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Cat confinement is still not a simple win-win: Response to Legge *et al.* (2026)

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Abstract

Cat confinement continues to be a topic that draws lively debate. Our recent paper "Calling a trade-off a trade-off in arguments for cat confinement" aimed to challenge the narrative that confinement is categorically good for cat welfare and is therefore a "win-win" for cats and wildlife conservation (Glanville *et al.* 2025). Moreover, we questioned the efficacy of the "win-win" public communication strategy, when the welfare risks to cats are not addressed and owners are not appropriately prepared for the implications of confinement. Our paper has since been critiqued by Legge *et al.* (2026) based on misunderstanding or mischaracterisation of our original arguments. Therefore, we take this opportunity to correct these, to further demonstrate the welfare challenges faced by confined cats, and to underline how our arguments are intended to align with conservation goals.

Introduction

Here we address the response by Legge *et al.* (2026) to our paper "Calling a trade-off a trade-off in arguments for cat confinement" (Glanville *et al.* 2025). While we appreciate the interest and concern, much of the opposition to our paper appears to be the result of misinterpretation. This is evident from the summary and paraphrasing of our arguments by Legge *et al.* (2026) largely being an inaccurate representation of our intended points. Here we will clarify these and demonstrate that our goals are ultimately more aligned than not.

But first, it appears that personal offence has been taken by our critique of the "win-win" public messaging strategy for promoting cat confinement/containment. This was not our intention. We highly respect the work of conservationists and the enormous challenge of the current extinction crisis (Legge *et al.* 2023). We are purely contributing an alternate viewpoint (animal welfare science) to an issue that has been largely dominated by one discipline (conservation).

Overarchingly, the response incorrectly posits that we are advocating for free-roaming cats in Australia. We explicitly state at the beginning of our paper that we are not anti-confinement where there is a conservation need. What our paper does do is to critique the public communication strategy whereby cat confinement is promoted as being a simple "win-win" for both cat welfare and wildlife conservation. A recent paper, published after our original paper, further confirms that this is indeed the messaging strategy being employed by some conservation advocates (Calver *et al.* 2026).

One of our concerns with the trajectory of this messaging is that "*it takes away the incentive for people to make the one decision that is likely to yield long-term benefits for both cats and ecosystems in areas with vulnerable wildlife: ceasing to own cats*" (Glanville *et al.* 2025). Pragmatically, we acknowledge that this "is not happening any time soon" (Legge *et al.* 2026). Hence, our commentary regarding behaviour change science and potential boomerang effects of this messaging strategy is intended to inform *more effective* confinement campaigns, if this policy is pursued. Where there are predictable barriers to a desired behavioural change, a researched and successful behaviour change technique is pre-emptive "barrier identification" combined with various techniques to address the barriers when they arise, such as "action planning", "problem solving" or "goal setting" (Abraham & Michie 2008; Glanville *et al.* 2020; Knittle *et al.* 2020). As such, acknowledging what cat owners intuitively report – that there are welfare risks to confinement (Crowley *et al.* 2022; van Eeden *et al.* 2021) – and appropriately preparing them for the challenges they and their cats may encounter, is likely to be a more effective long-term strategy than focusing purely (or heavily) on the safety benefits of confinement.

We will now respond specifically to the four arguments that Legge *et al.* (2026) picked from our paper, each of which is highly simplified or inaccurately represented:

The relationship between health and welfare

"*Sickness and injury risks for outdoor cats are health, not welfare issues*" (Legge *et al.* 2026). This is a false summary of our argument. Physical health is absolutely one key determinant of animal

welfare. Our argument, and that of the broader animal welfare science discipline for several decades, is that physical health is not the *only* factor contributing to an animal's welfare state (Fraser & Duncan 1998). Animal welfare by one influential definition is determined by the animal's affective experience: how the animal feels (Hemsworth *et al.* 2015). This subjective state is a product of many inputs that have been depicted in various contemporary models of animal welfare, e.g. the Five Domains model (Mellor *et al.* 2020). Traditionally, greater importance has been placed on physical health than other aspects of animal welfare (e.g. social interactions, positive experiences, innate behaviours) and the same is true in arguments regarding cat confinement (Abbate 2020). This is why our paper focuses heavily on these other aspects of cat welfare as those most impacted by confinement (noting that cats' physical health is also impacted by confinement, simply in other ways than outdoor living).

Another more recent paper, published after our original paper, and written by a panel of international animal welfare scientists, including one of the authors of the current paper, focuses on *positive* animal welfare and defines this as "*the animal flourishing through the experience of predominantly positive mental states and the development of competence and resilience*" (Rault *et al.* 2025). In line with our original argument it adds, that "*positive animal welfare goes beyond ensuring good physical health and the prevention and alleviation of suffering*". Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of "*having choices and opportunities to actively pursue goals and achieve desired outcomes, according to species-specific and individual capabilities*" (Rault *et al.* 2025). It will be hard to argue that, on this definition of positive animal welfare, that nothing is lost in terms of welfare by preventing cats from roaming. Hence, our primary point: cat confinement involves welfare trade-offs.

The response of Legge *et al.* (2026) also continues to argue throughout that containing cats improves their welfare. In this way, it again assumes that physical health and safety are either synonymous with welfare or outweigh other aspects of welfare. It also claims that there is "*abundant evidence*" that any welfare risks can be minimised or completely overcome (and that we said this ourselves – we did not). While there have been empirical studies published regarding cat welfare and enrichment based on owner surveys (Hoff *et al.* 2026), they too demonstrate deficiencies in contained cat management and welfare.

