

**Wildlife Rehabilitation Strategy
National Parks & Wildlife Service
Biodiversity & Wildlife Unit (Level 3)
PO Box 1967
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**From Patricia Edwards
WIRES Clarence Valley branch**



Dear Wildlife Unit team

I particularly appreciate the now recognition of the important role wildlife volunteers fill in a community, and the major effort of time, financial outlay and frequently the stress levels they must meet in the process of carrying out their work.

I also appreciate the need for the earlier full review of the entire sector, and the now seen requirement for certain aspects of the sector management to be altered in order to more capably assist the compromised wildlife at the heart of the effort, as well as the needed support for the volunteers themselves.

For this, my personal grateful thanks.

Comments –

Peak body umbrella

I suggest that the second option for the formation of the peak body - ie made up an advisory board, of government members (NPWS?); existing groups (RSPCA?); vets and natural resource management personnel (Landcare?) would provide the more respected and authoritative leadership for such a large group of many differing personalities. Having one currently dominant group over represented could, I imagine, wind up causing quite natural jealousy and rivalry, and associated distrust and disharmony within the volunteers as well as the managerial body.

Releasing the stranglehold of WIRES currently endured by many rehabilitators who would prefer to work for a different group will bring greater peace of mind, enjoyment in their work and an improved eagerness to learn, particularly about chosen specialist species. This will also greatly increase the care base for those other groups while at the same time possibly importing previously unsuspected and under-utilised knowledge and experience

It is uncertain whether each of WIRES branches will be licensed by OEH automatically should WIRES continue as an entity, or if the management of each branch will also need to go through a process to determine their suitability to manage a wildlife rehabilitating unit and deliver its services at a branch level.

It is assumed that all wildlife care groups will automatically be fully covered by the insurance policy of the peak body group, supported by government funding. Is this correct?

Volunteer support and culture

Adopting Volunteering Australia's standards for volunteer involvement is a positive first step. To date WIRES in particular appears to comply with none of the standards set down in this document.

I am sure that by applying these proposed new initiatives to wildlife rescue and care, in conjunction with a stronger involvement and guidance role for OEH and the familiar partnership of National Parks, will serve to regenerate pride in the sector's volunteers for the important work they do, and bring an associated boost in spirits and optimism, in place of the depressed negativity more frequently prevalent in a number of groups and group branches

Involving natural resources groups such as Landcare and other experienced ecological assessors in the management structure could be a key to producing / identifying dedicated koala feeding and leaf collection stations, and the best and safest release and post-monitoring sites

If looking for a high profile celebrity to help promote the wildlife rehabilitation services, I suggest Troy Casser-Daley might be a good person to start with. His mother is a high profile environmental activist in the Clarence Valley region, while Troy needs no introduction

Volunteer of the year

I personally have some reservations about creating a wildlife volunteer of the year award. I'm not sure the sector needs this type of competitive activity at this time, when each carer sees themselves as providing an important service, and the most significant contributions by quieter, less forceful members might easily get overlooked

Fundraising

One thing not considered by the Review is how each group and group branch manages to raise its own funds to support its own initiatives and operations. With WIRES, each branch inevitably has extreme difficulty in organising and achieving its fundraising targets, chiefly because of the problem of exploiting the services of a very scant handful of willing members. It would free up member's time and considerably reduce stress levels if government (ie the NSW public) could accept responsibility for all expenses incurred by wildlife rescuers and carers. Otherwise perhaps these incurred costs might be passed on by the rehabilitation group to their local councils, with a reimbursement or part reimbursement agreement with OEH? For instance, while koala coordinator for Clarence Valley WIRES, I negotiated full reimbursement from our council for all veterinary expenses incurred for koalas coming into care within the branch, as well as for any accounts presented from external attention - ie Lismore, Keen St vet clinic.

In which case I would anticipate a capping limit would need to be set on veterinary expenses, and also for fuel claims, as these could (and possibly would) be open to rort. A 25ct limit per kilometre for fuel, with the volunteer paying the first 20 kms, would work to alleviate pressure on volunteers in large regional jurisdictions while at the same time avoiding helping the volunteer operate at a profit, as is currently the situation in the Clarence Valley.

Veterinary costs for more common birds, reptiles etc should be allocated a small capping sum, without discouraging the vet to treat the animal instead of immediate euthanasia as is too frequently the case. This will in turn will not only immediately greatly increase the success rate of the rehabilitation sector but also the morale of the volunteers.

I suggest, too, that a system to help rescuers communicate the outcomes of their rescues with the members of public who call them in could greatly improve the image of the sector in the public view. Lack of follow-up contact is a major reason for many disenchanted public members not bothering to call in another animal they might find in need of help. This is specifically the case where that person believes "their" animal that they cared enough about to deliver into the hands of a total stranger has been killed without treatment.

Conflict resolution

A review of conflict resolution guidelines, particularly those adopted by WIRES - a non-accountable agency – can only be beneficial. However I suggest this needs to include some actual legal rights and guidance for volunteers, such as where they might seek legal protection in cases involving the Board, where they feel themselves unfairly victimised.

