Name of petitioner
Ellie Stirling

Petition title
Managing the Cat Population in Scotland

Petition summary
Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the Code of Practice under the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 and to identify measures which could be introduced to control the soaring domestic cat population and protect the existence of the Scottish wildcat.

Action taken to resolve issues of concern before submitting the petition
I have written to the Scottish Government/ Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, the Cross-Party Group on Animal Welfare, my Regional MSPs and have also discussed with my own constituency MSP.

Petition background information

Legislative context
In Scotland, all cats of the domestic species are considered as a non-native species (NNS) under the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011. It is a strict liability offence to keep, release or allow a NNS to be out-with its native range where it cannot be constrained from free movements into a new area. The purpose is to protect native species of animals (and plants) from the negative impact of having territory and/or food resources taken over by non-native species that are not under human control. Currently the Non-Native Species Code of Practice (2012 s4) and SNH Guidance Notice: Native Range (2014 s3.1) consider owned free-roaming cats to be under human control if they are 'expected to return' to their owners without any definition of interval, frequency or impact on the environment. Owners of un-neutered cats have no control over where they go, or their reproductive and resource impacts, resulting in un-controlled colonisation and predation on native wildlife species or competition with them for food resources.

Currently, there is no clear means of defining cat ownership. There is no requirement for owned cats to be microchipped, registered or neutered. The proportion of owners who do not microchip or neuter their cats is higher in Scotland than the UK average.

The current situation is that ownership and degree of control are ill-defined and open to interpretation. As a result, efforts to manage the domestic cat over-population and
assist the conservation of the Scottish wildcat are seriously hindered. At present, neutering of stray cats is held up because ownership cannot be identified and colonisation takes hold.

Own Experience
Having undertaken humane trapping for neutering of over 4,000 feral cats I have witnessed at first hand the extensive colonisation of the environment by stray and abandoned pet cats which endure atrocious conditions, disease, injuries and unspeakable deaths.

A new approach is required
Management of the cat population has been by prominent appeals to owners for voluntary neutering of their cats. Virtually free ‘Snip and Chip’ programmes are available. Veterinary professionals, charities, and the Scottish Government Code of Practice for the Welfare of Cats associated with the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act (2006) recommend routine neutering, vaccination and microchipping cats. This approach has had nearly a century to work but still a minority of owners keep their cats un-neutered. This is a serious problem as they produce large numbers of kittens at a time when available homes are decreasing, resulting in an influx of cats into the already extensive stray and feral cat populations where their high reproductive rate quickly adds to the extending cat population. The voluntary approach has gone as far as it can go. Shooting and other forms of killing of cats has been practiced for centuries but there are more cats than ever. There is evidence that killing cats can have a limited term local impact on numbers but new cats move in to occupy the vacant territory and super-survivors breed making further colonisation more likely. A new approach is needed with immediate impact if a tipping point into environmental disaster is to be prevented.

Cat population statistics
There are ~11 million pet cats in the UK, about .88 million of those in Scotland. The UK already has a feral cat population of ~1.5 million, about .4 million of those in Scotland. In surveys carried out by pet organizations 13% of owners admit to keeping their cat un-neutered in Scotland though this is an under-estimate. Assuming just 1 litter a year the result is 286,000 new cats joining the population each year, and the pet cat population increasing by a factor of X 2.3 every four years. If we estimate 17% of owned cats are un-neutered (more realistic), the result is 374,000 new cats joining the population each year, and the pet cat population increasing by a factor of X 2.7 every four years. Even with 1% of owned cats un-neutered, the result is 22,000 new cats joining the population each year, and the pet cat population increasing by 10% every four years. These estimates ignore offspring reproduction and assume 50% kitten mortality so the actual volume of cats flowing into the environment to colonize un-controllably and compete with wildlife is higher.

Risks if we do not turn off the tap
We can expect to experience the kind of disasters suffered by Australia (where compulsory neutering was introduced only after the cat population had taken over territory and wildlife had been eradicated) and the USA (where kill shelters for pets are the norm). To allow the domestic cat colonisation of the environment to extend further will only lead to even worse problems in the near future, and will give traction to voices that call for lethal methods of control which are deeply unpopular. Hybridization with domestic cats and feline infectious diseases will continue to pose significant threats to the existence of the endangered Scottish wildcat in perpetuity, with associated costs.

Through the Code of Practice/ Native Range Guidance associated with the 2011 Act I would like to see the following:
1. A neutered cat to be defined as ‘under human control’ and exempt from NNS legislation (an un-neutered cat defined as high risk for un-controlled colonisation and a high degree of invasive potential).
2. All owned cats to be neutered, microchipped, and registered. The responsibility and cost to be borne by the owner.
3. A licensed exemption scheme to allow responsible breeding of owned cats by an appropriate person. Licence conditions requiring kittens to be neutered at no older than
4 months of age with the cost borne by the breeder.
4. Feral cats to be identified by an ear-tip at the time of neutering.
5. Timing: given the high reproductive rate of the cat population, speedy consideration is key to making an effective positive impact, while delay would mean losing the opportunity to gain control with potentially catastrophic consequences and costs.

Positive outcomes
Tens of thousands of cats and kittens will be prevented from having to endure atrocious welfare conditions. With one ‘rule’ that applies equally to all cat owners across the country, having one’s cat neutered and microchipped will become normative and accepted. The majority of people will support progressive measures that mean the number of cats in distress goes down. People will benefit from an end to the repeated colonisation by stray cats and their offspring of farm and industrial sites, where they pose disease risks to human and animal health including toxoplasmosis, bovine TB and cat infectious diseases. Essential ecosystems including populations of small mammals, amphibians and birds will be protected. Scottish wildcats, whether existing or introduced from breeding programmes, will have a restored extensive environment free from breeding competition from reproductively competent domestic cats.

Unique web address
http://www.parliament.scot/GettingInvolved/Petitions/scottishcatpopulation

Related information for petition
PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) / YouGov Report 2015

PFMA Cat Population Detail 2016
http://www.pfma.org.uk/cat-population-2016

Chris Bradley, The Mirror 2 April 2014
http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/rspca-full-cat-crisis-charity-3341187

Feline Advisory Bureau, Feral Cat Manual 2006

Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust

Do you wish your petition to be hosted on the Parliament’s website to collect signatures online?
YES

How many signatures have you collected so far?
500

Closing date for collecting signatures online
Comments to stimulate online discussion

What do you think about the proposal to help cat owners ensure that their cats are chipped and neutered?

What opportunities do you think this could open up for breeders, in terms of training and licensing?

What potential benefits do you think this can provide to animal welfare charities, if they are able to redistribute time and resources from cat neutering?