

Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy: Public consultation

Response:

I am a new graduate veterinarian. I have been volunteering at Southern Cross Wildlife Care Charity in NSW with Dr Howard Ralph since 2014. My response to your strategy is from a new veterinarian perspective with a unique insight into the wildlife care environment. The following outlines my response to your strategy and refers to each point.

Section 1: Volunteer Support and Culture

Focus areas	→ Planned actions	→ Expected outcomes
Volunteer support and culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Improve standards of governance▪ Help new leaders adjust to their role▪ Attract younger participants to the sector▪ Facilitate a unified peak body and new strategic agenda▪ Improve the sector's access to funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The sector has a positive culture and is buoyed by the intake of younger participants▪ Providers are well-represented by an effective support network▪ Volunteers have capacity to meet the demands of wildlife care

1. *Improve standards of governance*

I agree.

Volunteers need to be made aware of their ethical obligations towards wildlife just as veterinarians are as part of their training. I have given additional examples in Section 2 point 1 below. Simply picking up an animal and nursing it for weeks despite the fact it has a broken leg is not an example of ethically considerate care despite the carers best intentions. I agree implementation of governance is a very important point, where carers can be monitored and regulated. Animal welfare is first and foremost.

2. *Help new leaders adjust to their roles*

Any online resource is beneficial if carers know where it can be found. Seeing as many carers are of an older generation it is important they can access this information too.

3. *Attract younger participants to the sector*

Introduction of wildlife care and issues at school level would make huge change for the future:

- guest speakers e.g.
 - Veterinarians
 - Local wildlife care charities representatives
 - Local experts in wildlife
- hands on workshops e.g.
 - basic first aid
 - A kit they can make to help injured wildlife (towel, box etc.)
- fieldtrips

Introducing young people at school level will allow interest and enthusiasm for the topic to develop naturally. Introductions to problems facing wildlife and how they can be more aware of their actions and how it affects wildlife will allow change to develop with a new generation at a point in their lives where they are inquisitive, empathic, enthusiastic etc.

4. *Facilitating a unified peak body and new strategic agenda*

I thoroughly agree a unified peak body must be formed. However, it is important this body represents balanced opinion and expertise. This must include veterinarians who are enthusiastic to the cause. For example, Dr Howard Ralph of Southern Cross Wildlife Care and Mrs Glenda Ralph, both champions for the cause and with vast expertise.

5. Improve the sectors access to funding

I completely agree more funding needs to be provided, however, the amount pledged \$1.2million and \$4.05 million, does not even come close to what is needed.

Good use of any funding:

- wildlife education at school level.
 - Improving school student's attitudes towards wildlife so that they are more aware of how their lives can impact wildlife and how they personally can make a change e.g. consideration to wildlife habitats. Long term this will reduce the impacts on wildlife and thus overall reduce the requirements for wildlife carers and veterinarians. I appreciate this is a hugely "bigger picture" outlook however is important to address now. In addition, allowing students to realise they can get "hands on" with helping wildlife which is why my point 3 above applies here too.
- Funding to veterinary clinics
 - Providing access to grants for veterinary clinics to be able to fund their services for wildlife. Lack of funding is a big reason why further care is often not available in veterinary clinics.

Section 2: Standards of Care and Training

Standards of care and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Standard induction and specialised species training for volunteers▪ Enhance mentor and species coordinator support▪ Wildlife care training for vets and vet nurses▪ Update triage and treatment protocols▪ Create service provider access to standard compliance assessment tools and continue random audits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Volunteers are skilled and capable to meet minimum standards of care in the sector▪ Vets and vet nurses have the skills and resources to treat wildlife▪ The sector has access to tools for ensuring standards are adhered to
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1. Standard Induction and Specialised Species training for volunteers

This is a very important point.

My observations of the wildlife care sector, is an absence of regulation towards standards of care.

Whilst many wildlife carers do their very best and know their limits, there are also many who do not.

I have witnessed some very tragic sights and blatant animal welfare issues where carers have failed to bring an animal to veterinary attention in sufficient time, allowing the animal to suffer unnecessarily. If a domestic animal was allowed by an owner to suffer the way some wildlife cases do, there would be a case for animal cruelty.

The wildlife carer may have not brought the animal in for veterinary attention promptly, for several reasons, for example:

- Their lack of knowledge of the severity of the problem
 - *"Oh, it didn't look that bad to me"*
- Attempting to "fix" the problem themselves
 - *"I watched a vet do this once so I can do it myself now"*
- A senior carer informing "they can fix the animal"
 - *"I've been a carer for years I know what I am doing"*
- A senior carer telling them "the vet will just euthanise the animal" – introducing fear that if they seek veterinary attention the animal will be lost.
 - *"I didn't bring the animal in 6 weeks ago because I just thought you'd euthanise it"*

Introduction of a Standard of Care for carers is just as important as it is for Veterinarians. For example; providing information to carers when it is important to seek veterinary attention.

