

Wildlife Victoria in the 2006-2007 Fire Season in Victoria: Experiences and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT: This paper sets out to portray how Wildlife Victoria responded in the 2006-07 bushfire season in Victoria. It covers training and managing volunteers, working on a public appeal for financial support, seeking out and logistics of goods in kind donations, media management and working with the rest of the state. The paper will give a brief outline on the major fires and events and also look at how we are working with authorities to improve our response in the future.

Introduction

Victoria suffered under extreme fire conditions in the last fire season following on from a devastating 2005-06 season. The experiences for Wildlife Victoria during this season were multi-faceted and included managing donations of linen, medical supplies and money, rescuing distressed koalas and other animals, and facilitating training for shelter operators in management of burns in wildlife.

This paper is an informal examination of our experiences in the fire, what we learnt from our successes and mistakes and what we are doing to prepare for the next fire disaster. Wildlife Victoria is preparing a formal document that will be available in due course on request.

Wildlife Victoria

Wildlife Victoria has been operating as a State-wide wildlife rescue group since 1989. Our organisation has grown enormously since those small beginnings and we have recently formalised our mandate in the industry with the development of a new mission statement:

Wildlife Victoria is dedicated to the care and protection of Australia's native wildlife through the pursuit of the highest standards in wildlife rescue, rehabilitation and care, with continued commitment to carer support, education and training, wildlife advocacy, research, promotion of partnerships and the preservation of natural ecosystems

I have included this statement as it helps clarify some of the reasons behind what we undertook to do during the fire season. Some background into the wildlife rehabilitation system in Victoria will also help clarify some of the hurdles we have to overcome as an industry.

Experiences – Management of Resources

Training

In Victoria shelter licenses are given out individually on completion of a one year term as a foster carer under the tutelage of a licensed shelter operator or upon evidence of experience of wildlife care ie: being a wildlife carer in another State. This former system has a risk for the unfortunate outcome of 'the sins of the father' – bad practices being handed down from mentor to mentee. With this in mind Wildlife Victoria continues to facilitate and run training days to enable wildlife carers to learn latest practices and pursue highest possible standards in wildlife rescue, rehabilitation and care.



With respect to wildfire we promoted a standard training package, Assessment and Treatment of Burnt Wildlife that was developed by Dr Anne Fowler along with other wildlife carers after the early 2006 fires. This training package was presented by Dr Fowler in numerous regional areas across the state. Unfortunately the fire season arrived early and the training was still being run during, and subsequent to the 2006-07 fires and we are looking to run further training early in the last half of the year. Wildlife Victoria was heavily involved in promoting and coordinating these events although Dr Fowler herself usually initiated them. We are excited to hear the possibility that this training may be made available as an online course.

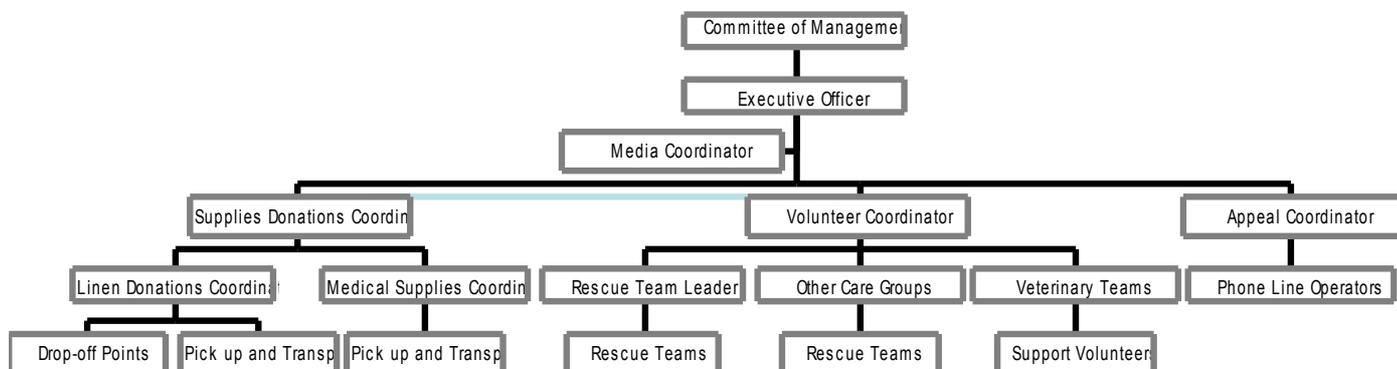
Wildlife Victoria also negotiated with the Department of Sustainability and Environment DSE for rescuers to undertake Basic Wildfire Awareness using the DSE online training package. Any Wildlife Victoria volunteer wanting to take part in search and rescue had to at least completed this basic package before being allowed into the fire ground and this became fairly standard protocol for most of the other groups participating.