Robust evidence in animal welfare science requires simultaneous examination of multiple animal-based measures; most commonly a combination of behavioural, physical, and physiological indicators (Hemsworth *et al.* 2015). To our knowledge, there have been no studies to have done this for contained cats in general, none comparing contained to roaming cats, none testing the efficacy of enrichment in ameliorating welfare risks of confinement, and importantly, none examining the welfare state of cats that were previously allowed to roam and then contained. Ergo, there is a distinct need for integrated animal welfare science in this area, which utilises complementary animal-based measures, and is specifically designed to assess the effects of confinement.

Indoor life

"*An indoor life is bad for the cat*" (Legge *et al.* 2026). We did not state that indoor life is categorically bad for cats, but that there is a trade-off to be made between different aspects of welfare. We highlighted the significant risks to cat welfare of a contained lifestyle as these are often underplayed. Also, there are possible negative physical effects on the welfare of containing cats, notably a higher level of obesity (Bjørnvad *et al.* 2026), which in turn may lead to other health problems. While some of these impacts may be managed to varying, somewhat unknown degrees by enrichment or other owner-driven interventions, some factors are either unlikely to be able to be replicated in an indoor environment or would take significant time and commitment by cat owners. The latter raises issues (as discussed in our original paper) of owner motivation, time, and competence to maintain a minimum welfare standard. Therefore, it is important that owners are appropriately educated about these risks, not falsely assured their cats will simply have better welfare because they are contained and safer. While Legge *et al.* (2026) rightly note that some confinement campaigns have promoted cat enrichment, many do not (as referenced in our original paper), and these are what concern us.

Misunderstanding and misattribution of the concept of rights

"*Cats have rights, but other animals do not*" (Legge *et al.* 2026). We do not discuss the 'rights' of any animals in our paper. Indeed, none of us have in our writings tended to agree with this school of ethical thinking (Hampton *et al.* 2019). This interpretation suggests a misunderstanding of the relationship and difference between animal welfare science and ethical theories. We do, however, consider that we adopt responsibilities to animals in different ways. Just as our responsibilities to cats do not negate our responsibility to act on the extinction crisis, the extinction crisis does not negate our responsibilities to cats. We most certainly do not consider that "*the cat's right to roam should somehow trump everything else*" (Legge *et al.* 2026), but that the risks to contained cat welfare need to be appropriately understood and recognised in order to make the ethical weighing of interests the authors promote.

Our paper focuses heavily on the welfare risks of cat confinement (while also noting the benefits to safety and some physical health aspects) as these are what have been largely underrepresented in such arguments previously. Unlike what our critics claim, we nowhere suggest and would not argue that allowing cats to roam carries more weight than preventing the negative effects caused on wildlife by the cats – quite to the contrary. We simply contend that confining cats involves trade-offs regarding cat welfare.

Shooting the messenger

It is stated that we "*make a series of statements that are excessive and seem designed to offend other scientists working in this space…*" (Legge *et al.* 2026). This was not our intention, and we apologise for any personal offence caused. Our critique of win-win messaging is simply that, a critique of an approach that we consider to be risky for both public trust and the effectiveness of confinement campaigns. Our comments regarding messengers being "*misleading*", "*disingenuous*", or "*deceptive*" either related to the *perception* by the public (i.e. that they are *perceived* as being these things, not that they actually are) or were accompanied by the alternate explanation that those promoting the "win-win" message may not fully understand animal welfare science. By stating that scientists from one discipline may not understand the complexities of another discipline we meant no personal attack; simply a statement of inevitable fact. Conservationists may not (and should not be expected to) have an expert understanding of contemporary animal welfare science. When real-world problems such as these cross scientific disciplinary boundaries, it is practically necessary to draw upon the expertise of those different disciplines (Sekar & Shiller 2020).

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Lastly, Legge *et al.* (2026) appear to imply that any welfare risks associated with cat confinement are trivial, that "*one may as well debate the choice of font on book covers whilst standing in the middle of a burning library*". However, contemporary Australians do not consider animal welfare to be a trivial issue (Sinclair *et al.* 2022). It is possible to care about more than one value simultaneously, and herein lies the merit in ethical analysis (Lynch *et al.* 2025). While we appreciate the urgency and scale of the extinction crisis in Australia (Legge *et al.* 2023), ploughing ahead with a potentially flawed approach with a determination to "*get on with the task*" (Legge *et al.* 2026) is likely to backfire.

Our intention has always been to stimulate debate, not offend, and highlight the need for further cat welfare and behaviour change research. With shared goals in many respects, we consider the most productive way forward to be working together to broaden our understanding of this complex issue, refine approaches, and ultimately improve the lives of both cats and wildlife.

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Competing interests. Jordan Hampton is currently a Section Editor at *Animal Welfare* and Peter Sandøe was previously a Section Editor at *Animal Welfare.* Jordan Hampton was previously the President of the Australasian Wildlife Management Society, is a member of the Zoos Victoria Scientific Advisory Committee, and a member of the Australian Feral Cat Taskforce. Jordan Hampton is currently an Associate Editor at *Wildlife Research*, where Sarah Legge is a Co-Editor-in-Chief. The other authors have no other potential competing interests to report.

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