of killing many more birds – meaning Peng You actually helped the local native bird population.

So, science tells us domestic cats do catch rodents and birds and lizards – but do they catch them in quantities that harm native populations?

Gareth Morgan, being a non-expert, says they do.

“Research shows cats catch an average of 15-20 prey items a year,” Mr Morgan says.

Mr Flux confirms this figure, but when we look at the details, it obtains a very different meaning, especially when he adds that the amount of wildlife on his property showed no apparent change over Pen You's 17 years, compared with the previous 15 years – when no cat was present.

Peng You, a well-fed, neutered female – died in 2005 and has since been replaced by another cat. Interestingly, although this cat isn't as good a hunter as Peng You, Mr Flux says their habits are similar.

Despite the presence of cats, Mr Flux says there is no shortage of wildlife on his property. This statement of a zoologist corresponds with the statements in above-mentioned reflections #1, 8 and 9. but not with Gareth Morgan's, an economist's view of natural balance. Dr. Flux also quotes a number of other studies to support his contention that keeping cats indoors at night is the completely wrong thing to do if we want to protect birdlife in our towns and cities. Cats catch rodents rather than birds at night and rodents are a much bigger threat to birds.

John Bradshaw, an anthrozoologist (BA, PhD, University of Bristol) says:

“All my cats have been given 24-hour access outdoors. The suburban area where I live has a large rat population (I see a rat most times I walk through the park nearby), and I have often seen my cats hunting and killing rats.

Our compost bins are rat-free, and I would rather have their numbers kept down by the cats than put out poison. Rats abound in towns and cities worldwide and are far-worse vectors of human disease than cats ever were or will be. Moreover, rats are predators themselves, and given their numbers are more of a threat to wildlife than are cats. Cats were domesticated primarily to keep mice and rats — man-made pests — at bay, and I have few qualms about allowing them to continue to do this where they can be useful.

I accept that there is collateral damage and that this is regrettable. Even though there is no evidence that outdoor pet cats affect the numbers of songbirds, I would still encourage cat owners to provide (cat-proof!) bird feeders and nesting boxes — but as much to compensate for the destruction of habitat caused by the creation of the plot on which their home stands than for the occasional kill that their cat makes.

“As far as I am aware, there has still been no convincing demonstration that confining pet cats indoors has any beneficial effect on wildlife populations. Pet cats are usually lazy surplus killers, only removing individual animals already weakened by disease, starvation or old age. It turns out, as long as a pet cat wasn't born feral or on a farm, it's probably a clumsy hunter. Birds and rodents usually zip away from its plodding, approach. "Obviously there's some deep ancestral memory of stalking prey," he says, "but a domesticated cat by itself is usually not a very good hunter."

Australian experiments with 24-hour cat-curfews which turned out to have minimal impacts, match this view.

On the other hand, feral cats doubtless have become a threat to New Zealand wildlife. Thus, the real issue is how best to manage feral cats, not whether to restrict pet cats indoors..

So, could this really be the better, since logical approach to solve the problem?

This question can certainly only be answered in context with the Government's goal of having the country predator-free by 2050. And there lies the next issue, which is probably the much bigger one: The people.

Dr Wayne Linklater (Associate Professor of Conservation Science and Director of the Centre for Biodiversity and Restoration Ecology at Victoria University) explained in the *Dominion Post*, 28 July 2016, why it's people, not pests, who represent the biggest challenge with the Government's plan to make New Zealand predator-free. Here excerpts from his commentary:

“You would think, reading this, and subsequent comments by conservationists, that Aotearoa was already people-free too. But we are not, of course. Most of our island nation is populated—urban and farmed landscapes where introduced predators also like to live.

Remarkable gains have been made in developing the techniques and tools to eradicate pests from increasingly large and remote areas: Campbell Island and the current eradication of mice from the Antipodes Islands being good examples.

And progress is accelerating thanks to advances in biological understanding over the last four decades by universities and research institutes.

The government model proposed is also timely. Several examples, like the NEXT Foundation-funded Zero Invasive Predators efforts on the Bottle Rock Peninsula, Queen Charlotte Sound, have proven that it can work, albeit for the moment at small scales.

But the places these success stories come from are places where people do not live or at least not in significant numbers. And a predator-free 2050 will require eradicating predators from peoples' farms and backyards, and preventing people from inadvertently or intentionally re-introducing them.

