

WILDLIFE CARERS AS ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

This research is looking at carers' perceptions of themselves as environmental educators. I asked carers to tell me about situations in which they felt they have been engaged in environmental education with a member of the public. From this, I have been able to draw a preliminary sketch of what environmental education by wildlife carers looks like - what they do, where they do it, how they do it and how long it takes. An interesting picture was also drawn of the types of people who take wildlife to carers, as perceived by the carers themselves. A simultaneous review of related literature indicates that the high percentage of common species in rehabilitation programs may not be a limiting factor, as some people have suggested, but rather an asset in any education programs offered by carers - either formal or informal. Further research is required to develop the sketch into a watercolour and to elaborate on subtle nuances. A more detailed analysis will be able to better inform training and education programs for carers, and to therefore improve environmental education outcomes.

Introduction

There are lots of 'theories' about wildlife caring and wildlife carers. Some are based on research, some on observation and others on supposition. They include:

- Wildlife rehabilitation has no real ecological value.
- Care for common species is just practice for when endangered species need care.
- Wildlife caring is just an animal welfare issue.
- There are greater health and psychological benefits for the carers than for the animals.
- Wildlife rehabilitation is just a feel good exercise for carers and the public.
- The greatest value in wildlife rehabilitation is public education.

To my knowledge, we don't really know the full ecological benefits or otherwise of wildlife rehabilitation. Endangered species definitely should go to more experienced carers. Yes, wildlife caring is about animal welfare, but not just animal welfare. There probably are health benefits for carers and yes, it does feel good to release healthy animals back into the wild. And, yes we do educate the public, but what do we know about this aspect of wildlife caring? Individual wildlife carers have little voice when we stand up and say that they are doing something worthwhile. This research is aimed at providing a collective voice and valid research to back up what we all know is something unique and important - environmental education by wildlife carers.

The research

I am enrolled in the research higher degree program at Griffith University and am working towards a doctoral degree. All research and ethics protocols have been approved by the university.

The data for this study came from permitted wildlife carers in Queensland who responded to an advertisement in an RnR newsletter in 2004. Four initial in depth open-ended interviews provided the framework for a questionnaire that was then completed by another twenty carers across Queensland. The group represented bird, mammal and reptile carers. The questions asked about the individual carer's perceptions of the role of wildlife carers as environmental educators, and about their own experiences with members of the general public.

The how, what, where and when of environmental education by wildlife carers

Although each carer's experience is different, there seems to be a pattern to interactions between wildlife carers and the general public. Most interactions are short. I did not ask people to tell me how short is 'short', but my guess would be certainly under half an hour and most likely no more than ten or fifteen minutes. The typical short interaction occurs when an animal is either dropped off at the carer's home, or picked up by the carer from a member of the public. Short contacts can also occur at community information days, during phone

Someone brings an injured bird to a carer's door. The carer asks for details such as where it was found, the circumstances etc. The carer performs a cursory examination and tells the person the general nature of the bird's injuries. The person asks what type of bird it is and what are its chances of survival?

calls from members of the public seeking advice about wildlife, some talks (particularly to children), and incidental meetings with the public (e.g. when gathering leaf tip for possums). The member of the public may learn the identity of the animal and some basic facts such as how old it is and what it eats. They may ask about the rehabilitation process. At times the public are not interested in learning, or in co-operating with the carer and such interactions can be quite frustrating.

Longer interactions, say more than half an hour, are much less common. There is no typical long contact but many of them are related to a rescue and then follow-up with the person after the rescue. Other longer interactions include: discussions with vets, neighbours and other carers; talks and community information displays; the rescue of 'special' species such as raptors that fascinate people and grab their interest; media interviews; carer training; and when the member of the public is somehow involved at the release stage. These interactions can be quite rewarding for the carer when they know they are talking with someone who is genuinely interested in what they have to say. Unfortunately

Someone brings an orphaned baby ringtail possum to the carer's house. The person describes in great detail the circumstances in which the possum was found and how they kept it warm and away from the kids. The person brought the kids along and asks if they could nurse the possum now. The carer says no and explains why, but offers to show the kids a crèche of older possums asleep in their artificial drey. One pops its head out and the kids are happy. The person asks if they could make an artificial drey for their backyard and the carer explains how to make it and where to place it. The person is very thankful for the carer's time and asks if they can ring in a few days to check the baby's progress.

though, these interactions are somewhat rare. The first four participants in the study were all suburban Brisbanites and they included some difficult problem-solving situations in the category of 'long interaction'. The one they particularly noted was trying to change the behaviours of chronic backyard feeders. There may be geographic differences in the nature of longer interactions between wildlife carers and members of the public.