As standard practice we also offer a basic course in rescue and transport of injured wildlife, minimally 4 times a year. We have three people who can teach this course and in the last year we ran this training day over ten times in various regional and metro locations.

Managing volunteers

There were various volunteer types including, but not limited to coordinators, rescuers, rehabbers and browse collectors. Early in the season Wildlife Vic called for help from within the membership for various roles. Over-all coordination was the task of the Executive Officer and if we had a flow-chart it may have looked a little like this:

Flow Chart - Management of Volunteers



The volunteering was broken up into 3 main parts, managing those who wanted to help with rescue, the donations of goods in kind and the Financial Appeal.

Goods in Kind - Linen

Donations of both linen and medical supplies were the predominant goods in kind donated during the fires. Linen was a major logistical effort and we had donations of towels, blankets and pillow slips from all over the state being offered. We appointed a linen coordinator whose role was to arrange for drop-off points across the state and arrange pick up and delivery to shelter operators who needed them. The drop-off points were usually shelter operators and due to the overwhelming response to a rumour that we needed these items we encouraged the shelter operators to keep any linen they could use themselves for their shelter or for their local network.

Although we did not actively seek out this type of donation we found that the media would print this in any article about wildlife affected by fires and members of the public were really happy and enthusiastic about being able to help in this way. Next time we will be very specific about the needs as we were donated a lot of items that we could not use at all. In fact most of the donated linen is still in storage and is being handed out to shelters at training days. Ideally we could use one drop-off point where volunteers could come in to sort through the linen and box up a selection of linen that could then be sent out to various places that needed it. There were people willing to travel to deliver goods to affected areas who could have been better utilised using this method.

Goods in Kind – Medical Supplies

We had large amounts of medical supplies donated, including drugs, which we were able to distribute via shelter operator's own vets. Other medical supplies donated were bandaging, syringes, gauze, saline etc. We sourced these donations from drug companies, hospitals and veterinary practices or quite often the companies would seek us out to donate.

We tended to ship these out to shelters as soon as they came in; the supply of goods in kind to shelter operators reduced their immediate expenses significantly. It also meant that reimbursements claims were lower. We had one person coordinating the donation of medical supplies. We also tried to ensure a small amount of supplies were distributed throughout the state in various locations (usually using Wildlife Victoria's Regional Coordinators) as a precaution and so that if fires did start up in any area there were some supplies to start with in case the area was cut off. Once fires started in an area we stocked up the supplies available to the shelter operators.

Once again it would have been more ideal to have a central place for sorting and distribution at the same place where the linen was being delivered. DSE allowed us to transport supplies using their logistics structure, sending supplies out to local branches for pick-up by the shelter operators from the local DSE office.

Financial Donations

Wildlife Victoria ran a Public Bushfire Appeal over the duration of the fires. We raised over \$90 000 using mainly radio and print media. We had three mobile phone numbers for people to use to ring to make a donation. These phone numbers were on the website and we made a point of asking people who wished to donate not to use the emergency phone number as it became very difficult to get through because of the high volume of animals needing care during this period.

We also had a downloadable donation form on the website and online donation could be made through Our Community. Most donations came in via over-the-phone credit card authorisations.

