

Louise Krieger – Submission

Veterinary treatment

It is wrong for the government to expect veterinarians to provide services free of charge, and equally wrong to expect time-stretched volunteers to man weekend barbecues to raise funds to pay them. These animals belong to the Crown and provision needs to be made for their treatment.

Government support

There is no support from NPWS and no appreciation. Rangers are disengaged from wildlife and the challenges facing both animals and carers. They are happiest when they are signing licences to cull animals. There needs to be more protection for the limited release sites we have with no culling licences to be issued to landholders who are not primary producers.

We are not permitted to take our firearms into national parks to euthanise native animals, but hunters are free to do so. Even after a major fire we were not allowed to take firearms in to euthanise injured animals.

Reports of cruelty to the licensing unit of NPWS are routinely ignored, or cases are fobbed off to the RSPCA. All resources are poured into investigating those who try to help animals rather than those who harm them. Licences to cull animals are granted in a simple, straightforward process. Licences to remove animals from harm are convoluted and carry so many conditions as to make them unworkable. Threatened species have no chance if commercial interests are involved. I saw the removal of hundreds of threatened species microbats because they were in the way of a local mining company.

Despite the trauma suffered by volunteers who are constantly dealing with injured animals, there is no counselling service offered. Volunteers should have access to NPWS' Employee Assistance Programme. Vets and paramedics are amongst the highest suicide risk of all professions, yet we provide similar services and receive nothing. I have euthanised up to four severely injured kangaroos in a single day, yet there was no support available for me had I needed it. A NPWS Ranger who sat in an office signing culling licences all day would have had full EAP support.

Legislative and policy settings

I have spent years reinforcing the importance of meeting licensing conditions to members and encouraging them to treat their carers' licences as they do their drivers' licences. Changing the term to accreditation softens the expectations and responsibilities involved. I also suspect that the real reason for changing this is to make it harder for wildlife carers to meet conditions and easier for those who want to keep native animals as pets. There are many changes needed - why change something that doesn't need to be changed?

Wildlife rehabilitation in other jurisdictions

Dedicated wildlife hospitals would make the task of caring for animals so much easier and outcomes would be greatly improved. Taking native animals to vets who only have training and experience in domestic and farm animals is like going to a psychiatrist for a hip replacement.

Grants are well and good - who has time to apply for them? Applications are competitive and require a degree of skill. Our members are struggling to keep up with the demands of rescue and care, not to mention fundraising. We shouldn't have to go begging for every penny we receive.

A single wildlife rescue call number is a good idea, preferably federally. This would reduce confusion and people would only need one number stored in their phones.

Challenges of wildlife rehabilitation

One of the biggest challenges we have is a lack of release sites. We are currently euthanising all macropod joeys because we have nowhere safe to release them. The few sites we have are quickly filled. All of our sites have the constant threat of shooting and development around them. Landscapes are becoming more fragmented as environmentally insensitive developments take place.

Members join because they love animals and want to care for them. When they find out we euthanise healthy, viable joeys they become disheartened and leave. The group then obtains a reputation for euthanising joeys so members of the public don't call us and instead try to raise them themselves, with disastrous results. We are faced with an impossible situation exacerbated by the willingness of NPWS Rangers to issue culling licences next door to release sites for no better reason than a landowner was growled at by a kangaroo after his dog chased it.

Compliance needs to be addressed by paid officers. Having a management committee responsible for investigating its own members leads to those members becoming angry with the committee and spreading discontent throughout the group. Furthermore, when management committees do investigate non-compliance there is no back-up support from those with the power to act. As Chair of my local branch of WIRES, I have had members laugh in my face when I have told them that failure to follow a directive from the management committee could lead to animals being removed from their care. They are right to laugh, because no one has any power to act and those that do have the power are reluctant to do so. It is beyond the abilities of a small group of people who are already contributing hours of unpaid time to rescuing and caring for animals to also police other members.

Furthermore, there needs to be funding provided to pay an officer to help management committees. There is currently no one to liaise with at a higher level and I have found after 5 years on the management committee of my local WIRES branch that it is pointless to invest the effort I do. No one is there to help, requests for assistance are ignored and we are toothless tigers when it comes to compliance.

There also needs to be a system of compulsory criminal background checks for new members. We are taking people on as members without any kind of background checking - they could be wildlife smugglers or have convictions for animal cruelty and we would never know. Members who are expelled from WIRES can just go and join another group.

Members of the public expect the service we provide, without having any understanding as to the fact that we receive no payment for our services, that it costs us personally (in my case, thousands of dollars each year) to provide it, and that the government provides no funding. People complain bitterly regarding response times and the time it can take to get through to the call centre. They think reporting an injured animal is the same as calling an ambulance.

Conclusion

The NSW government continues to work against those who care about native animals and commit their time, money and energy to them. Land clearing has increased to unsustainable levels, displacing the animals that call native forests and landscapes home. The new Biodiversity Act makes it easier to harm animals and harder to care for them. Moving NPWS to the DPI will result in further dismissal of the valuable work we contribute. That the government is even considering allowing more native species to be kept as pets is reprehensible. Already our branch has been expected to provide new homes for snakes and turtles which members of the public no longer want. A quick phone call from NPWS dumping the problem onto us is all the involvement they have, while we spend hours trying to source suitably licensed

carers with facilities to home them. We struggle to deal with the native animals that come into our branch, with many of them being needlessly euthanised at the vet's because carers can't pick them up or care for any more animals, and cannot be expected to become a rehoming service for unwanted native pets. We need help from the government, but instead I suspect this review is just an excuse to make things more difficult and to deregulate the sector.

Louise Krieger
Chair/Reptile Coordinator
WIRES Central West