pussyfooting around notorious sensitivities of pet owners.

One such community group is the Darebin Parklands Association which launched a campaign last month urging local pet owners to keep their pets inside in a bid to halt the decimation of park wildlife, particularly birds, lizards, possums and frogs.

As part of the project, backed by the RSPCA and the Cat Protection Society of Victoria and funded by two local councils, every household around the park received a leaflet explaining the benefits of keeping cats enclosed.

It is a campaign to win the hearts and minds of cat owners and one that is being watched closely by ecological and animal welfare groups around Melbourne.

In the brochure, titled "Home Cats - Safe Cats - Safe Wildlife", pet owners are urged to keep their cats contained not for the good of other animals but for the good of their own animals. One of the most telling statistics in the cat containment debate is the fact that cats kept indoors are the only felines that live to a ripe old age.

Mr Martin said the association planned to monitor the success of the campaign, via any fluctuations in the number of cats trapped in the park, and would provide reminders to residents within the next few months.

He said the association would be delighted if the Darebin Council made cat containment a policy but said such a move was well outside its control.

The council's senior environmental planner, Michelle Bennett, said such a move was unlikely. But she said the council was supportive of the campaign and was considering distributing the association's pamphlet via future cat registration mailouts.

"The council some years ago looked at imposing cat curfews but chose not to do that then and is unlikely to do so now," she said.

"However, the council already bans cats in certain sensitive areas such as in sections of the Darebin Parklands, the Bundoora Parkland and the Dandenong Street Wetlands. Cats found here can be picked up by the Lost Dog's Home but the ban is difficult to enforce because we can't have officers patrolling all day and night. "We depend therefore on responsible pet owners and any campaign to increase awareness is welcomed by the council."

Ms Bennett said the council was in the early stages of developing a biodiversity strategy in which the subject of responsible cat ownership was likely to arise. "This strategy will allow council to easily identify sensitive areas and threatened species," she said. "But it is a complex issue. The main threats to biodiversity are urban development, human behaviour, domestic and feral animals and weeds. All these issues need to be addressed."

The RSPCA also enthusiastically backs the association's campaign. According to the executive manager of animal welfare, Ms Jo Lindley, the RSPCA believes all cats should be confined from dusk until dawn across Australia. And she agreed that education rather than enforcement was the most practical approach to embed such a dramatic social change.

She said there was already legislation in place under the Domestic and Feral Animals Act where an owner of a wandering animal can be fined up to $200 if their pet was trapped. Yet the time and personnel resources required for such trapping meant the provisions were rarely used. This meant that education remained the key.

"The impact cats have on wildlife is unclear because no adequate research has been conducted but we know it is significant," she said.

"We fully support this initiative because keeping cats inside or confined in a catery both protects the cat and other creatures. Yet we also understand that such a move represents a significant change in public attitudes.

"Issues surrounding responsible dog ownership took some time to take hold and no doubt this will too."

A LPHINGTON resident Vanessa Craigie sees the cat containment debate from both sides. On one hand there are her two domestic cats and on the other is her job at the threatened species and communities section of the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

"To her, there should be no debate - cats need to be confined. She has an outdoor cat enclosure with cat flap access to the main house leaving her two beloved Burmese free to race around indoors while also being able to safely enjoy the outdoors.

"I very strongly support the push to contain cats not only because of the destruction of native wildlife but also a way to stop them being hit by cars, to stop the yowling, fighting and indiscriminate breeding," she said.

"I've always had cats and I've patched up more wounds caused from fighting than I care to remember."

"We bought a cat enclosure so they could sit in the sun, smell the air and watch - only watch - the birds." Craigie believes education and permission are not enough. She would like to see the introduction of "stickers" such as council-by-laws banning cats roaming, along with "carrots" such as subsidies to help cover the cost of cat enclosures.

"I work with threatened communities and species so while my interest is in this is mostly as a concerned resident it is based on my knowledge of the destruction caused by cats," she said.

"It must always be remembered that no matter how well cats are fed, they cannot help but kill, it is an instinct hard-wired into them."