

Response to NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy

Accreditation

I was relieved to find the intention to provide the option to apply for accreditation to existing licensed wildlife rehabilitators. This was probably the most important aspect of this document for me because for a very long time I have been aware that there could have been the intention to withdraw my license and hence my ability to continue to rehabilitate wildlife.

Amalgamation

Whilst it is also pleasing to see that wildlife rehabilitation be recognised, respected and supported by Government it is troubling that OEHL is now to be amalgamated with another Government Department. As a volunteer working in the field the flow on effects of this are unknown and further concerning. I used to feel supported by OEHL but since the last 'reshuffle' that support very noticeable dissipated so the inevitable changes to come are quite worrying for me.

Veterinary support

Vets are not educated about wildlife and many vets (not all) have no interest in wildlife, instead seeing their practice as mainly being a business venture that provides income. Clearly there is no reason for them to want to take in wildlife due to the time and costs involved. With the move toward keeping wildlife as pets this may change the focus of veterinary training somewhat however would still not help with wildlife being dumped at vets surgeries by wildlife carers.

Wildlife carers could be trained and permitted to be more interventionist with treatment which would/could alleviate the necessity of using vets to the extent they are at the moment. There are many instances where the wildlife carer could provide the necessary initial assessment and possibly appropriate care. This would mean that wildlife carers would need to be more experienced than many are today.

Wildlife carers who complete an induction course and commence rescuing wildlife do not have the knowledge and experience to do very much at all. However when/if a person has spent many years in the field and experience many circumstances of various injuries they really can be capable of providing a more high level of assessment and treatment than a newer person with much less experience.

I have known of animals with obvious injuries such as a broken leg being given back to carers as being suitable for release. Any experienced carer could, in most instances make this assessment for themselves and simply ask for euthanasia.

Younger Participants

I was dismayed to see the specific focus of attracting younger participants into the sector. Any experienced person will tell you that this is setting the strategy up to fail. Younger people have their lives to live. They are focussed on education, travel, socialising and eventually starting a family and providing for their own housing etc. They are not stable. The wildlife carer that is needed by the sector is a person who is settled, mature, has time, resources, focus and life experience. Investment in the 40 year plus demographic is what will pay off in the long term. These people have something tangible to offer the sector and very often are looking for something useful to do.

Whilst younger persons may be interested in gaining a certificate to add to their resume, they will usually disappear right after the first induction course. In fact I would assess that after 12 months most participants of an initial induction will have disappeared. Wildlife caring is time consuming, inconvenient and expensive. Many people initially find the idea of caring for fluffies attractive but very soon become disenchanted and unavailable.

If you did a survey of long term carers and found out how old they were when they first started I would expect they would have been older at the time of commencement.

Younger people can be useful to answer phones and collate data etc but even tasks such as these can have a negative impact. Any person responding to a phone call who has had little or no experience in the field can kill animals due to providing incorrect advice by not recognising a life threatening situation. I have seen this on numerous occasions and it is distressing for the public and rehabilitator.

One Phone Number

The intention of providing one number state wide for wildlife rescues is good on paper but will be difficult to implement. This idea has been thrown around for years but getting every part of the sector to agree, I believe will not be possible. Perhaps one state wide number be established and if a group or person prefers not to participate then so be it. The number may then be better than no number but would not be all encompassing. It would possibly still provide a better outcome than the present? Should the one number be implemented would individuals such as myself be included? I would be disappointed if not. It may surprise some but I am sometimes used by the group in my area to respond to calls and to take in animals for assessment and care which simply proves that having a group in an area does not mean all situations can be covered by the group. I have no problem with cooperating and working together and think that this should be encouraged.

Community Education

With regard to community education, there should be a focus on encouraging and guiding Local Councils to introduce cat control. Some local councils are pro-active in

this area, some are woeful. In my particular area which is promoted as a city within a national park cats are encouraged to run wild with no restrictions on numbers. I spent some years trying to encourage council to promote a more responsible attitude toward wildlife and cat management without success. Whilst there was some implementation it was half hearted and does not address the problem. There was 100% resistance to cat containment, either at night or 24/7 and 100% resistance to trapping or even providing a trap hiring service to the community and 100% resistance to limiting the number of cats at any one premises.

There are many residents who find this very frustrating. There are many responsible cat owners in the area and other residents who simply don't like cats roaming and defecating in their gardens. The keeping of multiple cats is encouraged by the RSPCA (who have a contract with our council to provide the local animal shelter) and 'Cat Defence' the local cat rescue group in the area. Rescue cats saturate the Blue Mountains with between 2 to 6 per household. These cats are roaming during the day and many also at night. There seems to be no education by those that are promoting 'rescue cats' or encouragement for owners to contain the cats. You may understand that in a large area around any of these homes wildlife is simply obliterated. It's a very disheartening situation. Our local council is very focussed on flora but it seems pointless having healthy and abundant flora when the fauna has been wiped out. Flora also needs fauna to enable pollination etc.

