

CODE OF PRACTICE FOR WILDLIFE REHABILITATORS

What the Code of Practice is

The Code is a document that aims to stimulate soul-searching by people wishing to rehabilitate wildlife. The Code intends to highlight the best interests of the animal and encourage people to deal with them in a way conducive to their return to the wild. It is not intended to overly restrict peoples access to and enjoyment of wildlife beyond what is consistent with the above. The public is an extremely valuable resource in the conservation of wildlife and that includes rescue and rehabilitation.

The Need for the Code

The need has arisen from repeated examples of wildlife being rescued in the best of faith but because of inappropriate treatment being unable to be released. That is, rescued animals have been made into pets, sometimes socially crippled by their dependency on humans. All too often the best interests of the animal are twisted into the best interests of the so-called rehabilitators. It is obvious that certain domestic contact with wildlife is not in the best interest of rehabilitation. Common examples of this involve Wombats and Forester Kangaroos (Eastern Grey Kangaroos) which have been genuinely rescued, but only lip service paid to rehabilitation and the animals become pets. If the spirit of the Code were followed this would not happen. Wildlife must be kept in conditions as natural as possible. With social species this may mean some social contact with others of the same species. Although marsupials may need intensive, 'hands on' care for considerable periods; the weaning process should be applied to social as well as nutritional factors.

Ultimately, animal welfare legislation exists which allows the removal of cruelly treated animals but this does not encompass inappropriate treatment; hence the need for the Code.

The Use of the Code

Current Department policy is that permits for rehabilitation of protected wildlife are temporary and issued on condition that rehabilitation is undertaken. Treatment that is not in the best interests of rehabilitation can result in cancellation of the permit and confiscation of the animal. We wish to use the Code as education and an explanation of this policy and its adoption should eliminate the need for such drastic action. It is intended that before rehabilitation permits for protected wildlife are issued the Department will require that the applicant agrees to abide by the Code.

However, most wildlife rehabilitation concerns species for which a permit is not needed but for which the same standards of rehabilitation are required. Obviously, it would be best if people rehabilitating this wildlife also agreed to abide by the Code. So, to be realistic, adherence to the Code can only be voluntary. Hopefully, peoples' ethics and goodwill can work well enough.

Decisions to be Made

It is important to distinguish wildlife *rescue* from wildlife *rehabilitation*.

Wildlife *rescuers* can be anyone helping distressed wildlife. The law accepts that anyone may find themselves in this position and accepts acts of good faith. In fact, the law requires that some effort should be made to relieve the suffering. Nobody who genuinely rescues wildlife and then makes the proper contacts for veterinary advice has run foul of the law.

Wildlife *rehabilitators* are those who aim to place the wildlife back in the wild with a chance of survival comparable to what it would have had in nature.

People who rehabilitate wildlife will often be called on to also rescue wildlife so it is best to consider the wider issues.

The main concern during the rescue of an animal is to minimise any additional distress experienced by the animal. Once the animal has been captured, urgency diminishes and considered decisions for its future must be made. Options at this point are as follows:

- immediate relocation/release
- euthanasia
- retain the animal with the intention of rehabilitation
- retain the animal without intention of rehabilitation

Except in cases of obvious great pain which cannot be quickly relieved euthanasia is rarely immediately necessary. Veterinarians, the police or wildlife authorities are an obvious choice for helping with euthanasia. However, transport to a vet may bring considerable additional pain and at times it may be best to be decisive and do it 'on the spot'. In these circumstances extreme trauma, such as by a very heavy blow to the head, is often the most humane method, even if distasteful to those present.

If protected wildlife is euthanased it is best to notify wildlife authorities as soon as possible. This at least gives the option of use of the specimen for scientific or education purposes. It may also circumvent misunderstandings generated by second-hand reports.

