

Towards a more effective model of local wildlife care with the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector: A survey of volunteers in New South Wales, Australia

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Abstract

The provision of wildlife rescue and rehabilitation services in NSW relies heavily on the volunteer sector. The NSW Government regulates the sector and is responsible for identifying measures for its ongoing support and delivery of services. To inform this process, we undertook an extensive review of the sector and report here on a selection of results from our survey of NSW volunteer wildlife rehabilitators. The survey provided a unique insight into the demographics of the sector, the challenges it faces, and the value of their contribution to wildlife rehabilitation.

We report volunteers' views on the operation of wildlife rehabilitation providers in the five key areas of governance, training, standards of care, service capacity and reporting, and the support received from other stakeholders such as the NSW Wildlife Council (the peak body for the sector), veterinary practitioners and government. We found that the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector in NSW provides a significant public good that is of high value to the environment, community and government in terms of avoided costs and benefits to wildlife. We make recommendations for future investment and strategic improvements to the capacity of the sector to continue to deliver services and help transition wildlife rehabilitation providers towards future accreditation.

Keywords: *Fauna rehabilitation, volunteer, wildlife carer, animal welfare, conservation, government, accreditation*

Introduction

In NSW there are about 5700 volunteers engaged in wildlife rescue and rehabilitation. These volunteers are dispersed across the state and most belong to one of 28 groups of <10 to over 2500 members (OEH 2018). Home-based multi-species care is the sector's primary mode of operation. This service is augmented by central facility-based organisations which are predominantly single species or similar species focussed, and wildlife hospitals attached to exhibited animal facilities. There are also a small number (<20) of individual licence holders. The sector mostly operates on the goodwill of its members and small financial contributions from government and the local community.

How wildlife rehabilitation is regulated in each Australian state and territory differs depending on its respective legislative and policy framework. In NSW, the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) considers wildlife rehabilitation to be a specialised activity that involves the capture, handling, treatment, release or euthanasia of sick, injured and orphaned free-living terrestrial and marine free-living native

animals. To participate in this activity people and organisations currently require approval in the form of a licence issued under the NSW *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*.

OEH actively regulates the shape and direction of the sector through policy (OEH 2010a), with the preferred approach being for volunteers to be members of, and live within the geographic boundary of an incorporated group. Licences are granted to new groups only on a 'need for services' basis and OEH is responsible for undertaking a periodic assessment of service quality against specified standards (OEH 2010a). Since 2007, only two groups have been issued with a new licence and the current spatial organisation of groups across NSW is mostly the result of historic regulatory decisions. Overall, about 92% of NSW has coverage from at least one wildlife rehabilitation provider, and 65% of NSW is serviced by two or more providers.

The conditions of the licence and OEH Codes of Practice (OEH 2010b; 2011; 2012; 2015; 2016), specify minimum standards for the welfare of animals, the training of members and the keeping and submission of records to OEH. Governance arrangements, the setting of training curricula and individual training of members is the responsibility of the group. The NSW Wildlife Council (NWC), formed in 2005, is independent of government and provides peak body support for about 55% of volunteers who participate in the sector (OEH 2018).

In 2014, a NSW Government initiated independent review of biodiversity legislation in NSW by Byron et al. (2014) stated that wildlife rehabilitation providers give a valuable service to the community that should be supported and maintained. Byron et al. (2014) recommended that the sector continue to be regulated and that government facilitate more effective wildlife care through strategic partnerships with wildlife rehabilitation providers. The approach suggested in the review was to co-design a system of accreditation supported by government in partnership with the wildlife rehabilitation sector. If adopted, NSW will be the first state in Australia to introduce accreditation and its implementation is intended to give government and the community greater certainty that future services will be delivered in a consistent, credible and reliable manner that is consistent with established standards.

To help inform this process, OEH undertook a comprehensive review of wildlife rehabilitation services in NSW in collaboration with the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation and veterinary sectors (OEH 2018). One part of the review involved a survey of NSW volunteers to profile the sector for the first time and ask about their contribution to wildlife rehabilitation, why they participate, what they think their group does well and what needs to improve in key areas such as governance, training, standards of care, service capacity and reporting. These areas are essential for ensuring group viability, standards of service provision and welfare of animals. We also probed volunteers' views on other services supporting wildlife rehabilitation such as the NWC, veterinary practitioners and government.

