

NEW SOUTH WALES WILDLIFE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

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Chair - WRC Steering Committee

Background

In NSW, all wildlife carers are licensed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, which is now part of the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation. Without a 'peak body' we don't have all the information needed, even the total number of volunteers, but we estimate it to be between four thousand and five thousand. That includes the estimated membership of the various groups, so it includes administrative helpers, and volunteers who are not actively involved in hands-on wildlife rescue and rehabilitation. There are 28 identified wildlife groups (give or take a couple), although this is also in a state of flux at present with some groups considering merging their efforts. It is National Parks written policy to encourage any people wanting to get into wildlife rehabilitation to join an approved rehabilitation group if there is one nearby. The individuals are then authorised to rehabilitate under the group's license, after ensuring that they meet the necessary criteria.

There are currently about 30 or so individually licensed wildlife carers in NSW.

A Short History

The process of forming a state body had its origins at the 2003 National Wildlife Carers' Conference at Werribee in Victoria when Peter Myroniuk and Greg Gordon argued in favour of a national body.

In the following year, the National Parks & Wildlife Service of NSW held a series of workshops involving people from wildlife groups across NSW. At the 2004 Conference, Brendon Neilly presented NPWS findings. Many other speakers also hammered home the importance of wildlife groups 'getting their act together' to attract better funding, coordinate research, and to provide a conduit to government agencies. At that conference, it was decided that a 'federated' model would work best.

States create their own organisation, and these can cooperate to form a national body.

The 2004 Conference Organising Committee morphed into the Working Party, to seek representation from all groups in NSW, so we could agree the best approach.

In April 2005, the first meeting of the NSW Steering Committee was held.

The Steering Committee

There were originally 23 people on the steering committee, representing fifteen different groups. Two of the 23 were individual general license holders. Later, three members resigned for various reasons. This had no serious impact on the Steering Committee as they were each from groups that had more than one representative.

The committee 'self selected' - which is to say that all eligible applicants were included because they were prepared to put in the time and effort, and to make their own (sometimes quite lengthy) way to Sydney.

Some applicants represented the interests of two or three groups, particularly where several groups overlapped in the areas they served. Although we met only once per month, we were in constant communication through an online discussion group called 'Wildlife Rehabilitation Alliance of NSW' - or WRAN, which was a nifty acronym for people in NSW.

One of the first things we learned was that we all had our own ideas, and if we were to get anywhere, we were going to have to compromise, or end up like the committee in this picture, who decided to work on until everyone was happy!

Steering Committee Participants

A quick list of the organisations represented by the 23 people on the Committee includes the following.

- . AWARE
- . FAWNA NSW
- . Friends of the Koala
- . Independent Licence Holders
- . Koala Preservation Society
- . Native Animal Network Assn
- . Native Animal Trust Fund
- . Northern Rivers Wildlife Carers
- . Northern Tablelands Wildlife Carers
- . RRANA Broken Hill
- . Sydney Wildlife
- . Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers
- . Wildcare Queanbeyan
- . WIRES

WIRES had representatives from several branches, and as mentioned before, two of the people were independent licence holders.

Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (WRC) Mission

Our Steering Committee set out to create a framework, which we hope will be a useful starting point for the appointed council members. We are indebted to Adrian Caneris for sharing his experiences in Queensland with us at the outset. One thing that we were able to agree very quickly and unanimously was this simple mission statement.

"To achieve better outcomes for wildlife"

While it could be more detailed, we felt that it encompassed everything that we went on to discuss, including the need for us to work towards the preservation of habitat. There's not much point doing what we do if there's nowhere to go when the animal recovers.

WRC Objectives

In full, the SC decided that the Council will:

- Act as the peak representative body for licensed wildlife rehabilitators in New South Wales.
- Foster the sharing of available resources among rehabilitators and will collect, assemble and disseminate accurate and up to date information on all aspects of wildlife care, rescue, rehabilitation and release.
- Develop State/National standards and codes of practice for both captive wildlife management and the training of rehabilitators and through education and training maximize the welfare outcomes for native animals.
- Act as an independent advisory Council to all levels of Government, business and the community on wildlife rehabilitation and habitat conservation.
- Work with equivalent councils from other states and territories towards the creation of a National Wildlife Rehabilitation Council.

- Work for the interests and needs of wildlife rehabilitators
- Undertake such other representations, programs and activities as may, at the discretion of Council, be considered necessary and proper.

