The ecology of feral cats (*Felis catus*) on a New Zealand offshore island: Considerations for management

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

in

**Zoology**

at Massey University, Manawatu,

New Zealand.

Kathryn Emily Strang
2018
There is a predator within me
One that craves to stalk you
My neverending prey
For with you I have
The thrill of the hunt
In the night and in the jungle
Feel my roar vibrate through your bones
And know me to be a beast
Aggressively marking you as my territory
Claws that dig into your fur
Canines that linger in your warmth
And this is the beginning
Of our wild hunt

Poem by Cheyenne Raine (www.rainepoetry.com) and artwork by Lucy Newton.
Abstract

Invasive species have contributed to the global biodiversity crisis, with the majority of recent-day terrestrial vertebrate extinctions implicating invasive predators. Domestic cats (*Felis catus*), particularly feral cats, are among the main culprits. In New Zealand, the continued decline of native species is largely due to invasive predators, which has led conservation efforts to focus on pest management. Feral cats are often a secondary focus for pest control, and their impacts within an ecosystem are not well understood. The main objective of this study was to produce a comprehensive study of feral cat ecology using a population of feral cats on Ponui Island, New Zealand, and highlight factors that should be considered for efficient control operations.

Predators distribute themselves and move within their environment in relation to prey availability and habitat type. These factors vary between locations, leading to differences in home range sizes that are difficult to predict. A relationship between home range size and population density was identified in the literature, which I used to predict changes in home range size with changing population density. I mapped the home ranges of eight cats for one year using location points from Very High Frequency (VHF) radio-telemetry and camera traps, then two males were removed from the population, seven months apart. The first removal resulted in an increase in the home range sizes of the remaining cats, whereas the second removal saw an invasion of four unmarked male cats. These results show that feral cats change their home ranges accordingly with changes in density, and removals (such as control operations) result in a change in feral cat ranging behaviour.

Feral cats are often live-trapped during control programmes to reduce capturing non-target animals. This technique is labour intensive because traps need to be checked frequently for welfare purposes. Describing feral cat activity patterns can dictate when live-traps should be set and checked. Camera traps have recently been used to estimate activity patterns, but have yet to be validated against accelerometry devices. Therefore, I compared the activity patterns obtained through camera trap data to that from collar-mounted accelerometry devices, and found a high correlation ($R^2 > 0.9$) between the two methods. The highest correlation was when activity from 600 or more videos was used. Feral cats were most active between sunset and sunrise, and live-traps should be set during these times to increase trapping efficiency and reduce bycatch.

The reproductive biology of invasive predators can be used to predict the recovery of populations following control operations, however there is very little information available for...
feral cats. Therefore, I investigated the reproduction of feral cats in a stable, insular population. Using camera trap data, I found that females had high reproductive output, averaging three kittens per litter and two litters per year. However, the recruitment rate was low in this population; only 3-4% of kittens survived to one-year-old. There were two infanticide events observed; the first reported for solitary-living feral cats. Females moved shorter distances when they had young kittens (less than seven-weeks-old). These results show that feral cats can rapidly recover from control operations. Females are less likely to encounter traps when they have young kittens, suggesting there are optimal seasons to capture cats.

Population genetics is used in invasive biology to identify populations that are isolated and have limited immigration. Eradication of isolated populations will be easier and more cost-efficient, with low chances of reinvasion. Although offshore islands are geographically isolated, there is the chance of reinvasion that is assisted by humans. I investigated the population genetics of the feral cats on Ponui Island using genetic samples collected from adults and kittens, and also opportunistically studied parentage. Most of the fathers of the litters were the heaviest males, and the males that had the most home range overlap with queens. Population genetics showed that the cats have most likely been isolated with no recent introductions, suggesting the removal of cats from this island would be successful with low chances of reinvasion.

Feral cats can have large impacts on native species, but prey on rats that also have detrimental effects on wildlife. This led me to investigate the diet of feral cats using scat analysis on an island with native birdlife, and rodents at high densities. I examined season and sex differences on diet and the impacts of cats on native species. Feral cats consumed prey based on seasonal availability, with cats eating rats when rats were at their highest density. Females ate smaller prey more frequently than males, such as passerines. The cats on this island are not reliant on the rat population, and were found to eat many native species such as brown kiwi, morepork, and fantails.

The findings from this thesis can be applied to feral cat management to develop efficient control operations. The decision to control a population should be based on both dietary and genetic data to reduce possible cascading ecological effects from the predator removal and identify genetically isolated populations. Home range, activity, and diet data can be used to determine the control protocol, such as; trap spacing, the time traps should be set and checked, and if secondary or primary poisoning should be used and the seasons that cats would uptake the baits. Finally, knowledge of feral cat reproduction can be used to predict the recovery of the population.
Acknowledgements

My supervisors, Isabel Castro, Murray Potter, and Nick Cave. Isabel, I guess this journey started because of you. I had been applying for PhDs overseas when you invited me on a trip to Ponui, got me talking to the Chamberlins about the feral cats, and convinced me to apply for funding at Massey. I see what you did there... I appreciate you encouraging me to take every opportunity that came my way, not only for my PhD. Often, I felt like it would have been easier to herd cats than what it was to get all of you in one room at the same time, but the great ideas talked about in these meetings was worth it. I appreciate you all taking on this project and I feel like everyone had a different expertise to offer that moulded this thesis into what it is.

Kristene Gedye, you were basically my genetics supervisor. Thank you for holding my hand throughout all of my lab work. For teaching me so much about genetics, coming up with new ways that we could extract DNA (in a simple and cheap way), and boosting my spirits when the PCR gods really didn’t like me. I learnt a lot of things from you, and I really appreciate all of the new skills I have.