Results from the survey were augmented by face to face consultations with wildlife rehabilitation group leadership teams, a small number of individual licence holders, a survey of past and present members of the NWC and a survey of veterinary practitioners (OEH 2018).

An independent audit of a representative sample of 54 authorised wildlife rehabilitators across all providers was also conducted to identify areas of non-compliance with OEH Codes of Practice across the sector and to gain an understanding of the reasons that might be driving this non-compliance (OEH 2018).

Materials and methods

Volunteer survey

A questionnaire was designed for members of licensed wildlife rehabilitation groups in NSW and individually licensed volunteers in collaboration with the NWC and the Wildlife Information Rescue and Education Service (WIRES). The questionnaire was open to all members of groups regardless of their role. Four zoos and fauna parks licensed to participate in wildlife rehabilitation were excluded from the questionnaire because they are not strictly volunteer-based organisations.

The questionnaire was made available online using SurveyMonkey® and in hard copy form for a period of two months from November 2016 to January 2017. It included a cover page stating its purpose, that it was confidential and that the results would be aggregated so an individual's information would not be identifiable. An email and letter to the Chair of each wildlife rehabilitation group was sent advising of the questionnaire and timeframe for completion. Promotion of the questionnaire was undertaken via the NWC and licensed wildlife rehabilitation groups. Persons who requested a hard copy questionnaire were posted one in a self-stamped return envelope.

Participants in the questionnaire were asked 70 questions in total, covering four broad categories: (1) information about themselves and their individual contribution to wildlife rehabilitation; (2) an assessment of their volunteer group in service areas such as governance, training, standards of care, service capacity and reporting; (3) the effectiveness of the NWC, local veterinary services and government as supporters of the sector; and (4) future aspirations for wildlife rehabilitation. Individually licensed fauna rehabilitators were not asked to assess fauna rehabilitation groups.

The questionnaire comprised both mandatory and optional closed-ended and free-text questions. Most closed-ended questions measured responses on 5-point Likert-type scales. Participants could select ‘I don’t know’ for relevant questions and were encouraged to expand upon their responses using free-text. The total number of respondents to each closed-ended question is represented as ‘n’ and differences in response are compared using percentages. Free-text responses were analysed and grouped into themes.

In addition to the survey, OEH undertook face to face consultations with the Executive Committee of 90% of licensed NSW wildlife rehabilitation groups and a small number of individually licensed volunteers. Each committee was asked to complete its own questionnaire about their group and supporting services and provide documentation on their policies and procedures.

Wildlife encounters

Rescue and release data submitted to OEH over a 15-year period from 2001–2016 (excluding 2007–2008) by licensed wildlife rehabilitation providers were collated by animal class to give an indication of the volume of animals encountered by the volunteer sector.

Results

The results presented here are a selection of findings from the volunteer survey augmented by feedback from face to face consultation with group leaders. Overall 970 people (17% of the sector) responded to the survey. Responses were received from volunteers from 26 groups (93% of licensed groups) and 17 individuals (85% of individual licence holders). The number of responses (n value) to each question varied as not all respondents provided a response to each question.

Demographics of NSW volunteers

Most respondents (67%; n=964) were between 31 and 65 years of age; more than half were over 50; and 20% were over 65. Only 11% were under the age of 30. Most were female (79%), of which 70% were between 31 and 65 years of age (Figure 1). A higher proportion of male respondents were aged over 50 (62%). Over 65 was the only age class where there was a higher proportion of male (31%) to female (18%) respondents. Most respondents (75%) were born in Australia and 94% spoke English as a first language.

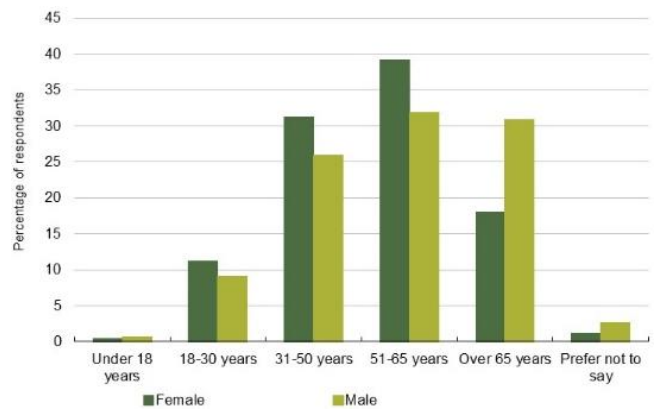


Figure 1: Percentage response to survey by gender and age class (n=964).

