Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: PE01674

Main Petitioner: Ellie Stirling

Subject: Managing the Cat Population in Scotland

Calls on the 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.

The Scottish Wildcat

The Scottish wildcat, Felis silvestris, is the only remaining native member of the cat family in Britain. It is one of Scotland’s most endangered mammals, and according to Scottish Wildcat Action they “are on the edge of extinction”. In December 2016 Roseanna Cunningham, Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, said “fewer than 300 wildcats [are] thought to exist in the wild.” The map below is taken from the Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan and shows records of probable wildcat sightings from a 2006-2008 survey.

The high number of domestic and feral cats is thought to be directly linked to the low Scottish wildcat population. Hybridisation with feral or domestic cats – which are classified as non-native species (NNS) – is believed to be the most significant issue facing the Scottish wildcat. This is when two different species mate and produce kittens who receive half their genes from one parent and half from the other. Hybridisation increases where there are high densities of domestic and feral cats and when there are not enough suitable habitats (Scottish Natural Heritage).

Contact with domestic and feral cats can expose the Scottish wildcat to diseases to which it has no immunity.
Other risks to the Scottish wildcat include mortality, disease, and habitat loss and fragmentation.

**Domestic Cat Population**

Domestic cats originate from African wildcats, a separate sub-species from the Scottish wildcat. In response to PQ S5W-21151 from Alex Cole-Hamilton on 30 Aug 2017 Roseanna Cunningham stated “The Scottish Government is unaware of any historic long-term data on domestic cats of sufficient quality to allow assessment of population trends”.

With that caveat, the Pet Food Manufacturers’ Association (PFMA), 2017 estimates that 15% of people living in Scotland own cats. PFMA indicates that there are around 430,000 cats in Scotland. The PFMA does not provide time series data for the cat population for Scotland, but for the UK as a whole, their data shows that the domesticated cat population has remained fairly static.

**Feral Cat Population**

According to Scottish Wildcat Action feral cats are domestic cats that are living wild, either because they were unwanted kittens that were abandoned, or they have dispersed from farms. They state “it is estimated that there are a minimum of 813,000 feral cats in the UK …although welfare charity, Cats Protection, believe this to be more like 1.5 million.”

**Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act**

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (WCA) protects wild animals and birds. It is amended by the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 which inserts new sections about codes of practice related to non-native species.

The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 inserts the following into the WCA:

> “Any person who releases, or allows to escape from captivity, any animal to a place outwith its native range; or of a type the Scottish Ministers, by order, specify; or otherwise causes any animal outwith the control of any person to be at a place outwith its native range, is guilty of an offence”

**Code of practice on Non Native Species**

The Code of practice on Non Native Species was issued by the Scottish Government under section 14C of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Failure to comply with the Code is not itself an offence. However, whether or not a person has complied with the Code could be used in court as evidence by either the prosecution or the defence, if criminal proceedings are raised.

The Code sets out guidance on how people should act responsibly within the law to ensure that non-native species under their ownership, care and
management do not cause harm to the environment. List 1 of the code is about “Circumstances in which a type of animal is not considered to be released.” Pet cats are mentioned –

“Dogs and cats that are released off the lead or out of the house for exercise or to perform working duties (such as sheepdogs) are not, for the purposes of this legislation, considered to be released by their owner even though no longer under physical control. They are expected to return and are dependent on their owner for food and other requirements. Therefore, they are not being released for the purpose of section 14(1)(a) of the 1981 Act.

The release of unwanted dogs and cats, with no intention of retrieval, is an unlawful release for the purposes of section 14(1)(a) of the 1981 Act. Note that in this case, offences relating to abandonment may also be committed under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 – see the Annex to the Code.”

Scottish Government Action

The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Report to Parliament 2011-2013 states that the Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan was introduced in September 2013, aiming to restore viable populations of the Scottish wildcat north of the highland border by 2019. Scottish Natural Heritage co-ordinate the plan delivery and the Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Group deliver the action.

On 23 December 2016 Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Roseanna Cunningham, referred to two aspects of the Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan: to maintain and preserve wildcat priority areas for example with the Trap, Neuter, Vaccinate and Return initiative, which aims to limit the number of feral cats interbreeding with wildcats; and to breed pure wildcats for release.

Scottish Parliament Action

Parliamentary questions have been asked about the Scottish wildcat.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (S5W-10623) asked - what information the Scottish Government gathers on the number of domestic cats in Scotland, and what impact reported increases in this number will have on (a) pet cats and (b) the long-term future of the Scottish wildcat.

Roseanna Cunningham (30 Aug 2017) answered: Free-ranging domestic cat numbers are being monitored in wildcat priority areas through survey work conducted by Scottish Wildcat Action. This survey work is too recent to establish whether there have been changes in the domestic cat populations in those areas. The Scottish Government is unaware of any historic long-term data on domestic cats of sufficient quality to allow assessment of population trends in Scotland and it is difficult to predict what effect an increased domestic cat population would have on [wild] cats.
One of the main threats to Scottish wildcats is hybridisation with domestic cats, with survey work and genetic analysis confirming widespread hybridisation. An increase in the domestic cat population within the range of the wildcat could result in a corresponding increase in the risk of further hybridisation with wildcats.

Liam McArthur (S5W-10320) asked what action it is taking to protect the wildcat population, and what analysis it has carried out of the impact on the species of domestic cat overpopulation.

Roseanna Cunningham (02 Aug 2017) replied: The Scottish Government supports, and works closely with, the partner organisations who are helping to implement the Scottish Wildcat Action Plan. This is a five year project that aims to restore viable populations of wildcat north of the Highland fault line. So far, this work has focussed on six Priority Areas and has included intensive camera trapping surveys, a first season of ‘Trap Neuter Vaccinate Release’ (TNVR) of feral cats and hybrid cats, the 'Supercat' campaign to promote responsible cat-ownership, and engagement with land managers to improve land management practices in relation to wildcats. Some of the partners are also working on a captive conservation programme, using Scottish Wildcats from collections across Britain.

Analyses show that the main threat to wildcats is hybridisation from feral and domestic cats. Survey work undertaken by the University of Oxford and recent monitoring work under the Scottish Wildcat Action Plan has established that feral and domestic cat populations can be extensive across the wildcat range and within the Priority Areas. These results have been confirmed by initial genetic analyses by the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland.

Liam McArthur (S5W-10322) asked the Scottish Government what its position is on the compulsory (a) neutering, (b) microchipping and (c) registration of all domestic cats, and what analysis it has carried out of the impact that this would have in controlling overpopulation.

Roseanna Cunningham (27 Jul 2017) replied: The Scottish Government Code of Practice for the Welfare of Cats recommends that all cat owners should consider neutering and microchipping (involving registration) their pets as the best way of being reunited with them should they be separated. We do not currently consider these actions should be compulsory for cats.

The Scottish Government has not carried out analysis on the impact of these in managing the population of domestic cats.

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SPICe
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