Steve Trewick, thank you for giving me a very quick crash course on population genetics. Chapter 5 would not have been the same without your input. Thank you for reading through the drafts to make sure I knew what I was talking about!

My sincere thanks goes to all of the volunteers and interns who helped me in the field. Aden and Sarah, thank you so much for all of your hard work. Your company out on Ponui was amazing, as well as binge watching Friends and Game of Thrones at night. I appreciate the many sleepless nights trapping, walking endless kilometres to find cats, sorting through the massive dataset that was our camera trap data, and sorting through cat scats and pitfalls in the lab. Cecilia, thank you for coming out and helping me rebait traps and keeping me company in the field. Warren, thank you for sorting through cat scats. It really helped me with being able to finally sort through the mountain of scats that awaited me after finishing field work.

To the Rawhiti guys, Inge and John, Tom Dixon, Alex Wilson, and Alex Brighton; I have loved your company every catch week. I appreciated you all coming out to help me check traps during my first week trapping. Rana, thank you for lending me traps, running around the island after the pit tag reader, and for your quick hands when Tigger refused to go into the crush cage. Inge, you taught me so much during that first week of trapping. I never would have gained the confidence to anaesthetise feral cats without you being there that first time. John, you also ran around for
me checking traps, and even brought us hot chocolate all the way up to Road trap on a long, miserable night trapping. Maria, I owe you a lot. You enthusiastically took over the position from Inge of accompanying me out on trapping nights. Your vet knowledge is incredible, and I will forever appreciate you being on call for me, and for looking after Shadow.

To the Chamberlins, words cannot express my gratitude. None of this would have been possible without you guys. Thank you for welcoming me and sharing your amazing island and farm with me. Ponui is absolutely one of my favourite places in the world. Thank you for letting me borrow vehicles when I was trapping, for the many barge and boats trips, the impromptu trips to Rotoroa Island, teaching me about sheep farming, all the fruit from the orchard (especially the wheeny grapefruit!), collecting dead cats for me whenever you came across them on the farm, and most of all, your company.

Maurice Alley, thank you for teaching me so much about post-mortems, and for not laughing at me when I brought you bones and asked you what it died from. You are quite the investigator, and I enjoyed piecing together the puzzle with you for both the kiwi and cat post-mortems.

To all those people who helped in what may seem like small but were very important ways. Ellen Schoener, Kim Singleton and the Wilson family, thank you for honouring my unusual request to be sent some of your cat’s hairs for the genetic sampling. Paul, Tracy, Shaun, Cleland, Sharon, and Sandra, thank you for making it easier to get things done for this PhD. For mending equipment, building antennas, and ordering endless amounts of batteries. The Ecology Group would be lost without you. To the Waikato DOC office in Rotorua and the Palmerston North City Council, thank you for lending me traps. Thanks goes to Phil and Katie for helping me identify the munched up feathers that I found in cat scats. Keren Dittmer, for letting me use your lab for all of my genetic work, and checking up on me when I was working late nights in the lab. Anastasia, for helping Kristene and I grind up the bone samples for the genetic work. Lee Shapiro, thank you for the initial advice on setting up the trapping programme for the feral cats on the island and for all of the advice on baiting and also collaring the cats. To the girls at the Feline Unit; thanks for the many coffees, the kitten cuddles, for lending me data, and letting me store my anaesthetic.

To the Ponui team, enjoy! Good luck for your postgrad studies, and thank you for all of the trips that we shared together on Ponui. Thanks especially to Tom and Alex who taught me so much about the island when I was just a newbie.
To my friends, my office mates, and the Ecology Group, I could not think of better people to go through this with. Thank you for all of the support, the lunches at 12pm on the dot, the movie and Game of Thrones nights, and the parties when we really needed them. Nina, the weekly pints before pilates really saved me (for both my PhD and pilates)! Yvonne, the endless coffees at uni and de-briefs, and just lending an ear when it was a bad health week. Nicki, Katie, and Emily, you know everything that you have done for me; the surprise trips, Mean Girl movie nights, and the very weird but so much fun Spice Girl night, to name a few. Thank you for it all.

My family, thank you for all of the support. Thank you Mum and Dad for instilling hard-working values into me throughout my life, it certainly helped prepare me for the long days in the field, lab and office. Thanks for the petrol and food top-ups on my way through to either Ponui or back down to Palmy. And most of all, thanks for taking an interest in the feral cats on Ponui every time I called in.

My thanks goes to those who saw the value in my research on an underestimated invasive predator: Massey University Doctoral Scholarship, Julie Alley Bursary, JP Skipworth (Ecology) Scholarship, Ecology Bursary, NZVA Wildlife Society Marion Cunningham Memorial Fund, Freemasons Postgraduate Scholarship, Australasian Wildlife Management Society Postgraduate Student Award, Lovell & Berys Clark Scholarship, and Massey University Doctoral Completion Grant.

This thesis was not possible without the help of so many people, and a huge amount of effort went into this (summarised in the table below). Cats are not always easy to track, and unorthodox methods were used at times, such as the top of the barge. Results from this thesis have been presented at numerous conferences, which is summarised in Appendix A.

| Days spent on Ponui from 2014-2018 | 375 |
| No. of boat trips to Ponui | 43 |
| Kilometres driven between Palmerston North and Kawakawa Bay | 42570 (559 hours) |
| Kilometres of transect walked | 924 |
| Sleepless nights trapping | 24 |
| No. of camera trap videos | 174571 |
| Hours of camera trap footage | 1454 (60 days) |
| Hours spent sifting and IDing cat scats | 325 |
| PCRs run | 2589 |
| PCRs rerun (because the PCR gods failed me) | 975 |
| No. coffees drunk during PhD | ~5200 |
| No. muesli bars eaten in the field (they are a lifeline) | ~774 |
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