Increasingly, as recent efforts to make Stewart Island predator-free or neighbourhoods cat-free have found, the greatest challenge is not how to kill predators and defend landscapes from animal reinvasion. The most difficult problem is how to convince people that this is a worthwhile goal and to cooperate in it. That requires changing peoples' thinking and behaviour – a Herculean task.

It is common for conservationists to assume that their values are in the majority but this is not true. The zealot's naiveté that just because they believe so passionately in conservation that everyone else must do too, or could easily be convinced to, is all too common. In reality, most people don't care about conservation or, at least, they care much less about conservation than they care about other things. And, of course inevitably, some of those things that are important to them will conflict with the values and aspirations of conservationists.

Aotearoa is a diverse community. We are a nation of people with divergent values, beliefs and behaviours, even when it comes to the environment and conservation. Some people will want to trade in possum fur. Some will want to keep a cat. Some rats will be considered taonga. Some will want to hunt exotic wildlife and some don't like killing - period. And all these people will also be the neighbours of others who want to kill rats, cats and possums. It's the classic recipe for environmental conflict.

The conservation community of policy-makers, practitioners and researchers are largely unprepared for this societal challenge. I doubt the government received much advice from them with regard the human dimensions of the predator-free aspiration.

The ranks of social scientists in conservation organisations are transparently thin, although they will be the most critical to a predator-free New Zealand by 2050. It is not biologists and technologists that are now most needed to reach the predator-free goal, but people trained in the social sciences.

And, by social sciences, I do not mean the legions of marketing and communications experts. Even the best media and marketing campaign changes the thinking and behaviour of only a fraction of the population and, most often, only the already receptive. No, instead I mean people trained in the social sciences—psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists who know the science of how to engage with people and communities to build consensus, support and change human behaviour.

But we are naïve to think that conservation and conservationists are ready for the real and largest challenge that is yet to come and which no amount of biological or technological expertise can solve—the people problem.”

There we go. And it's even more than that. It's not only a people problem in the sense that they might not be able to follow suit. No, it is their numbers as being the worst predators and destroyers of our country's natural balance. In their wake are rats, mice and other pests, and where they are there will also always be cats. Managed ones and unmanaged ones.

So, why don't we then rather concentrate our efforts to make New Zealand predator-free first on vast areas where there is still no human population and get those under control? And should this mission be accomplished we could proceed further and even further, simultaneously and continuously educating people until we reach suburban and maybe later even urban areas. By then the country and its natural balance should have recovered considerably and such success would be explaining itself and motivate people to go even further if necessary.

Towns and their surrounding environment are not endangered by cats but by humans who have begun to displace most native wildlife long ago. These areas will never become a natural habitat again. So let's do the obvious and let's rather save nature where the exertions are still worthwhile and money can be spent with some hope for success.

Conservation Spokesperson Clayton Mitchell (NZ First) sees the situation exactly this way:

A predator-free New Zealand by 2050 is likely to cost trillions, not millions as the government claims, says he.

“The National government’s promise to make New Zealand predator-free for the bargain price of \$28 million is nothing but greenwashing,” says Conservation Spokesperson Clayton Mitchell.

“Zealandia, a predator free plant and bird sanctuary in Wellington, cost \$17 million to set up with an operating cost of \$867,000.

“Using these figures as a yardstick, the cost of keeping the entire country predator free and maintaining it would see a capital expenditure cost of \$1.67 trillion and an operating cost of \$91 billion per annum – as New Zealand is 98,000 times larger than Zealandia.

“The operating cost alone would be 40% of New Zealand’s GDP.

“According to the Conservation Minister, the private sector will be willing to share the burden with additional funding.

“The government’s targets are totally unrealistic.

“New Zealand First recognises that the preservation and enhancement of the environment requires sound economics.

“Unlike National we believe that we must set appropriate and realistic environmental goals,” says Mr Mitchell.

When these realistic goals have been achieved, like to get rid of feral cats, stoats, rats and possums in environmentally sensitive areas like wilderness, islands and natural reserves, we might even have found the ultimate solution for our companion and stray cats -at least in order to calm some zealots who just don't understand. The idea sounds quite futuristic, but, well, until 2050 there is still a long way to go anyway. It might be possible and could well become part of a real strategy: **Education of the people and make them more aware of what a balanced environment really means.**

We, with Northland Cats in Balance are happy to help and support any plans heading in this direction.