

OEH NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy

Background Issues

This strategy needs to be understood in the context of legislation, strategies, plans and licencing currently in place, or proposed to be implemented within NSW. These include, but are not limited to:

- The Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 which took a 'risk-based approach' to regulating human-wildlife interactions, allowing some 'low' and 'moderate' risk activities to be exempted from requiring a licence.
- The various remaining licences which enable holders to harm/cull/ harvest native animals, including harming threatened species - the public registers contain details of such licences.

Very few of the licences granted to harm threatened animals seem to have any remediation strategies, generally being for the removal of nesting or food trees – see the public register for harming threatened species (download) on this site

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/threatenedspecies/S91Tscaregisterbydate.htm>

The Standard Operating Procedures for harming native animals are not readily available on the OEH site, so it is unclear what means can be taken to harm wildlife, or if any secondary issues such as predation on corpses is covered. The licence conditions appear to focus largely on reporting rather than being animal welfare focused or requiring humane treatment.

- Proposals to enable members of the public to keep an expanded range of native animals as pets. It is unclear what, if any, checks, guidelines or training will be put in place before a native animal can be kept as a pet.
- Loss of habitat through natural causes such as bushfires, drought or flooding, as well as land clearing for roadworks, farming or other industry which reduces the ability of native animal populations to survive.
- Lack of controls over predator animals, including wild dogs and feral animals which attack and injure wildlife.
- Lack of qualified wildlife veterinary staff and dedicated facilities in many parts of the State, with wildlife generally having to compete for time with domestic or farm animals in private veterinary practices. It should be noted that vets and vet nurses in the Northern Rivers provide invaluable services to wildlife and that their contribution is most appreciated. Currumbin Wildlife Hospital is also a valued resource for wildlife carers.

In addition, there are numerous, fragmented groups across the state, all operating semi-independently. WIRES, while being the largest single organisation, does not have state-wide coverage, nor are all branches 'equal' in terms of their current capacity to undertake the full range of activities expected under this strategy.

Some areas have a good coverage of wildlife groups, others may be fragmented or have no local groups at all. There is a balancing act to be achieved between keeping groups locally run and responsive to local needs and conditions, with the need for 'critical mass' sized groups to be able to maintain standards, raise revenue and achieve the outcomes expected under this strategy.

All these factors have an effect on the capacity of wildlife rehabilitation groups to care for injured and orphaned native animals, and to successfully release them back to the wild when they have recovered full fitness or are old enough to survive independently.

Volunteer Support and Culture

Competition for volunteers is intensive, perhaps especially so in rural areas. Wildlife carers, in addition to the time involved, also may need to expend considerable funds to undertake wildlife care or related voluntary activities. A volunteer at an 'op shop' for example will generally have no membership fees, no training fees, no requirement to purchase food, equipment or other infrastructure items for animals and may also have 'defined' times when they can volunteer.

For wildlife carers, it can be a full time, long-term, round the clock commitment. Support needs to be more than just training and having 'kits' or other 'opportunities to augment home-based care' – it needs to be practical and of sufficient quality and quantity to attract those people who passionately care for wildlife, but who may simply not have the financial or other resources to commit to the task. If the outcome is that 'volunteers have more capacity to meet the demands of wildlife care' – the 'more' must be substantial, not merely band-aid solutions. Succession planning and the capability and capacity of new leaders is a critical issue for most, if not all, groups.

In terms of the specific proposals, **meeting National Standards** is a good and worthwhile objective. This is necessary for both the volunteers own understanding of their role but also their ability to provide the best care for animals. Some of the proposed initiatives will help volunteers achieve standardised care standards.

It is unclear how a '**welcome kit**' for volunteers might be developed as a generic product. While meeting state-wide standards and the ethics and values of wildlife rehabilitation may be covered, the 'policies and procedures' of the individual wildlife groups could vary significantly. A video of OEH appreciation and expectations is a good idea.

Online training in governance/management for wildlife groups is a good idea – there are courses which exist online for WIRES but again, these may be organisation-specific, rather than generic.

A new peak body is in theory a good idea – though the purpose of it or the alternative Advisory Board and its relationship (and influence/control) over member wildlife groups would need to be very clear to all, and be more than 'motherhood statements' – the actions must follow along with the resources.

Would a bolder move be to try and encourage (force?) **existing wildlife groups to join together** to not only share the resources available, but to provide a **full state-wide integrated service**? While many wildlife groups may be reluctant to give up their autonomy, might they do so for a share of greater resources? If the government can 'force' local council amalgamations, they could potentially also force licenced/funded/accredited wildlife groups to do the same. Some areas of the state seem to be well supported with multiple wildlife groups (e.g. the Northern Rivers, with 4 separate groups), while others may struggle to have sufficient rescuers and carers on the ground to meet public expectations and demand. It is recognised of course that groups are made up of diverse individuals, and that not all those who want to be wildlife carers will automatically 'fit' into any particular group. Cultural differences between, and within, groups are real, and need to be factored in to any discussions.