As Wildlife Victoria does not have access to all shelter operators' details (shelters give permission to DSE for them to pass on their phone numbers to Wildlife Vic or other care groups), we negotiated with DSE to send a formal offer to every shelter operator in Victoria for them to claim reimbursement for cost of care for burnt wildlife through the Wildlife Vic Trust Fund. The first round has closed and we were able to reimburse all claims 100%. A second round will be offered for those who still have animals in care and we expect that we will also be able to cover all the second round submissions. We expect to pay out around \$20,000 in reimbursements.



The funding will also allow us to update our resources for rescuers. At the Framlingham Forest our rescue resource coordinator, Manfred Zabirskas, spent a lot of time with other groups learning new methods and examining out other groups' and professional rescuer equipment. We will now be able to invest in updated equipment to resourcerescuers during disasters and train groups in their use.

Some of the funding will also be used to get an independent study done on the work of wildlife rescuers in wildfire. We hope to be able to improve our own responses to dsaster by analysing our previous activities.

This method of fundraising, although appeared effective in that we were able to raise funds that we needed for the diaster, was time consuming, as we did not have a base-group to work from. We have since worked on setting up a donor program and have collated all donors from current and previous appeals. Not only will this now allow Wildlife Victoria to have a bolder plan for the future, we also have a base-group where we expect most of our appeal money will come from. This will significantly decrease the pressure on raising money while juggling fire, heat stress in flying fox populations and generally the busiest wildlife rescue period even without disasters.

Rescue volunteers

All people wanting to help out with rescue had to register with the Volunteer Coordinator (VC). The VC took details on what type of volunteering was offered, anything from ferrying medical supplies to line searches. The VC would also instruct people wanting to help with line searches on training that they needed to undertake first. The VC would then coordinate groups of people into areas where local shelter operators requested our help. The VC dealt with individuals as well as groups. Generally the local networks and groups would ring and let the VC know that they had a team that was ready to go and help in areas that needed outside support. This included care groups and also vet staff and veterinary teams. We had a number of vet practices able to supply vets and vet nurses to manage the triage for a weekend while the rescuers went out to search.

We always started the triage with a wildlife veterinarian or a very experienced rehabilitator in charge who would guide the veterinary teams, some of them from city practices who had never worked with koalas or other wildlife other than possums and birds before, until both parties were satisfied that the animals were being appropriately cared for. This worked reasonably well, and the vet teams were usually very impressed with the knowledge and help they received from our experienced rehabilitators. Surprisingly there were some significant difficulties between veterinarians themselves, due in the main, I think, to there being no formal process and procedures, however the vets held their own debrief sessions after the event and we expect that they will come up with solutions to resolve the issues that occurred.



Purnim Hall Triage
Assessment and stabilisation occurred at the triage centre before being sent on to the next



The rescue teams were always led by an experienced volunteer. The lead team member would debrief the rescuers on OH&S issues and procedures prior to commencing the search. We never sent out a team unless they had a number of people experienced in wildlife care and safety on a fire ground. A rescue team's role was only immediate rescue, on capture of an animal it was immediately transferred to the triage and the rescue team continued to search. Any animal that was out of reach of the on-ground rescue team was tagged by a tape around the base of the tree and a map coordinate or GPS location noted for follow up by cherry pickers that came in on various occasions for that purpose. We also relied heavily on the use of professional tree climbers, but these were restricted to those with current qualifications and their techniques were sometimes governed to avoid damage to trees in culturally sensitive forests.

Rescue teams carried plastic rubbish bins with holes in the lids or plastic laundry baskets for the purpose of containing the animals. These containers were ideal as they were light enough to be carried by one person, could hold various items including blankets and towels and once an animal was contained could be easily carried out of the forest by two people. These containers reduced stress on the animals as they could not see out, the animal could not inadvertently injure themselves or rescuers, they were easy to clean and cheap to purchase. Care had to be exercised to ensure that the animal did not overheat in the rubbish bins. Plastic laundry baskets were better for ventilation but were more difficult to secure and carry. The other major piece of equipment for ground rescue teams was a long pole with a spider web brush attached to the top with a plastic bag tied around it. This was shaken above the koala causing it to descend the tree where rescuers were waiting to catch the animal and put it into the bin. A new version was trialled, a telescopic fishing pole that was very light and had extraordinary length (9m), but there was some practice needed in order to manage the pole's flexibility.