Also not all members are going to get along with all animal coordinators. Yet it is a requirement for volunteers to work with animal coordinators – and needs to be – but human nature dictates that a volunteer not speaking to a coordinator won't get the rescues, thus exacerbating the angst. This happens a lot.

As Chair of our WIRES branch one year I dealt with this type of disruption by designing a questionnaire that went out to every branch member, so giving everyone that opportunity to have their say on all aspects of rescue, care, times suitable for feeding, animal species in their area particularly macropods to see who could take what and which members could release their animals; who was up to date with which species refresher courses, so again could care for certain animals; whether they could work with the coordinator, so might care for that animal type right now or might have to wait a while etc etc, then following all that it became the job of the BMC to manage that document, keep it updated, and work with the coordinator and those members who claimed they couldn't work with her to slowly come through their differences, firstly by asking the person to do a rescue, see which person needed help to improve their facilities where that was the problem, and gradually prepare the member to take on an animal of the age they could care for by their answers to the questionnaire, and to release if suitable to area.

It was a good document, it seemed to be working, and everyone seemed happy with the analysed results that slotted them into areas where they were most comfortable. But then of course one member of the large mammal standards team complained about it (the only person to do so) and the branch went into dispute again, another incoming BMC failed to take it on board and it all fell by the wayside, with differences still ongoing when they could well have been resolved.

I suggest that this type of across-branch survey, officially designed, could be looked at as a possible solution to internal branch differences where character clashes are not unexpected, and possibly quite natural

Possible uniform

I wonder if a uniform might also be designed for accredited rescuers and carers, with expectation of it being proudly worn at all public functions involving wildlife matters. WIRES has a particularly attractive one at this time, which definitely draws the eye at public events. I feel it would be an excellent investment to have all wildlife rehabilitators have a matching outfit

Animal euthanasia

This has also not yet been touched on by the Review, yet is a major part of volunteers' work and lives. Specifically large injured macropods create a serious problems under the current legislation.

I personally would like to see trust in experienced wildlife rescuers returned by a re-review of the Firearms Act, and issue of an Animal Welfare clause automatically on the licence of wildlife volunteers licenced to bear and use a firearm (as with the RSPCA), without the now additional need to complete bi-annual highly costly training courses in firearm use. This trust will return certain pride in skills and upgraded ability to offer immediate relief to an injured larger animal, as well as restore public respect for volunteers for the important role they fill. This will also definitely improve the lot of those numerous animals that currently receive no attention.

In this regard too, it would greatly improve the chances of many injured larger animals suffering flesh wounds, and that cannot be safely captured and must be shot, if certain members might also earn permits to carry dart guns, to enable safe transport and treatment of that animal by a vet

Training

I completely agree with the concept of experienced rehabilitators being able to add to their knowledge and improve their skills by an improved (upgraded) training structure,

I would also suggest this structure might be developed to encourage achieved levels of experience, with certificated qualifications that indicate which individual members can apply for higher expertise levels for individual wildlife species (eg, species coordinators; pre-release facility managers; experienced rescuer and carer; 1st term member; No 1 team member etc, as a suggestion).

It would be excellent if this higher training will also include some veterinary training for suitably accredited members at the more experienced level, eg a person specially trained and approved to hold and administer tranquillising and pain relief drugs under veterinary advice. Most importantly this will ensure a higher level of care as well as circumstances for our compromised wildlife. This will definitely be greatly appreciated.

More advanced training requirements will enable individuals to progress and improve their skills and experience, and give them a goal to aim for. This in turn will improve their relevance and credence, and increase respect by the general public.

Perhaps advancements in the system might be proudly shown by arm patches or bands indicating levels of experience? For instance currently with WIRES over five years of active work with koalas accredits that member with the title of highly experience koala carer. An achievement to be proud of.

Facilities inspections / Compliance Audit

This has always been a bone of contention that has led to many personal disputes. Ongoing random inspections without offering very much time for the carer to clean up their facilities will definitely serve to improve performance as well as settle internal concerns.

Also the suggestion that OEH might also be available to investigate alleged breaches will offer enormous relief to carers unfairly accused/targeted, and who have to suffer prolonged waiting

times for a single person to assess and process the numerous complaints that appear to arrive in the system. This, together with regard to accredited experience and skills, should even possibly eliminate much of the prevailing infighting and character assassinations that are unfortunately prevalent within each organisation.

On a personal front, I believe I might have been one of those included in the audit of July 2016. In any case I have been subjected to 3 official audits, while koala coordinator and threatened species recording officer, with also a popular macropod care and release site. The last audit I found to be more comprehensive and searching than previously, and this appeared appropriate and was acceptable to me in its intent to bring about best care for our animals. The questions were also appropriate, and appreciated, as was the professional but easy and friendly way they were presented, giving no sense of awkwardness or embarrassment. I see this aspect of future audits as important, to maintain integrity of the surveys by making the questioned property owners feel comfortable about what could easily equate to interrogation, in their own homes.

Your efforts to provide a greater level of assistance to our native wildlife is greatly appreciated. I look forward to seeing the final outcome of your labours

Thank you for this opportunity to provide some input and feedback

Yours sincerely

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CV WIRES