Occupationally, about half (48%; n=949) the respondents were employed. Less than a third (29%) reported being in full-time work, 19% said they work part-time and 17% were self-funded retirees. About 28% identified themselves either as receiving government assistance, students or unemployed, and 8% had an ‘other’ employment status. Three-quarters of the respondents were highly educated with 76% (n=993) having tertiary or vocational education qualifications.

About one in three respondents had an annual income of less than \$25,000 (n=839), with 60% earning less than \$50,000 each year. Most people (75%; n=919) said they own their place of residence rather than rent. Almost half (45%) of respondents lived solely with their partner and 33% as a family. Only 17% told us they live on their own. Participation in the sector was nine years on average (n=906). The longest length of time reported by a respondent was 65 years.

Motivations

The top three reasons respondents chose for participating in wildlife rehabilitation were related to the ‘greater good’, i.e. to help native animals (91%), conserve the environment (57%) and contribute to the community (38%) (Figure 2).

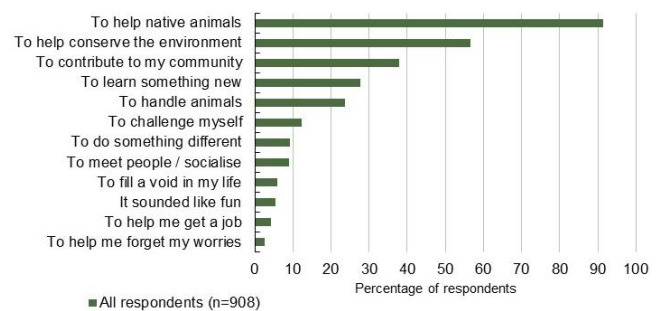


Figure 2: Percentage response of volunteers to ‘Reasons for being a wildlife rehabilitator’ (n=908).

This corresponds with previous studies in other countries (Kidd et al.1996; Dubois and Fraser 2003). Fewer respondents chose reasons relating to ‘self-discovery’ such as learning something new, handling native animals and challenging oneself.

Survey respondents also had mixed views on the effect of volunteering on their own well-being. About 64% (n=645) indicated it had a ‘Somewhat’ to ‘Very’ positive effect on their mental health and about half (54%; n=645) reported the same for another question about their physical health. However, 17% of respondents also said wildlife rehabilitation had a ‘Somewhat’ to ‘Very’ negative effect on both their mental and physical health. By contrast, Volunteering Australia (2015a) reported that across all volunteering pursuits, 96% of volunteers said it improved their well-being and made them feel happier.

During consultations we found stress and volunteer burnout to be prevalent, with the sector citing group politics and red-tape, in-fighting and bullying, lack of time, funding and resources, and dealing with animals in distress as key contributors. Only 56% (n=652) of respondents said their group was ‘Very’ to ‘Extremely’ good at looking after their health and safety. Despite these negative influences and lack of structured help, nearly 80% (n=641) of respondents said they were ‘Very’ to ‘Extremely’ likely to continue working in the sector.

Challenges and aspirations

We asked volunteers what is important to them in relation to future directions in the sector and ranked their answers in order of most importance (Figure 3). ‘Finding and keeping new volunteers’ ranked highest (90% said it was ‘Very’ to ‘Extremely’ important to them). This was followed by ‘Access to funding and other resources’ (86%) and ‘Community understanding of volunteer limitations’ (85%). However, more than 70% of respondents considered all other options to be at least ‘Very important’, except having ‘More flexibility around which group I belong to’, which fewer perceived as important (45%).

Consultations with NWC representatives and group leadership teams also identified ‘Succession planning’ for group leaders, ‘Better mentoring and support’ for volunteers and ‘Stronger standards for native animal care’ and ‘Standardised training’ as key strategic aspirations for the sector.

