

Background

The cat was introduced to Norway around 1200 years ago and historically has functioned as a useful predator of vermin such as mice and rats. However, in more recent times, the domestic cat is predominantly kept as a pet and is to a lesser degree used for pest control. Several breeds have been developed more recently, especially breeds suited as pets. Despite selective breeding, the cat's natural hunting instincts remain intact. Some breeds are well-suited for a life indoors, but many cats are kept outside to some degree, where they roam freely. The natural hunting instincts of a cat make it a top predator in the Norwegian fauna. Worldwide, feral cats are one of the biggest threats to local biodiversity. It is known from some islands that predation by cats has led to the extinction of several endemic vertebrates. It is also well-documented that cats prey on a wide range of prey in Norway: small rodents, squirrels, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and various larger invertebrates. Several species in these animal groups are at risk of extinction in Norway and are therefore red-listed. The total threat to biodiversity in Norway remains unknown.

A report by the Norwegian Ornithological Association (NOF) from 2018 states that there were about 770,000 cats in Norway in 2016, and that these together kill circa 7 million birds each year. In addition, cats prey on an unknown number of other animals than birds. Based on the increase of domestic cats in Norway from 2011 to 2016, there is reason to believe that the number of cats kept as pets in Norway is now greater than 800,000.

In addition, cats kept partly outdoors can spread disease-causing organisms (agents) and parasites like spool worms, tapeworms, *Salmonella spp.*, *Toxoplasma gondii* (causing toxoplasmosis), and potentially can spread SARS-CoV-2 to humans and other animals.

Apart from affecting biodiversity through predation and spreading of agents and parasites, there are also animal welfare issues related to keeping domestic cats:

- In addition to the animals killed, many are either injured or frightened by cats, and their fear of cats might affect their behavior and survival.
- Cats are often left outside without supervision. They are therefore the only pet in Norway exposed to considerable risk of death from interaction with native wildlife (badgers, foxes, etc.), and from traffic, poisoning and abuse.
- Domesticated cats that have not been sterilized/castrated are reproducing in nature, resulting in feral cats. Although these can survive in the Norwegian nature, they are poorly adapted to a life without supervision and care in the Norwegian climate, which reduces their welfare.

Although cats were introduced by humans, they are legally not regarded as an alien species in Norwegian nature but rather defined as pets under §29, section five of the Norwegian Biodiversity Act (see also note to §3 letter h in the Regulation on alien organisms). As such, cats have not been assessed by the Norwegian Biodiversity Information Centre (Artsdatabanken) in relation to their work on assessment of alien species. Nevertheless, the cat is a species that has shown to have a large potential to reproduce in Norwegian nature and to have a negative impact on biodiversity.

Terms of Reference

The Panel on Alien Organisms and Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) have commissioned VKM to:

- 1) Assess the risk of negative impact on biodiversity in Norway posed by the keeping of domestic cats, including the spread of pathogenic organisms and parasites to humans and other animals.
- 2) Assess the risk of reduced animal welfare in relation to the keeping of domestic cats, including the reduced welfare of cats, and of wild animals.
- 3) Identify risk-reducing measures linked to the identified hazards under points 1 and 2 above.

The assessment should be based on the current climate conditions. In addition, VKM is to assess whether the risks are expected to change due to climate change (under RCP 8.5) from now to the year 2100.