

INT08/62845
2006/04323

NSW DEPARTMENT OF PRIMARY INDUSTRIES

Reports of large black cats in NSW

Introduction

For more than 100 years reports have been made of large cat-like animals living freely within NSW. Some of the historical reports include the 'Emmaville panther', the 'Kangaroo Valley' panther and the 'Grampians puma'. Claims of a large black cat living freely in NSW have arisen because people persistently (albeit infrequently) see and report:

1. animals whose identity remains to be established; or
2. animals belonging to a known species – such as domestic cats *Felis catus*

For the last decade NSW Department of Primary Industries (NSW DPI) has received reports of large unidentified cat-like animals. Recently areas west of Sydney that accommodate zones of bushland and National Park estate, have generated attention due to reports of large cat-like animals being sighted within the environment. The sightings have been reported from Lithgow in the west, Turill in the north and Yerranderie in the south. Reports have also been received as far south as Adaminaby and, occasional sightings at Cooma.

In 2003 NSW Agriculture produced a report on black cat sightings within the Blue Mountains area of NSW. The report considered: discussions with staff of organisations such as NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Rural Lands Protection Board (now the Livestock Health and Pest Authority); the opinions of available evidence by an expert panel; a database of large cat sightings collected from a community based organisation set up to receive sighting reports; reports of predation, scratches on trees, casts of footprints and faecal, fur and hair samples. The report however concluded that none of the available evidence conclusively proved the presence of free-ranging exotic large cats in NSW.

Social Impacts

Media reports covering 'black cat' sightings have proliferated over the last 10 years, particularly in north-west Sydney newspapers and on radio broadcasts. The media coverage has assisted in making the wider-community aware of the 'black cat' phenomenon. Many community members who believe there is a large cat-like animal or claim to have sighted the animal express fear and concern over the potential for the animal to attack people or animals within their community. Some members of the community claim that there have been stock losses, (horses, cattle and sheep) as a direct result of predation by a large cat. Domestic pets (dogs, cats and chooks) have also allegedly been maimed or killed by the cat.

Role of NSW Government

area has indicated a strong expectation that NSW government has a responsibility to resolve the community's concerns regarding the black cat phenomenon. Many National Parks exist in close proximity to where the large cat sightings have been made. Consequently the has identified the National Park estate as providing habitat to support the long-term survival of a large cat-like

INT08/62845
2006/04323

animal. The [redacted] has questioned the roles of government departments, suggesting that the Department of Environment and Climate Change and NSW DPI should take effective action regarding large black cat sightings.

Arrangements in place to make reports of large-cat sightings

NSW DPI met with the community group from the [redacted] area to consider the group's concerns with the increasing number of large cat sightings in the area and the potential threat posed to the public by such an animal. NSW DPI proffered to collect and collate information about animal sightings and other events related to this matter. To this end the Department published an 'unidentified animal reporting form' on its external website and produced a document entitled 'black cat' identification. The document was developed to assist with determining what the unidentified animal might be and provide a guide to collecting evidence of the animal. The 'unidentified-animal' report form and the 'black cat' identification guide can be found at the following webpage: <http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/agriculture/pests-weeds/vertebrate-pests>

In addition to the NSW DPI reporting form, people wishing to make a report of 'unidentified-animals' are able to continue contacting the [redacted] to provide their information. The [redacted] have collected about 335 reports of sightings over a 10 year period.

Eyewitness testimony

For many years eyewitness descriptions of large cats have been collected by community groups such as the [redacted] and through the NSW DPI Unidentified Animal Report Form. Sightings have also been reported to NSW Police, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Moss Vale Rural Lands Protection Board and NSW DPI. These sightings range from distant glimpses to close encounters. Other claims include large scratches on trees and instances where goat and sheep carcasses were found in trees.

The most common description of the unidentified animal is of a large-cat like animal of a similar size to a large dog and the colour is almost always described as grey or black. However by themselves, the eyewitness reports are not a reliable scientific resource.