I have attached, with permission, an up to date but incomplete spreadsheet which shows that some councils are pro-active in cat education and cat regulation which you may find useful. This spreadsheet has been compiled by a friend and is a work in progress. As you can see, many councils have become conscious of the problem and if wildlife rehabilitators are to be genuinely supported by Government then an initiative within the strategy to address this widespread problem should be a priority across Government Departments.

Peak Body

I understand the intention to reform the peak body. I found my 8 year experience interesting but very disappointing. I saw nothing achieved in that time. There were opportunities lost or more accurately, avoided - a very sad state of affairs. This is why I don't attend. I tried to implement a standard training package that could have been used across the sector. This would have assisted and supported the groups and been invaluable to those working in the field but importantly it would have raised the awareness of the peak body which currently has a very low profile. The project was deliberately sabotaged in the very last stages.

I would be hesitant to agree to the makeup of a proposed new advisory board. Organisations can be divided politically into those that promote animal 'rights' as opposed to those that are focussed on animal 'welfare'. Organisations that support animal 'rights' are simply political organisations with an agenda that is not necessarily in the best interests of animals. This needs to be carefully considered when forming a new body. Perhaps existing animal organisations should/could be excluded? I certainly agree that something needs to be done with the status quo as it is ineffective.

Volunteer Participation

Developing strategies that increase volunteer participation in the sector including opportunities for participation from a wider demographic should focus on older people as I have mentioned before. There has always been a focus on reaching out to the younger demographic and I have seen it consistently fail for the reasons previously given. Volunteers need to have the capacity to operate because in the field they are basically on their own. Realistically I can't see that changing because physical stability and resources are imperative, both of which young people cannot provide.

Throughout the document there is mention that one group makes up almost half the sector and has membership of 2500. I have reason to believe that this number may be incorrect and may be as little only half of the actual number. A member who joined 2 or more years ago and has not renewed membership or has been inactive for most of that time should not be included as a member.

The strategy needs to be based on absolute fact if it can be expected to achieve its objectives.

Sadly, in any group a large number of 'members' are effectively inactive with a very small amount of people doing all the work. Some don't openly state they are inactive however will not do rescues and don't care for any animals. I think this situation needs to be accurately assessed and taken into account. I believe this situation is caused by the wrong demographic being targeted. The inactivity is inevitably caused by people having jobs, family etc which they rightly prioritise.

Training

Not wanting to sound too negative but training within groups does not achieve what it is intended to do. It is my opinion that probably only 10% of information a person is exposed to at an initial training course is actually absorbed. If a person is already experienced the course will be much more beneficial if the information is useful/new. This leaves a very large hole in what a person should and needs to understand when undertaking wildlife rehabilitation. This is a difficult area to address. People learn from their actual experience and so valuable learning is achieved slowly in the field and ideally needs good quality mentoring. This sounds easy but is not. My personal experience is that people for whatever reason just don't take to mentoring. Pairing individuals up into cohesive teams that can achieve good outcomes is more difficult than it seems. Personally, whilst I have trained many people individually over the years I have never had an official 'buddy'. The only one I was ever teamed up with I never actually met! So it just didn't happen although there were efforts to make it so. I'm not sure I have any useful suggestions for this problem but only to note that there definitely is a problem with educating new participants despite the good intentions and hard work of those who are providing the opportunities.

Group Membership

I support allowing greater flexibility in where members of groups can reside. In fact, I support accreditation of individuals although I am aware that this is not proposed. In some cases this would be very beneficial for both the community, local wildlife and also the members of the local group. I support cooperation between volunteers and know it to be beneficial. There is no reason for the regulation about licensing rehabilitators to be so restrictive. If a group is effective in doing good work it will attract people naturally.

Interstate Transport

I don't understand why animals would need to be transported interstate for treatment and rehabilitation?

Insurance

I support and applaud the continuing allocation of funds toward public liability insurance for the sector.

Audit

I was disappointed to read that 0% of individual licensees undertook regular training however there was no mention that there is no regular training available. Personally I have attended all training that has been available to me over the years. This has included group training, TAFE training and privately conducted training. When I have an injury or incident that I have not experienced previously and that I may be unsure of the best course of action I always take the animal to my specialist reptile veterinarian who gives me one on one training with the situation.

I have heard that some 'individual' licensees consider that they don't need training because they already know everything. This is concerning. It is my experience that you never stop learning and when you are no longer inquisitive then maybe it's time to retire. There's always something more to learn.

I would welcome regular training were it to be available however as I specialise in reptiles I am not referring to handling techniques but in dealing with illness and injury. It must be assumed that any experienced reptile handler is proficient in handling techniques so I am not referring to this. However new information involving research or scientific discoveries or veterinary techniques and knowledge would be useful and may be of great interest and value.

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