

Submission to the Independent Biodiversity Legislation Review Panel

By email : biodiversity.legislationreview@environment.nsw.gov.au

Re: Theme 5: Wildlife management

Native animals are a clear and acknowledged part of biodiversity at an individual level; at a species level and at a population level. Volunteers provide a significant service with regard to wildlife rescue and rehabilitation, and they spend many hours of time and many dollars doing so. Each year tens of thousands of native animals are presented for care after being discovered sick or injured by members of the community. Members of the public also contribute financially – annually in the order of several million dollars – through donations to wildlife rescue organisations. The support from volunteers and members of the public assist the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) discharge its duty to wildlife.

The current framework for wildlife licensing is failing the wildlife, the volunteers and members of the public.

The current system of licensing is inequitable and inconsistent across the state.

Individuals are severely limited if not excluded, from gaining a licence to rescue and rehabilitate wildlife regardless of their experience and expertise.

The current system states that only one licensed organisation is preferred in any area. However most areas already have more than one, and sometimes four, licensed organisations in the area. Despite this, new organisations are now prevented from gaining a licence if there is already one licensed organisation in the area. This inconsistent restriction is not supported by any evidence that only one organisation per area is best practice.

There is evidence though, that areas with fewer licensed organisations have had significant problems. This evidence has been provided to OEH, and the evidence is also available on public forum. These problems relate to animal welfare issues; improper management of volunteers including harassment, intimidation and ostracism; governance issues and questionable financial accountability. This is particularly so with one of the largest wildlife rescue and rehabilitation organisations.

OEH in general and the Licensing Unit in particular have seemingly divested the responsibility of oversight of the organisations to which a licence has been issued.

Monitoring of animal welfare and wildlife care standards has devolved to the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). This can be problematic, and possibly ineffectual, as permission to act, and enter private premises needs to be initiated and/or gained from either the organisation and/or the individual being reviewed. The extra responsibility also places extra pressure on an already stretched service, particularly in rural and regional areas that encompass large areas and long travel times.

Volunteers with concerns relating to governance within a licensed organisation have been advised by the Licensing Unit to address their concerns to the Department of Fair Trading. It appears though the Associations Incorporation Act does not give the Department of Fair Trading the power to investigate internal problems within wildlife rescue and rehabilitation organisations. This leaves volunteers at the mercy of the very same organisation with which they may have considerable concern and complaint. Disenfranchised volunteers who are in an area where there is only one licensed organisation have no option but to cease assisting wildlife.

Members of the public have little or no control of financial disclosure from the licensed organisation. However there is internal evidence that one of the largest licensed rescue and rehabilitation organisations directs the largest proportion of public donations to administration costs and a lesser proportion to direct animal support.

Improvements to wildlife management in relation to rescue and rehabilitation should include:

1. Increased individual and /or small locally based organisations.
This framework has been proven to be effective in groups such as Landcare.
Locally based organisations provide opportunity for the community to take possession and therefore promote responsibility for the future of our biodiversity.
2. Licence application and approvals based on merit.
Experience and expertise should be the main selection criteria in the assessment process for individuals and/or organisations involved in the complexities of wildlife support and management.
3. Licence conditional on maintaining membership of the NSW Wildlife Council.
The following list outlines the benefits of affiliation with the peak body
 - Each member will get representation on the peak representative body governing wildlife rehabilitation across the State.
 - A collective voice on all issues relating to wildlife rehabilitation enabling liaison with Government departments on the standards of care for wildlife rehabilitation.
 - Membership will give representation on a body that has the expertise to monitor and assist the quality and viability of all wildlife care groups across the state.
 - Affiliation will give easy access to a network of stakeholders across the state with regard to information and education for volunteers.
 - Financial membership of the Council provides affordable public liability insurance.
 - Conflict resolution is improved as members have a voice.
4. Regulatory bodies should focus on broad-based support to licensees.
The provision of systems for consistent state-wide data collection; and coordination of large scale events such as oil spills and mass strandings are consistent with, and best supported by, the resources of government agencies.

In summary:

- **Native animals must be given optimal support to ensure continuing biodiversity.**
- **Volunteers willing and able to assist native animals should enjoy the same level of protection as members of the paid workforce.**
- **Members of the public are entitled to expect accountability for the money invested in our wildlife.**

Making wildlife rehabilitation and release a desirable and effective part of biodiversity conservation may not be easy, but it is essential if we are to address the challenges that our native animals are facing, and to slow the decline of biodiversity in New South Wales.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the review.

Imelda Jennings

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