WRC Functions

The Steering Committee also agreed that, while it wasn't our place to 'instruct' the Council, we did want to pass on the results of our discussions and deliberations. We added that the Council may pursue its objectives by engaging in the following:

- Establish and maintain (within the legislative and regulatory framework) codes of practice and State/National standards for wildlife care.
- Promote the registration of education and training standards for licensed wildlife rehabilitators. - (We felt that a new standardised approach, already being considered by some groups, was the right way to go).
- Provide considered advice on any wildlife care/rehabilitation matters where applicable. (This might be to government, industry, wildlife groups, the media or any number of others who might seek advice in regard to the rehabilitation and welfare of Australian native animals).
- Promote networking and dialogue between all those involved in wildlife health and welfare. (For anyone who had not already realised it, events such as this conference, and shared training is an essential way of sharing information, which will eventually result in improved care for wildlife).

Other functions identified by the steering committee are:

- Represent and provide a collective voice for its constituents.
- Liaise with relevant government ministers and departments regarding the work and outcomes of the Council.
- Establish working groups or seek wider consultation to assist it in carrying out its functions as deemed necessary
- Advance and promote community awareness, interest and support for native wildlife welfare and conservation.
- Seek funding for pursuing the Council's objectives.
- Liaise with other State Councils in the creation of a National Council.

Membership

The Steering Committee determined the initial rules for Appointment of Members

- Members will be appointed from affiliated licensed carer groups and will constitute the voting membership of the NSW WRC. The affiliated licensed carer groups will determine the method of appointment of their representatives.
- The number of members each licence holder is entitled to on the WRC will be one per licence and one group vote for independent licence holders. Each licence holder will nominate an alternate member. The member and alternate must be endorsed by the appointing group's Board or Management Committee

- Persons will be elected by fellow WRC members for the positions of chair, vice-chair, secretary and treasurer (or secretary/treasurer). There shall be bi-annual elections for these positions.
- The Council will instigate a mechanism to allow variation to the representation entitlements of affiliated licensed carer groups and the process of representative selection.

From Here onwards.

Notice of the formation of the Council and an invitation for membership was sent to all licensed groups and individuals in NSW in early August. Nominations of a representative and alternative represent consistent with the initial rules for Appointment of Members are to be received by 30 September 2005. The handover to the new Council is planned to take place over a weekend in October to allow time for teambuilding, and discussion on a range of critical issues.

The Council will of course have to spend time on all those administrative tasks such as creating their constitution, registering as an association, electing their office bearers and so on.

The issue of how the Council will be funded to cover the cost of their travel, and meetings, and eventually their core activities has not yet been resolved. They will need to consider membership fees, grants, donations, fundraisers, and all the usual options.

Very early on the WRC - in cooperation with the member groups will need to determine what its priorities are - in addition to those administrative functions I just mentioned. While we have suggested some, such as standards & training, they will need to go into far more detail. The WRC must concentrate on effectively communicating with wildlife groups, the government and other stakeholders to ensure they remain visible and relevant.

Will it Work?

Over the past 12 months some 20+ people have invested valuable time and have personally incurred costs to get the Council off the ground. Whether the SC has done enough to engage the State's wildlife carers remains to be seen.

There is still some degree of scepticism out there. That is to be expected: whenever there is change there will be those that doubt and oppose. There does not seem to be much outright opposition, but that might just mean it's all gone underground. We expect that there are some wildlife rehabilitators out there whose standards are not what we would hope for. No doubt they will not want the WRC (or anyone else) looking over their shoulders. However, I'd like to think that the WRC will help address this issue sometime in the near future. As always, it only takes one or two individuals to give thousands of dedicated, ethical carers a bad name. As has been pointed out recently by a member of our committee, it is all going to come down to opportunities - or benefits - versus cost. If wildlife groups are going to put time, money, and energy into supporting the WRC, they need to see that they are getting something of value in return.

The WRC will need to plan and deliver some early, high-profile wins. They don't have to be big, but they need to be worthwhile, and they need to be communicated effectively to all the WRC stakeholders, so we can all see the WRC achieving results, with the promise of more to come. So in the end, we may not be able to satisfy everyone's requirements, but maybe we can all learn to sing off the same song sheet. A little cooperation goes a long way.

Acknowledgements

It is important to recognise that we could not have got this far without a lot of cooperation. In particular I would like to thank:

- The International Fund for Animal Welfare for supporting us in many ways, especially during the first few months.
- The National Parks & Wildlife Service, for providing the venues and their support

- All 23 of the Steering Committee members who were prepared to roll up their sleeves and get stuck into this initiative
- Over the last few weeks, two SC members (Linda & Steve) who helped me put together the abstract and presentation
- And of course the Working Party members - who kicked off the process once they had recovered from organising last years conference!