

AVA Submission:

NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy

To the Office of Environment & Heritage

Submission from the Australian Veterinary Association Ltd



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About us

The Australian Veterinary Association is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 9,500 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals, such as cattle and sheep, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

Executive summary

The AVA's NSW Division and Veterinarians with a passion for wildlife have reviewed the discussion papers relating to the "NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy"

We thank you for giving us the opportunity to provide comment into this process. Some of the main purposes from an AVA perspective is to contribute to the welfare of individual animals, welfare of animal populations, be an outlet for community and compassion, and help with the education and awareness of wildlife and environment.

Some outcomes that would be positive for the AVA would be to minimise suffering, maximise survival post release and survival to the point of breeding and ensure that funds are appropriately spent.

Background

The Strategy and supporting documents: Review of the NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector; Accreditation of wildlife rescue and rehabilitation services; and Wildlife rehabilitator compliance audit, provide extensive, useful and important information on the current state of the sector, and the role of veterinarians, and outlines actions the Government will take to support the sector.

This well developed, evidence-based strategy is underpinned by extensive surveys of the sector and evidence as to the most effective way of maintaining and supporting the valuable role that veterinarians and wildlife rehabilitation providers play in the care of sick, injured and orphaned native animals.

The five focus areas: Volunteer support and culture; standards of care and training; knowledge and information access; community awareness and recognition; and government support and regulation, cover the main areas of concern.

The Government has allocated funding of \$1.5 million over 3 years to Taronga Zoo, the University of Sydney and the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) to increase wildlife care professional development for veterinarians.

The strategy has drawn together much needed comprehensive and useful data which has previously been missing from a sector which is underpinned by multiple groups and individual carers.

Discussion

The Australian Veterinary Association commends the Government for developing this strategy which aims to support the wildlife rehabilitation sector and introduce a new accreditation system for providers. This strategy is timely and has the potential, if adequately resourced, and with good oversight, to improve the health and welfare of injured, sick and orphaned wildlife.

The introduction of a system of accreditation, underpinned by consistent standards of operation, for volunteer wildlife organisations is a positive move towards improving standards of care. The introduction of minimum standards for volunteer training is most welcome.

The strategy acknowledges the crucial role that veterinarians play in this activity and seeks ways to support veterinarians. Some veterinarians who were surveyed reported a lack of formal education regarding wildlife and some difficulties dealing with the wildlife rehabilitation sector.

As the strategy acknowledges, about 70% of animals brought into veterinary practices are by the community not volunteer wildlife rehabilitators, and states: 'We will collaborate with the peak body for veterinary professionals to ensure free-living wildlife is managed in accordance with best practice in the industry and adequate records are kept prior to their transfer to a wildlife rehabilitation organisation'.

We should point out that we are a profession, not an industry, and that the AVA is the peak body, and that record keeping is already a requirement under the NSW *Veterinary Practice Act, 2003*.

The focus areas of the strategy, as well as the planned actions and expected outcomes are excellent, however implementation needs to be well managed. For instance, under planned actions there is: 'wildlife care training for vets and vet nurses'.

A major issue of concern is post-release survival and the strategy states 'conduct post-release monitoring of rehabilitated animals'. This should be a major point as the limited research available suggests that few mammals survive release. Collection of data and developing a better understanding of the success of wildlife rehabilitation is a stated key outcome.

The strategy states that about 34% of native animals rescued are rehabilitated and released. The Government will fund post-release monitoring of koalas and explore opportunities with research institutions and wildlife rehabilitation groups to undertake post-release monitoring of other species. The AVA believes more details are needed to further understand the scope of this stated aim.

The review of the NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector outlines the considerable contribution that veterinarians make to this sector and the financial cost of this, and highlights the challenges practitioners face dealing with sick, injured and orphan wildlife. i.e. lack of time, facilities, knowledge and costs. Only 50% of wildlife rehabilitators surveyed agreed their local veterinary practice understood native animal treatment and triage protocols.

The intention as part of the strategy to introduce a single wildlife rescue number is most welcome. This will enable members of the public to have better access to facilities.

The development of more effective regulation for the system is a positive move. Accreditation will be delivered by the OEH and include 'policies and protocols in place that ensure interactions with veterinary practitioners are conducted in a consistent, positive and ethical manner'.

Diminishing release sites and finding suitable places to release rehabilitated animals is becoming a concern for the sector.

More than 50% of animals seen by vets are birds, 16% are possums and gliders and 13% are reptiles. Most vets don't charge. Vets reported that most aspects of their formal course of study were not very useful for dealing with free living wildlife. The survey showed generally good relationships with the rehabilitation sector. It also highlighted that groups with a structured and reciprocal relationship in place with their local practice are more likely to benefit from the services the practice can provide.

Accreditation is a positive move along with standards of animal care and record keeping.

Under accreditation: WR will have systems in place for ensuring they engage with veterinary practitioners in a consistent, positive and ethical manner. They need to have documented procedures for volunteers who work with veterinary practices.

In relation to the compliance audit: A wildlife rehabilitator compliance audit was undertaken which reviewed at least 50 wildlife carers across the state. The audit found a generally high level of compliance with the requirements of their licences, the policy and relevant codes of practice. However, this audit did not assess rehabilitators relationship with veterinarians.

Recommendations

The Australian Veterinary Association agrees in principle; but recommends the following based on the above discussion points.

- 1 The aims of the Strategy should be adequately resourced for implementation and there needs to be good oversight.
- 2 The AVA should be the veterinary 'peak body' mentioned in the Strategy for collaboration. The word 'industry' should become 'profession' and reference to record keeping for veterinarians should be deleted as veterinarians are already bound by the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* to keep good records.
- 3 The funding for professional development for veterinarians is a welcome initiative. This should be delivered in collaboration with the AVA, as practitioners are the first port of call for most injured or sick wildlife.
- 4 There should be a funding source established to compensate vet practitioners for the cost of treating wildlife. The Victorian government have just recently agreed to pay vets who do call outs to kangaroos that need to be darted and removed from public areas. It would be good if the NSW government put aside a fund to at least pay vets' drug and treatment costs (if not their time) in treating and euthanasing wildlife.
- 5 The planned wildlife care training for veterinarians and veterinary nurses should be well resourced and be readily available to practitioners outside the main cities.
- 6 The Strategy when implemented over the next three years should ensure information about the changes are available to veterinarians. This could be achieved with advice from the AVA.
- 7 The requirement of wildlife rehabilitators, to be accredited, to have systems in place for ensuring they engage with veterinary practitioners in a consistent, positive and ethical manner is an excellent initiative and will enhance the relationship between veterinarians and rehabilitators.
- 8 The introduction of a single wildlife number is a good initiative and will lead to better cohesion across the sector.
- 9 Post release survival of rehabilitated wildlife is an ongoing animal welfare issue. There is little research on this and that which is available highlights lack of knowledge and generally poor outcomes. Collection of data on post-release survival should be a priority. Although under the Strategy funding will be available for post-release monitoring of koalas....and will 'explore opportunities with others for other species' more should be done. There should be more research on post-release survival as part of the Strategy. The Strategy states that about 34% of native animals rescued are rehabilitated and released. It's important to know what happens to these animals so that good evidence-based guidance can be formulated for veterinarians and rehabilitators.