Accumulation of Evidence

Objective evidence including film, photographs, casts of footprints, faeces for DNA analysis and fur and hair samples for analysis has been provided to assist with identifying the source of the unidentified animal reports, however none of the evidence conclusively proves the presence of free ranging - large cats. Further examples of evidence reported include:

- Claims that there have been numerous attacks on livestock, peacocks and wallabies. In most cases it has not been possible to determine what predator actually attacked the livestock and wildlife but there is no evidence that the damage was caused by an exotic cat.
- A number of trees with large scratch marks on them have been photographed. Similar scratches have been seen on galvanised iron on a shed at [redacted] and in the New England area of NSW. It has been postulated that the scratches were made by a large cat however there is no evidence to support this theory.

INT08/62845
2006/04323

- Numerous photographs and some plaster casts have been taken of paw-like prints in mud and sand and also on concrete and other hard surfaces. Some of the paw prints have been found to be consistent with those of a medium sized cat. However none of the evidence provides conclusive evidence of the existence of a large-cat and the most likely origin of the prints is from dog paws.
- NSW DPI and the [redacted] have sent a number of hair, saliva and faecal samples to recognised Australian experts for identification. None of the analysis results have indicated cats as the origin of the samples.
- A group of experts was convened by NSW DPI to consider video footage of a large black cat filmed at Lithgow. The group concluded that the animal filmed was a very large feral cat, two to three times normal size. This was based on the profile of the animal and the shape of its head and ears. It was sitting very close to a large but obviously normal sized domestic cat. The group considered that a domestic cat would not be in such close proximity to a leopard or puma.

Other theories on the animal's identity

A number of theories have been postulated as to the identity of the unidentified animal/s. At times and under certain conditions many common animals may be confused with a large black cat such as a panther or black leopard. These include breeds of large dogs, swamp wallabies and large domestic /feral cats. Domestic cats normally range in weight between 2.5 and 7kgs but can range in weight up to 16 kg.

Conclusion

NSW DPI has continued to collect information on possible large black cat sightings since 2003 when the last review was undertaken.

Whilst information has been provided there is still nothing to conclusively say that a large black cat exists.

Recommendation

- NSW DPI should continue to collect reports of 'unidentified animals' through the NSW DPI public website. The report forms should be analysed for possible existence of large black cats.
- If compelling evidence is presented that indicates a large black cat exists within NSW, consideration may be given to forming a whole-of-government taskforce to examine future options for handling this issue.

Update Report - existence of large black cat in the wild

Issue:

Update report on the existence of a large black cat in the wild.

[Signature] 30.12.06

Executive Contact: Nick Austin
Secondary Contact: Graeme Eggleston

6391 3307 Mob 0429 650 275
6391 3683 Mob 0427 102 267

Director-General

[Signature]

8.1.9.

Minister, this matter was raised

Departmental Liaison Officer

[Signature] 16.1.09

to the Premier shortly after he took

office, and his office may be

Policy Advisor

[Signature]
3/7/09

interested in receiving a copy of

the report

[Signature] 8.1.9.

MINISTER

→ for filing, pls.

→ ~~D PHESSO~~

→ DEWPA 115109

→ MVP

NSW DPI – ABMS**Ministerial Briefing****Update Report - existence of large black cat in the wild**

Issue:

Update report on the existence of a large black cat in the wild.

Background:

Over the last 10 years there have been a number of reports from the public referring to the existence of a large black cat mainly in the area. An initial report investigating alleged sightings of this animal was forwarded to the Minister of the day in 2003.

Due to recent increased interest in the possible occurrence of such an animal the Minister's office requested that NSW DPI undertake a fresh review of all available information and some possible options for how this issue is handled in the future.

Comment:

The Office of the Premier has shown interest in this issue recently and may request a copy of the report.

Recommendation:

The Minister notes this Brief.