In between these extremes there are interactions that may last from ten to thirty minutes. They are mostly long versions of what I described as a short interaction, or a short variation of the long interaction. That is, the person may ask a few more questions when they ring for advice, attend a community education display or deliver an animal, there may be some limited follow through on the animal's progress, the neighbour down the road might stop the carer for a 'quick chat' about something happening in the local area, or there may be a reasonably easy problem to solve.

A neighbour comes over to discuss an unusual bird sighting in the local park. They describe the bird and the carer confirms its identity. The neighbour tells the time of day it was seen and describes its general behaviour. The carer hypothesises as to why the bird may have suddenly appeared in the park and what possible environmental consequences there may be.

Who are the 'general public'?

There is wide variety in the types of people who take wildlife to carers, but the most common meeting seems to be with people who have limited wildlife knowledge some of whom are also quite "ego-centric" in the sense that their main concern is how wildlife impacts upon their life. They are focused primarily on what happens in their own backyard. When they ring a wildlife carer it is to hand the problem to someone else - wildlife is not their problem. They don't want to see the animal suffering, but are not particularly interested in its eventual outcome. Some just want the animal out of their yard, not harmed at all just removed. Interactions with these people can be very frustrating for carers.

Public: There's a peewee pecking at its reflection in the window and pooping all over the window sill.

Carer: Try putting paper on the outside of the window so it can't see its reflection.

Public: I'm not going to all that trouble; can't someone just come and get rid of it?

Carer: But another one would just move in and besides it's against the law.

Public: I just want it gone; it's messing up my window sills.

At the other extreme are the "eco-centric" people whose main concern is for the wildlife. These people are very aware of the impacts of humans on wildlife and are active in minimising their own negative impact of their part of planet Earth. Unfortunately, wildlife carers do not meet many of these people. This is possibly because they already know what to do and are quite capable of dealing with a concussed magpie lark or a swooping magpie without a carer's help. They are more tolerant of 'annoying' wildlife behaviours because they understand why the behaviour is occurring. These people are often quite happy to put in whatever effort is necessary to help the animal in need.

I know it's wrong to feed the ducks at the park but my son sees the other kids feeding them and he wants to feed them too. I know bread is not good for them. What else can my son feed to the ducks?

Of course there are countless individuals between these two extremes who have some understanding and are maybe on the journey towards the eco-centric end. It is possibly this group that carers can influence most. They may know little, but are prepared to learn more. Some may even change their behaviour in some way that will lessen their impact on wildlife. In this "middle-zone" there are two special groups of people who have some wildlife

knowledge but are keen to learn more - new carers and vets. New carers generally come to caring with some understanding of wildlife, but often not the detailed knowledge of experienced carers. While all vets have extensive knowledge of cats and dogs, not all have a high level of knowledge of birds and other wildlife. Carers have the time and opportunity to gather a vast amount of observed information that is not available to vets - even those with a keen interest in wildlife.

There is no doubt a large number of other people who never interact with wildlife carers. One group, for example, are the ones who walk past an injured animal without a second thought. Others may routinely take injured wildlife to a vet, but never actually speak to a wildlife carer. In some country areas there simply may be no wildlife carers to ask. And then there are the ones who try to do it themselves - it would be a wonderful experience for the kids to raise a seventy-five gram ringtail possum ... So, while I have described the people who interact with wildlife carers, this is just a small number of people within the wider community.

A man found a young tawny on the ground but could see other young and the parents in a nearby tree. He put the youngster on a branch nearby and rang a carer for further advice. The man checked on the tawny family every morning for two weeks, retrieving wayward young from the ground and even from the bottom of a bin in a glass recycling depot next door. After two weeks he rang the carer to say he was happy the young tawnies were flying well enough to now look after themselves.