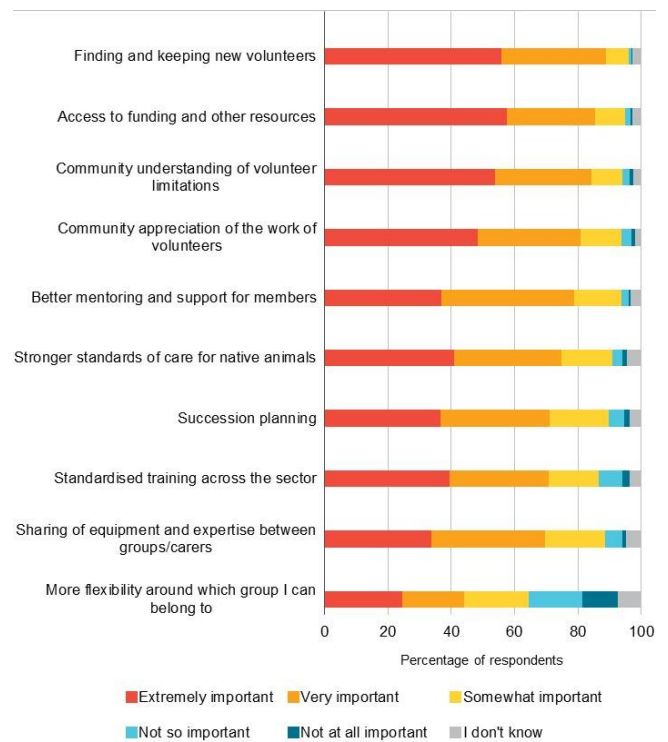


Figure 3: Percentage response of volunteers to the question ‘How important are the following to you’ (n=662).

Contribution volunteers make to wildlife rehabilitation

The rescue and release results show that about 900,000 animals across 600 species were rescued by the sector over a 15-year period at an annual average of about 64,000 (Figure 4). More than half the animals rescued were birds. Over the last five years the average number of animals reported rescued per year rose 30% to 90,000 (OEH 2018). This result is an increase on the 49,000/per year estimated by Tribe and Brown (2000) between 1995 and 1999. About 34% (approximately 309,000) of the animals rescued were rehabilitated and released.

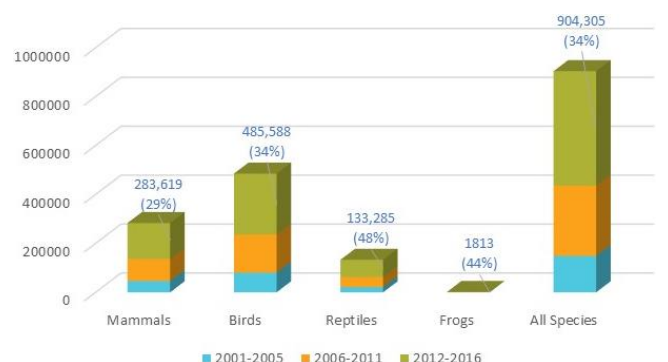


Figure 4: Numbers of animals rescued and percentage rehabilitated and released by volunteer fauna rehabilitators from 2001–2016 (excludes 2007–2008).

In the survey, 840 volunteers (15% of the sector) estimated the time and financial resources they contribute to wildlife rehabilitation. Total hours given by respondents in the past 12 months was 755,754 (average 898 hours/person or 17 hours/week; median was 365 hours or 7 hours/week). Volunteering Australia (2015a) report the median time spent volunteering in 2006 across all pursuits as 56 hours per year or 1.1 hours a week. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015) reports the average hourly contribution of volunteers in 2014 to be 128 hours or 2.5 hours/week. Personal expenditure by volunteers over the same period was \$2,626,572 (average \$3123/person; median \$500). Respondents who identified as primarily animal carers and in rescuer roles reported the highest annual expenditure (approx. average of \$4000 and \$3700 respectively).

Delivery of services: Wildlife rehabilitation providers

Volunteers were asked to assess the quality of service their group provides in five key areas: governance, training, standards of care, service capacity and reporting. Where possible we compared the results from all volunteers with those volunteers who perform a specific role in the group. We augmented our findings with additional information provided by group leadership teams (OEH 2018). The following is a selection of results.

Governance: We wanted to better understand volunteers' views about the leadership of groups and aspects of their management that promote cohesiveness and inclusion of volunteers. About 61% (n=695) of respondents said they were 'Very' to 'Extremely' satisfied with their group's leaders; 22% were 'Somewhat satisfied'; and nearly 17% were dissatisfied. Overall, a quarter (24%; n=653) of all respondents said leadership could be greatly improved, which was less than Group Executive members (29%) and Species Coordinators (35%) (OEH 2018).

