

Compromised Care

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The concept of population runs through conservation biology. I am curious about what can be gained by thinking critically of what work the idea of “population” does in relation to invasive species control. Social scientists interested in the social and cultural dimensions of invasive species have devoted significant attention to problematizing other taken-for-granted concepts in conservation biology—for instance, the native/introduced binary generates discussion about human bounding practices, as do the concepts of rehabilitation and restoration (restoring to *what?*) (Cattelino 2017; Head 2012; Trigger 2013). Population, however, is a concept that is rarely brought into question. It is the scale at which conservation biology operates. This kind of population thinking is necessary when thinking about ecosystem well-being and, significantly, extinction. Conservation biology is a biopolitical regime in which some (native) species are made to live as other (invasive) species are let to die.

In Australia, one of these species is the cat (*Felis catus*). First brought to the continent by early colonists on the First Fleet, feral cats are responsible for the death of an estimated two billion native animals each year in Australia, contributing to biodiversity loss and extinctions (Australian Government 2024). The risk presented by cats to threatened species is widely known. Conservation biologists engage in a range of feral cat control programs, including cat-proof fencing, shooting, trapping, baiting, and—increasingly—developing new technologies to identify and (lethally) control feral cats. Cats can be considered an

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undifferentiated population, in that all cats have the capacity to predate vulnerable wildlife. However, at the same time, cats are organized into three separate categories: the feral, the domestic, and the stray. The stray is the most shadowy of these figures; it can slip between boundaries, and it evokes different feelings and responses than the feral. Categorization here shapes how cats are apprehended and controlled by environmental managers; culled or cared for. When a cat is designated as feral, it demands a different kind of treatment to one designated as stray or domestic. Categorization of cats is determined by their proximity to and intimacy with humans, not their behavior. Indeed, beloved, cared-for, fed, domestic pet cats are also responsible for the deaths of over five hundred million native animals each year (Australian Government 2024).

In invasive species control, there is a tension between attempts to control the more-than-human world and the urgent need for humans to work against extinction. In controlling cats, a violent biopolitical regime is put into practice. Population (alongside distribution) functions as a useful frame for conservation biologists to apprehend the devastation caused by invasive species. As the population of feral cats grows, the population of threatened species shrinks. For humans and nonhumans alike, population can function as a violent concept with violent material manifestations. The same is true in conservation biology. Talk about population justifies techniques of control and the meting out of mass death. While compassionate conservation advocates agitate for the development of non-lethal control methods, and some Aboriginal Traditional Owner groups express concerns about the impacts of cat control tools on valued non-target species, like the dingo, in general, public support for feral cat control is at an all-time high. The work of conservation biologists and ecologists feeds into the management plans and priorities of government agencies, but it is the operational environmental managers who are involved in the day-to-day, often intimate deployment of control methods. They are the ones who set the traps and euthanize the cats; they do the stomach content analysis to see which native, potentially threatened, species the cat has consumed in the hours leading up to its death.

Without these efforts, perhaps we would be witnessing a different biopolitical regime emerge, one in which cats live while endangered species are let to die. When the stakes involve extinction, can killing and culling can be conceived of as a form of violent, compromised, and difficult care (Bocci 2017; Van Dooren 2011)? In this context, is it possible to consider “population” as a compromised yet necessary concept in efforts towards multispecies justice?

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