Ideally for the next disaster we will have some 'fact sheets' ready for volunteers outlining what to expect. Some volunteers became disenchanted by the long time between when there was news of a fire and they registered to help and when they were actually called in. They also were unprepared, in some cases, for the immediacy of the need when it arose and also that the need may not actually be in their backyard and that travel to an incident and sometimes inconvenient accommodation was likely. We found that people who had been in the industry longer were prepared for these circumstances. Development of 'role guidelines' for each of the volunteer positions could also be a valuable asset, especially one where very detailed information on what to expect and conversely what the volunteer is able to give, will help us to manage this better in the future.

Records of volunteer work is another area where we could improve our response. We would have liked to have sent out a thank you to all involved, however because we lacked a system for recording this we found we couldn't. We did, however, recognise key people via a letter and also a certificate of appreciation.

Media

As previously mentioned the media were instrumental in letting the public know that we were accepting donations. We spent a lot of time keeping the media in the picture and proactively pitched stories to them. The sell to media became much simpler when the focus was on koalas. If you want media to happily run story after story then give them photo opportunities with koalas. This also helps with the fundraising campaign. People were ringing to donate to the koalas, however when we pointed out that other animals were also injured they were happy for the donation to be less prescriptive.



Media can be very demanding and have no qualms about asking us to accommodate them even to the detriment of the animals we have in care. We had to be very careful about managing this and on occasion say 'no' to their demands especially when unreasonable demands were being made on shelter operators who were already snowed under with animals to care for. Sometimes an 'unreasonable demand' is asking the shelter operators to do anything else at all. A small part of the role was responding to media on behalf of shelter operators who had been approached and lacked the ability or resources to handle the demands and requested our assistance in controlling these demands.

Working with the state-wide network

A number of local groups exist in Victoria, bringing together localised people that can support each other as wildlife carers. Some are formal and others informal. Wildlife Victoria was able to play a role in coordination of some of these groups in the fires and we kept communications open with most others in order to have a cohesive response across the state. As previously noted some groups as a whole registered with our VC to make themselves available as a complete team for search and rescue. Liaison with other groups occurred via the Executive Officer and we were very pleased with how our groups pulled together in this crisis to support each other. We think that ideally the shelter operators in a fire area should not have to leave their shelters, we should be able to provide outside support to run the triage and search and rescue in order that all that the local shelter can focus on dealing with the injured animals from triage. To a great extent this is what occurred this season with the support of the network of groups.

In future we expect that the state-wide body will take on this role of coordinating the network, however Wildlife Victoria were happy to step into that role to a great extent and most of the feedback on how people perceived this was positive.

Experiences – Major Fires and Events

Eastern Fire Front

Unfortunately the main fire that raged through Victoria was so large and took such a long time to bring under control (a few months) that there was not a lot we could do. Rescuers are generally not permitted to enter a fire ground until the fire ground is declared safe and authorities cannot declare a part of a fire safe while the fire continues some distance away. People experienced in fire rescue will know that the quicker we can get in the more likely we can save an animal, when weeks and months have gone by then most animals have either succumbed to their injuries or infections have terminally spread and all we can do is relieve suffering. Of course this part of our role should never be undervalued as it is just as important as rescuing an animal to save its life.

The Eastern Fires continued for months and there was not a lot we could do. We worked closely with the Gippsland carers and one of our most experienced fire rescuers, Donna Zabinkas, travelled extensively to support and work within the region. This took the pressure off the local carers in order that they could focus on caring for the animals that did come in. Donna liaised with DSE with such good sense and commitment that her relationship with them allowed her into reconnaissance areas where general public were not permitted. Donna also arranged some rescue groups later in the season, however because of the length of time that had passed they had little success in locating any live injured animals.

