

# Feral cats in Australia

## Felicitous felicide to save the numbat and other native mammals, Australia culls cats

<http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21688436-save-numbat-and-other-native-mammals-australia-culls-cats-felicitous-felicide>

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MOST Australians have heard of wombats, but few could place the numbat. Both marsupials are among 315 mammal species that roamed Australia at the time of the first European settlement in the late 18th century. The wombat has thrived. The smaller numbat, once widespread, clings on in only a few colonies in Western Australia. There it is listed as endangered, because of predation by feral cats. At least it survives. Australia has one of the world's highest rates of mammal extinctions—29 have been recorded over more than two centuries. Feral cats are reckoned to be culprits in 27 of

those disappearances: among them the desert bandicoot, the crescent nailtail wallaby and the large-eared hopping mouse.

Cats probably arrived in Australia on British ships carrying convicts. Unlike the convicts, their descendants have grown wilder and more menacing. The feral-cat population today is estimated at between 4m and 20m, most of them prowling outback habitats. They are often huge, weighing 15 kilograms. And they eat perhaps 75m Australian animals a day.

A parliamentary inquiry and a scientific report on mammals called for governments to step in. Last year Greg Hunt, the federal environment minister, launched a “threatened species strategy” to stop mammals’ decline. Fire, loss of habitat and foxes, another alien predator, have played a part. But, Mr Hunt says, feral cats are “the number-one killers”.

Ten cat-free sanctuaries are planned across Australia over the next four years. The Australian Wildlife Conservancy, an NGO, is to start fencing 650 square kilometres (250 square miles) in April to create the biggest one at Newhaven, in the desert in Northern Territory. Atticus Fleming, the outfit’s head, calls this region the “epicentre of the extinction crisis”. His colleagues aim to reintroduce several threatened mammals there, including the mala, a winsome creature resembling a tiny wallaby, which disappeared from mainland Australia 25 years ago. The project will also give jobs to the local Ngalia Warlpiri aboriginal clan. Its senior women, says Mr Fleming, are “extremely good cat hunters”.

The government wants 2m feral cats culled across Australia by 2020. It is funding trials on cat-specific baits, as well as an app allowing humans who venture into the outback to report cat sightings. Mr Hunt insists the baits would work “humanely”. If they eventually killed even half the cat population, “it would be the most important action for Australian wildlife in 100 years.”

The planned felicide has greatly upset some cat people, notably Brigitte Bardot, a French former sex goddess, and Morrissey, a miserable British singer. But conservationists say killing cats and fencing enclosures have already saved several species from extinction, including the Gilbert’s potoroo in Western Australia and the bridled nailtail wallaby in New South Wales. Mr Fleming admits an Australia free of feral cats is a long way off: “But the fence strategy can buy time until a silver bullet is found.”