The importance of common species

There is sometimes criticism that carers are wasting their time on common species. Ecological reasons aside, there are some very good educational reasons why common species are important. Many of the participants in my study lamented the lack of knowledge members of the public have of even the most common wildlife. So, even though these species may be common, they are not well-known. A review of literature in this area revealed more reasons why the predominance of common species in rehabilitation programs may not be a limiting factor, but rather an asset in any education programs offered by carers.

To begin with, the use of the terms 'common', 'rare', and 'threatened' belong to a classification system used by wildlife managers to prioritise resources towards those species that are at the greatest immediate risk of extinction. It is unfortunate that everyday use of the word 'common' implies lesser quality or significance, giving the overall impression that individual animals belonging to abundant species are of lesser value than individuals that belong to rare or endangered species. But is an individual red-necked wallaby really worth less than an individual bridled nail-tail wallaby?

It is possible for a species to be common in one part of its natural range and restricted in other parts. This is the case with some mammals found in the greater Brisbane area. Some mammals (e.g. squirrel glider, common brushtail possum) are described nationally as being rare or declining but are common in the greater Brisbane area. Others are common or abundant nationally but rare, restricted or uncommon at the local level (e.g. koala, greater glider). As well as variability in the abundance of whole species, there is variation within species that may also be important. When a local variety disappears, no species goes extinct but something unique is lost.

It is some species' abundance that may in fact be what makes it special. Each year, islands like Heron Island are inundated with thousands of breeding birds such as shearwaters and terns, and also with hundreds of bird watching tourists wishing to experience the phenomenon. It is abundance that makes these experiences special.

There are other common species that play an important role in defining human cultural heritage. Icon species such as kookaburras and kangaroos grasp the attention and interest of people who may otherwise have little interest in the natural world. From a cultural heritage perspective, it is important that these icon species remain common. I think the koala is a good example of an icon species that many Australians have never seen in the wild, and at this stage the situation is not likely to improve for the next generation.

Sometimes we get to know and understand common species in a way that is not possible with rare and distant species. We bond with and develop affection for what is common and familiar, and such a relationship with common wildlife may well act as a bridge to caring for the wider environment. Familiarity and intimacy with local species in local landscapes forms a foundation for wider environmental learning.

What happens when common species disappear from a local area? For the more ego-centric people described earlier who barely see beyond their back fence, the species might as well be fully extinct. A reduction in the diversity of daily encounters with the natural world is followed by loss of appreciation and concern, and ultimately the desire to conserve.

Implications

What then are the implications of this for wildlife carers? First, celebrate what you do. Pat yourselves on the back and say, "Yes, I am an environmental educator and I do it well." More education is always better, but we already do a lot. It's time that we acknowledged that, and that groups such as local councils acknowledged it too. Carers are already in local communities doing the job. Wouldn't it be nice if local councils could put up a bit of money to help them out with resources?

I believe that all carers have valuable skills, be it demonstrating a love for wildlife, or standing in front of a hundred people arguing to save a scrap of bushland. There are those who are good at speaking in front of a group, those that can draw amazing illustrations or take wonderful photographs, those that can write a ripping yarn, and those who show unsurpassed compassion. All are environmental educators. The purpose of my research is to formally acknowledge the environmental education that carers engage in day after day - firstly to ourselves, and secondly to others who may be blind to the rich resource sitting

under their noses. Every step a member of the public takes towards the eco-centric end of the spectrum is a good step for wildlife.

Recommendations

Further research is required to develop this sketch into a watercolour and to elaborate on subtle nuances. My own research is incomplete at this stage, but by the time I have finished I hope to have painted a detailed picture of environmental education by wildlife carers. A part of this process is embedding what we do in the relevant literature - this keeps the academics happy. Another crucial part is to ask as many carers as possible what they think of my sketch. I want to make sure that all carers can see themselves represented in this picture, making the picture as complete and as representative as possible.

Down the track, I would like to see a catalogue of 'best practices' in environmental education to guide training and education programs for carers, and to therefore improve environmental education outcomes. Most of us don't have time to do more than we already do, but by sharing ideas and resources, and with the support of other agencies, we have the opportunity to do it better.