The next decision regards veterinary attention. This must be sought whenever possible even when experienced rescuers/rehabilitators are available. Veterinarians have their own Code of Practice and they should give at least emergency treatment or advice. Modern veterinary techniques mean many problems, which were previously untreatable, can nowadays be successfully dealt with. Once initial assessment/treatment has been carried out wildlife authorities must be contacted for permit issue if possession of the wildlife species requires such. Check with them.

Following initial treatment, a decision must be made on how the animal's husbandry should be organised to suit rehabilitation.

As soon as possible, a decision must be made as to whether the animal can be rehabilitated or not. This will largely depend on the original cause of distress and the type of animal concerned; an active predator such as a bat obviously needs to reach a higher standard than might a brush possum but the differences are not as great as many people believe. A prognosis can be made for most cases (e.g. orphans) at the time of initial treatment. However, for other cases (e.g. a bone break) there may be a 'wait and see' period. Once a decision has been made on the long-term future of the animal other decisions regarding husbandry naturally follow.

Communication and Records

It is important that the opinions of people who have previously dealt successfully with related wildlife problems be consulted. These may be veterinarians, wildlife authorities, wildlife rehabilitators, zoos or wildlife parks. Usually wildlife authorities (Nature Conservation Branch within the Department of Primary Industries Water & Environment or the Parks and Wildlife Service,) have the widest range of experience and contacts. Use them.

Keep a comprehensive diary and photo album. This helps you and others to learn and reduces mistakes and misunderstandings.

Protected wildlife that cannot be released will probably be dealt with directly by wildlife authorities. Only very rarely are permits given to private persons to keep such animals as pets.

Responsibility

The decision to rehabilitate an animal involves much responsibility. A Carer will have a great effect on the animal's chance of survival. It is vital to seek help if all is not well and to communicate with others to share successful techniques. Stress related to captivity can dramatically change metabolism, immunity, fitness and accident rates.

Carers will also be responsible for the safety of wildlife under their care. Contact with animals and objects that, if too familiar, could be dangerous once the wildlife is again in the wild should be minimised. This, of course, means people, pets and vehicles.

Most rescued wildlife can be rehabilitated with very little contact with people. People must sacrifice some enjoyment of contact for satisfaction of an animal well rehabilitated. A very tame animal has little future in most parts of Tasmania.

Simply put - if you are not prepared to put the interests of the animal first (or equal first) you probably should not be rehabilitating wildlife.

Wildlife as Pets

In recent years there have been suggestions that more wildlife should be allowed as pets, partly to replace dogs and cats. Many issues are involved, not the least the suitability of the native species as pets. Our traditional pets and livestock are social species that we can manipulate behaviorally to slot into our own systems. Even cats are manipulated to be social by petting and feeding which keeps them in their kitten stage. Only one Tasmanian land mammal, the Forester Kangaroo, is social and large individuals can be dangerous and they cannot be controlled by voice and action, as can dogs. Consider the problems we still have with dogs despite thousands of years of selective breeding.

It has been argued that native carnivores (usually the Eastern Quoll) are suitable for replacing cats. However quolls are nowhere as easily controlled, are strictly nocturnal and usually only live in captivity for 3 to 4 years, much less than cats. No Tasmanian wildlife is compatible with dogs and cats as a whole, so their adoption as pets would have to be preceded by removal of dogs and cats. No one can see this happening.

Without question the removal of cats would have great benefits for Tasmanian wildlife. However, we believe they would be best replaced by one or more of the many breeds of dog. At least they can be better controlled.

Experience with other wildlife has shown that once a pet trade is established depletion of wild stock is an inevitable consequence. Most wildlife has enough problems already.

Although there are some positive arguments for increasing the availability of wildlife as pets we believe it is unnecessary and would only result in a net increase in pressure on their wild populations. Far better to enjoy wild animals and cater to people's desires for close contact by responsible wildlife rehabilitation.

Nick Mooney
WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT OFFICER
NATURE CONSERVATION BRANCH
DEPT PRIMARY INDUSTRIES, WATER AND ENVIRONMENT
GPO Box 44, Hobart 7001
Phone: 03 6233 3083 Fax: 03 6233 3477