Food drops

Wildlife Victoria, in the 2003 Beechworth fires, spent most of our resources in putting out food drops and bringing in water to fire devastated areas. We expected that this may be needed again and made funds available for that purpose. We also developed a fact sheet (pg.10) on feeding wildlife including warnings against putting out food that has the potential to spread weed seed into parks and reserves. Regional DSE offices were rung and made aware of the offer to cover costs of food drops for wildlife to alleviate the pressure on farmers to cull wildlife that had lost their food source and were consequently forced from the burnt forests onto farmland in search of food and onto farmlands. We were aware that some culling applications had been submitted in areas near to the edge of the fires. Wildlife carers in Gippsland applied for funds for food drops and we were able to set up an account in credit for them at the local food supplier. A very keen ranger in the Alpine Shire at the Northern edge of the fire was also keen to take up our offer, he had endeavoured to raise funds himself without success and we were able to relieve that need and again set up an account for him at the local supplier. This local ranger had extensive knowledge of the area and where animals were coming in for water and was able to manage a food-drop program that was ongoing for several months after the fires were completely out.

Ideally food drops should never occur, however after 10 years of drought and large expanses of foraging grounds being incinerated, the situation was a long way from ideal. Our method of communicating our offer was definitely hit-and-miss and part of the process of creating a better response next time should be to incorporate a better communication system for this aspect. Local authorities were not sure about who would be responsible for this type of liaison and a lot of time was spent trying to inform as many people as possible that Wildlife Victoria could cover costs of food drops for wildlife in order that if the situation arose where food drops would help then people knew where to go for support.

The Framlingham Forest

One of the major incidents involving wildlife rescue was in the Framlingham Forest in Western Vic. The fire was deliberately lit on 10th January and burnt 95% of the forest only stopping at surrounding farmland properties (Framlingham is an isolated piece of forest). Wildlife Victoria has a strong relationship with the local network there and so we were called in very early to the area. In an unprecedented turn of events we managed to get permission to start searching the area within a couple of days of the fire being under control. This was very exciting as we knew that this early entry would give us the best chance of saving the highest number of animals possible. Long waiting periods at other times meant that the animals were beyond help by the time we arrived and usually required euthanasia. Initially we were told by DSE that they had inspected the fire ground and that we should not expect to find very many animals at all. An early reconnaissance proved that this was not going to be the case. The local community hall at Purnim, only a few kilometres from the fire ground, was originally the CFA staging area for managing the fire and was later offered as the triage centre from where we sent out rescue teams. The triage was to assess and stabilise the koalas before they were transported to one local shelter where the local network would converge to assist with treatment and ongoing care.

During the first weekend, the triage was managed by a highly experienced rehabilitator with immense knowledge on burns. In addition to Wildlife Vic rescue teams, local veterinarians, a team from the Australian Koala Foundation (AKF) and a number of local carers and residents with invaluable local knowledge of the area saved around 50 koalas. On subsequent weekends, extensive support from Melbourne-based veterinary personnel arrived as did rescue teams from various other organisations. Assistance was also received from professional tree climbers and operators of cherry-pickers. Coordination of the vast variety of rescue groups, other resources and the large number of rescued animals became extremely difficult and the DSE assumed full

control of the situation and expanded on the logistical management of the incident. On the final week there were veterinary teams from all over, there were Wildlife Warriors, commercial animal rescue crews, tree climbers and cherry pickers and there was probably upwards of a dozen other crews there. The final part of the operation was undertaken exclusively by DSE who paid professionals to come in and complete the rescue operation. In all, over 350 koalas were collected.

The local shelter, Hopkins Point Rd Wildlife Shelter (HPS) became the next step for all koalas that needed further treatment. Here they were stabilised and excess numbers were moved on to other local shelters until they each reached capacity. As more koalas arrived, groups of stabilised koalas were then delivered across the state to shelter operators and zoos that had experience with koalas and with burns injuries. HPS had received a total of 195 koalas of which 19 remained in care there, 21 died and the rest were moved on .