Some of the **key initiatives** in this area are **good in theory but could be difficult to implement** in practice – e.g. **putting enclosures built by wildlife rehabilitation providers on government or corporate owned land** – how would groups ensure their property (and the animals within the enclosures) are safe from interference/vandalism/people who want to 'free' these captive animals or take them from enclosures as pets? This would work for very few species. Mostly we need to have carers living on site to allow soft release.

Similarly, would a charter for **volunteer engagement with veterinary practices** depend on the individual vet practice? Would there be any requirement on practices to adhere to the charter?

Species training teams, which all groups could use, is a potentially good idea. It is important though that existing trainers and materials are considered, instead of reinventing the wheel. Consistency of training and practices can be difficult, especially for long-established groups/carers who may be reluctant to change. There needs to be an openness and responsiveness to new ideas and practices from all groups, including those responsible for preparing training resources. There is a need for both introductory training for new carers, but also advanced training, where input from vets and other experts is sought and included.

Improving the sector's access to funding – this is a major issue for wildlife care groups. Some are able to do very effective fundraising, but others may struggle, particularly in identifying and responding to grant opportunities. Having small groups effectively compete for funds, or joining with others at a regional level may be easier said than done. Grant writing is a skill which not all groups may have. It is hoped that the \$1.2m delivers more than simply 'a program to support and engage wildlife carers ...' – it sounds as if the funds will be used for basically government/consultants(?) administrative work, rather than flowing through to wildlife groups? Strategies and proposals are good and necessary, but more so is action.

It is also important that if OEH standards change, resources are allocated to assist groups to comply with them – e.g. changes to the size/configuration of enclosures can impose significant costs for groups and individuals. It is not a lack of will by groups to make the changes or adhere to new standards, more a lack of resources, both financial and human. Consideration should be given to 'grandfathering' existing enclosures/cages as long as the sizes used are conducive to animal well being. It should be noted though that it is important that a consistent message on native animal care is given to everyone, including those currently, and potentially, able to have native wildlife as 'pets'. The chances of inappropriate care are likely to be higher in the general public than for dedicated wildlife care group members.

Standards of care and training

Standardised training is essential. Every native animal deserves to receive the best and most up to date care, which includes not only initial training and follow up, but information on new or emerging issues relating to the species - e.g. the appearance of a new disease or syndrome within a species. Obtaining assistance to deal with these situations has been fraught with difficulties. As with the previous comments, it is important to **build on what exists**, e.g. WIRES training is exceptional in many areas, rather than wasting resources starting from a blank slate.

The **workshops are a very good idea.** Some already happen e.g. in the Northern Rivers, a workshop on botulism in flying-foxes is being held for local wildlife groups, facilitated by the veterinarian from Local Land Services. However, the 'tyranny of distance' is a reality for many wildlife carers, so better means of dissemination, such as webinars, podcasts etc. would help more remote carers to keep up to date with the latest developments.

Species coordinator and mentor support is a key part of wildlife groups maintaining high standards of care. This is possible in groups with a good base of experienced carers, but small groups may have limited capacity to provide the level of mentorship/supervision envisaged under the strategy. The loss of a single volunteer in some groups may leave a large hole.

Wildlife training for veterinary staff is a major issue. Vets and vet nurses do the best they can, but without relevant training may not be providing optimal triage or treatment for wildlife. In addition to training, early collaboration between veterinary staff and wildlife groups is essential to plan the animal's journey through the system.

The **triage and treatment protocols need to be incorporated into training**. Training/care materials will need to be continually updated to ensure their currency.

Compliance with standards is important. But resources for the proposed compliance audits etc need to be forthcoming. Asking groups to do more without getting 'more' either in terms of human or financial resources, is a difficult situation for many groups.

Knowledge and Information Access

Maintaining **adequate and accurate information on wildlife** coming into the care of wildlife groups is challenging. Many wildlife groups may be using old technology or systems which are inflexible or not maintained, while others may be running spreadsheets, which, depending on their nature, might be difficult to extract information for useful purposes. While a state-wide IT system may be the ideal, such a solution would be many years in the development. It is critical that OEH clearly defines MINIMUM data collection standards, with wildlife groups free to gather additional information they find useful. WIRES is currently developing a new IT system – this has been several years in the planning and will also be several years in the full implementation.

Post release monitoring is welcome, though potentially challenging. We await further information on what might be proposed in this area. Some animal banding programs already exist, but for a limited range of animals. Funding to expand the banding program would be welcome. However, a major issue with post-release monitoring is the need to ensure a safe environment into which to release the animals in the first place, so control of feral animals is essential. Individual wildlife carers are not able to meet the substantial costs of ensuring control of wild dogs for example. As these feral animals also affect domestic and farm animals, everyone would benefit from improved and sustained control, of feral pests.