Work needs to be done to restore faith carers have in the veterinary industry - I appreciate this will take a long time as the fear wildlife carers have towards vets and euthanasia runs deep.

My colleagues and I are seeing a rise in the "Layman" Veterinarian, i.e. those members of public who believe they can do what a veterinarian can do either because they watched a vet do it once or they've been doing this for years therefore they know it all. This is not acceptable and is a question of animal welfare.

I have faith in the fact these carers are wanting to do their best, however they need to be aware of their limits and when veterinary training is paramount.

This is an important Focus Area of this Strategy that needs to be addressed as a matter of animal welfare.

2. Enhance Mentor and species coordinator support

Utilising veterinarians as mentors to members of the public.

3. Wildlife care training for Vets and Vet Nurses

Having just completed my veterinarian training I can comment that there is by no means enough wildlife training in the university curriculum. Whether or not the university has the ability to teach these modules themselves should not be a problem. If they cannot, students should be required to attend extramural wildlife placements as part of their standard requirements. I have spent a great deal of time with Dr Howard Ralph of Southern Cross Wildlife Care where I have learned most of my wildlife skills. My colleagues in my degree cohort however, view wildlife treatment warily and generally have little to no confidence treating these cases. This should not be the case. Wildlife treatment should be made a priority skill during University.

For those veterinarians post graduate who lack the skills to treat wildlife a collaboration with the Australian Veterinary Association and veterinarians with wildlife expertise (e.g. Dr Howard Ralph), could provide AVA subsidised courses to train up veterinarians with these essential skills.

4. Update treatment and triage protocols

Important, but should be limited to what can be classed as first aid and basic care. Emphasis should be placed on when to seek veterinary attention and to get it as soon as possible if required. There are many cases I have seen where if the volunteer carer had brought the animal to see the veterinarian earlier much more could have been done to treat or save the animal. This is particularly the case if the volunteer is taking the animal to a veterinarian who is not as confident with wildlife or not as interested. Earlier diagnosis will give the animal a much better chance of receiving the best care or referral to a veterinarian with those expertise (Dr Howard Ralph).

5. Prompting stronger compliance

Yes, very important to monitor compliance for standard of care amongst carers for the reasons mentioned above.

Section 3: Knowledge and Information Access

Knowledge and Information access	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Streamline reporting and improve access to dataConnect volunteers to other professional networksConduct post-release monitoring of rehabilitated animals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Data collected by volunteers is utilised for wildlife management and research purposesBetter understanding gained of the success of wildlife rehabilitation
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1. Streamline reporting and improve access to data

Extremely important. A huge amount of data is not being captured both from volunteer carers and veterinarians. A national database should be introduced where all details of a wildlife case can be captured. Information from the site of rescue and cause of injury/ disease to the treatment administered and eventual outcome.

2. Connect volunteer to other professional networks

Connect the volunteers and members of the public with veterinarians both nationally and locally

- National Phoneline to employ multiple Veterinarians (or vets can volunteer) to offer advice to volunteers and members of the public. Volunteers can phone in and ask to speak to a veterinarian

for help. Or alternatively an online “Chat” forum where veterinarians can volunteer some time online to answer wildlife related questions.

- Veterinarians with an interest or skillset in wildlife could offer up training workshops for members of the public to be able to train them on basic wildlife first aid and wound management.

3. Conduct post-release monitoring of rehabilitated animals

I agree it is very important to capture information about success following release. How are these animals coping in the wildlife after they have had human interaction? This is a huge area that needs much more research and could impact the direction of both carers and veterinarians work.

Section 4: Community awareness and recognition

Community awareness and recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduce a single wildlife rescue number• Guide community education about wildlife• Promote awareness about volunteer participation in wildlife rehabilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community access to rescue services is enhanced• Community recognition and appreciation of volunteers and native wildlife is improved
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1. Introduce a single wildlife rescue number

Absolutely a great idea. I believe this will also improve conflicts that are occurring both within care groups but also between care groups that is currently a big problem. The amount of politics that is inhibiting good care getting to wildlife is phenomenal. I have heard many stories about groups falling out amongst each other. Groups need to come together to work as one for the greater good of animals not for their egos and how “long they’ve been a carer for”.

2. Guide community education about wildlife

Council members need to lead the way. Cooperation between wildlife groups, veterinarians and council would provide easier access to expertise.

Section 5: Government regulation and support

Government regulation and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduce a system of accreditation for volunteer wildlife rehabilitation organisations• Implement a more flexible policy framework• Provide ongoing strategic support services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Services across the sector are consistent, reliable and in accordance with set standards• More effective regulation and support for the sector
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1. Introduce a system of accreditation for volunteer wildlife rehabilitation organisations

Yes, this would help monitor standards of care from volunteer carers too.