Currently a lot of animals are still in care however most have been successfully released, either immediately after capture into a functioning habitat or after short/medium-term care.



Koalas in Transit

Quick, cheap and easy to store the laundry basket became the perfect temporary housing for the large volume of animals we had to deal with.

Future Directions

Wildlife Victoria, along with a number of other key stakeholders including other care groups, veterinarians, CFA, DSE etc, have undertaken to address the lack of formal response for wildlife affected in wildfire. Although Framlingham is an incident unlikely to repeat again due to the uniqueness of the situation, it did however draw much attention to the lack of process in the way these types of situations are handled and it is likely that this incident was instrumental in pushing this issue high onto the agenda of government authorities. The meetings are being convened by DSE and we are pleased that care groups are being recognised, not only as key stakeholders, but as sources of knowledge that cannot be found elsewhere and that that knowledge is being recognised as valuable and important to this process.

The role of this group is to identify where wildlife fit within the Incident Control Structure and set up formal processes and protocols for how wildlife groups operate within that IC structure during an event . Issues that will be addressed include:

- How early can wildlife rescuers access the fire areas, balancing safety issues with the imperative to respond as quickly as possible.
- What is required of wildlife volunteers in respect to PPE and rescue equipment
- How are decisions made in the field and at the triage station
- Setting up communication systems to support a united effort from diverse groups

It is hoped that by next fireseason each part of the network will be able to participate and understand the processes and protocols for effective wildlife rescue in burnt areas.

BIOGRAPHY

Sandy Fernée

BA (Hons) Arch.

Sandy became involved with wildlife rescue when requiring the services of a rescuer for an injured bird in 2000. Wildlife Victoria's response impressed her so much that she requested information on volunteering for the group. She became involved in the office work, a rescuer and a Wildline Operator. Sandy was elected to committee a year later and to the role of secretary the following year. In 2005 Sandy received a grant through World of Difference to work for the charity of her choice for 12 months; giving up her day job, Sandy took up the role of Executive Officer of Wildlife Victoria. 12 months later Wildlife Victoria agreed to her ongoing employment in the role and this is her current position.

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Appendix 1



Guidelines for supplementary feeding of Wildlife during extreme disaster situations

Wildlife Victoria does not endorse feeding of native wildlife as a general rule, however during extreme disaster situations, for example wildfire, there can be good grounds for giving supplementary food to help affected wildlife survive until their food sources re-establish.

Feeding native wildlife often causes problems including unnatural populations, poor diets resulting in sick animals and behaviour modification which leads to problems when animals come in contact with humans. When making the decision to supplementary feed it is important that consideration of these issues are taken into account. Check with authorities on diets and take care that the food is, if possible, not linked to humans as the source (ie: do not use food troughs that farmers use, do not spread food while wildlife are present or hand feed wild animals).

Consideration also needs to be given to the possibilities of weed species that can be present in hay bales and care taken when putting this type of food out in Parks areas. You will need permission from Parks and/or DSE to put out supplementary food on public land. Quite often the best option is to approach local land owners (try the local Land Care Groups for example) as this will have the added benefit of alleviating the concerns that farmers may have over wildlife grazing on their pastures.

Wildlife sometimes do not recognise hay or other supplementary food as a food source and it may take some time before they begin to graze on it.

Water can also be a problem for animals and if the water sources have dried up it may be worthwhile considering trucking in water when supplementary feeding is taking place. If water is around then it is likely that this will be a congregating place and a good option for putting out your supplementary food nearby.

For Eastern Grey Kangaroos a supplementary diet of Lucerne or grass hay, pasture or green grass is ideal. Some vegetables can be put out, carrots and other tubers are usually OK, however a lot of other vegetables will cause diarrhoea in our native wildlife, particularly those high in water content.

For more information contact DSE on 136 186 or Healesville Sanctuary for dietary requirements for specific species. Wildlife Victoria has a link to Healesville Sanctuary's Diet Sheets at <http://www.wildlifestvictoria.org.au/academic.html> however please note that these diets have been developed with a different purpose than that which presents itself in disaster responses.

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