Community awareness and recognition

Public information and education are key roles for many groups, but resources and expertise can be limited, particularly for smaller groups. Resources which all groups can access would be welcome, but again, these should build on what exists, not start from scratch.

A **single wildlife rescue number** is in theory a good idea. The practicality of 'finding the right person to help them if they find sick or injured wildlife' is another matter entirely. How would this work?

- Is this a 'staffed' service or simply an automated redirection service to the nearest group – assuming this can be determined from the incoming call?
- If it is a staffed service, would this be a government run service, or only government funded with the operations tendered out to private enterprise or to a wildlife rescue organisation? Or is it expected that an existing organisation will simply pick up the extra work/costs?
- If the single rescue number service IS responsible for finding 'the right person', it may be simple in some instances, e.g. a contained animal reported at 10am on a Tuesday, which the single number service can ask the member of the public to take to the local vet practice. But if it is an injured macropod with a viable joey on a country road at 3am on Sunday morning, how will the required rescue be delivered? In these cases we need rescuers, shooters/police to get to the site asap.

- If the single number service provider IS 'finding the right person' would it need a list of all registered/accredited wildlife carers or only groups? Would groups be compelled to provide details of all their members, including when they are available for rescues?
- If the single rescue number service is NOT 'finding the right person' but simply relaying messages, how would it know which group to access, much less which individual carer? Local knowledge can be a valuable thing.
- If the single number service IS only passing on messages to wildlife groups, then would groups still need their local 'call centres' (usually just in a person's home, or sometimes at WIRES Sydney Rescue Office).
- If so, would this simply add another layer of administration/delay before a rescuer is sent to an animal? It seems from the following section that wildlife groups WILL be required to have 'an efficient phone rescue service' – so what benefits, if any, does the single number service actually have?
- Would it be a 24/7/365 service, regardless if it is or is not 'finding the right person'? Many groups run this service and would be reluctant to have it replaced with a business or limited hours service only. Again, larger regional groups could potentially go some way to alleviating the need for multiple services covering the same area.

Running a **24-hour rescue phone line** is, for many wildlife groups, a very difficult and expensive proposition. Volunteers willing and able to undertake this can be hard to find, and there are examples even within WIRES branches, where staffing such a service at the local level has become unviable. As a key frontline service, far more support for wildlife groups to maintain these services would be exceptionally welcome. Some mutual obligation schemes have been beneficial in enabling some members to undertake hotline work, but support for IT and phone costs would enable many others to also contribute.

Community education and promotion of volunteer participation in wildlife rehabilitation are needed, and any additions to the available resources is welcome. As with previous comments a wide variety of resources for community education and on websites and social media already exist, and it is hoped that efforts are directed to enhancing and building on these, rather than starting from scratch.

Government support and regulation

The move from licencing to accreditation is in line with many other areas of community volunteering operations, and is welcomed. However, this change should consider a real improvement in the ability to deliver services – with all options from larger regional group accreditation to accreditation for individual wildlife carers. There are many pros and cons to be considered at all levels on this possible spectrum, and only a full and meaningful assessment of them will result in a better 'system' which should, in turn, result in better care and hence outcomes for injured or orphaned wildlife.

This section also requires wildlife groups to have an efficient phone rescue service – as above, how will this work with the single number service?

In relation to specific accreditation issues, the **transition period will be critical**. Many groups may be unable to implement the range of changes envisaged without a significant injection of financial or other resources.

The ability to have up to 20% of members from outside the geographic area may be very helpful to many groups. However it would need to be supplemented by protocols between groups, so that animal care is not compromised – if a member outside the area rescues an animal for which they are not a carer, which group becomes responsible for its care – the ‘rescuing’ group or the ‘area where found’ group?

As noted above, while it is recognised that wildlife care groups and members need to maintain good governance, have appropriate training and support and comply with, and be audited on their standards of care, the same conditions should, surely, be applied to non-accredited members of the public who can currently keep many native animals as pets, with the unhappy prospect that many more species may be added to the list. You only need to see the appalling conditions in which many dogs and cats are kept by people, and the sad and necessary euthanasia of the scores of unwanted pets which flood animal shelters to know that this will be an inevitable consequence of any relaxation of the laws allowing wild animals to become tame pets.

Summary

Many of the initiatives and proposals in the strategy will help move the sector forward. But the key issues remain – resourcing a sector where volunteers are generally aging and may not be well resourced to undertake the range of individual or organisational skills upgrades envisaged. Groups are continually balancing their financial and human resource expenditure across a wide range of activities – 24 hour hotlines, rescue and care, public education, media, fundraising and reporting for example. Saving resources on public education, training and fundraising materials by accessing state-wide resources will help. Better consistent standards and training will help. But the bottom line is, wildlife groups need more capable and experienced ‘bums on seats’ and the facilities to support rescue and care activities to adequately give our native injured and orphaned animals the care and attention they deserve. We need to do all we can for our wildlife. When a species is gone, it is gone.