In terms of communication within the group, the results show nearly 73% (n=689) of respondents agreed their group's management communicates well and 62% (n=690) also agreed they listen to members' opinions when making decisions that affect them. Approximately 10% disagreed with these statements and the remainder were either neutral or did not know.

Over 90% (n=671) also said they clearly understood what is expected of them as a volunteer. However, less than 50% (n= 660) said they were very familiar with their group's constitution, which sets out its aims and rules, or thought it was very useful. Also, about 30% indicated that group leaders provide feedback about

their work 'Not so often' or 'Not at all often' (Figure 5).

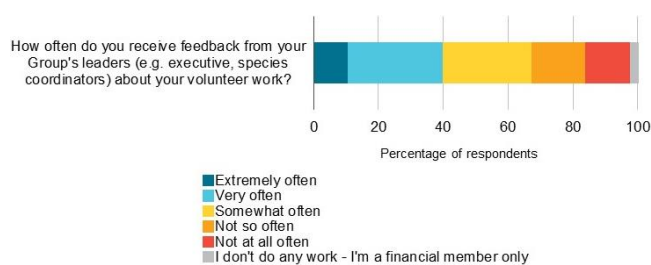


Figure 5: Percentage response to the question 'How often do you receive feedback from group leaders?' (n=671).

We asked how well volunteers get on with each other and resolve their differences. Nearly 68% (n=669) of respondents agreed that volunteers get along with each other and treat each other with respect; 30% said they were neutral or disagreed with the statement. However, only 41% agreed that responsibilities are shared fairly among group members. When asked about conflict management, less than 25% (n=671) of respondents said their group deals with conflict and disciplinary matters 'Very' or 'Extremely' well, although more than a third indicated they did not know (Figure 6).

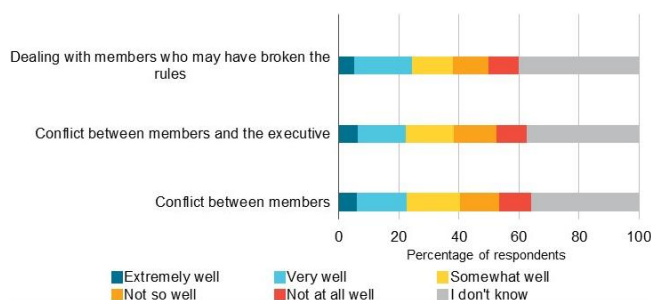


Figure 6: Percentage response to the question 'How well does your group deal with the following issues?' (n=671).

Volunteer suggestions for improving the management of internal conflict and disciplinary issues included more government involvement, greater transparency in decision making by Executive Committees, having fixed terms for Executive Committee members and improved training and support for leadership roles including Species Coordinators and mentors.

Training: Volunteers were asked about aspects of their group's training program. About 82% (n=698) of respondents said their introductory course was 'Very' to 'Extremely' useful (Figure 7). About 74% gave the same response for specialist species training. Less than half (42%) said their refresher training was at least 'Very useful' with some respondents saying it was repetitive and did not meet their needs. Only about 59% of respondents who took leadership training thought it was 'Very' or 'Extremely' useful and many leaders, including Species Coordinators and mentors, said they

were not well prepared or given any form of induction prior to taking on the role (OEH 2018).

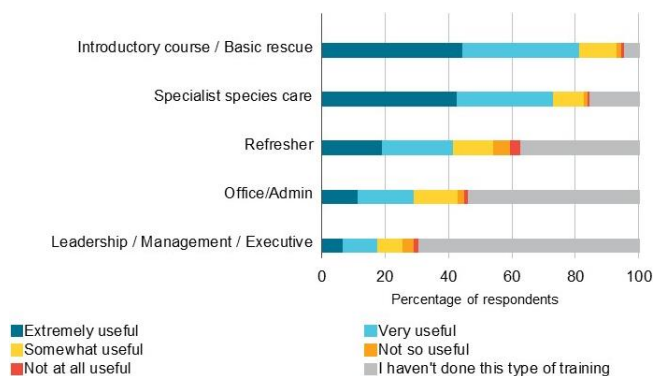


Figure 7: Percentage response to the question ‘How useful were the following types of training you have done with the sector?’ (n=698).

When asked about the overall effectiveness of their group’s training, 69% agreed that their group has an effective training program that meets their needs and over 64% were satisfied with the opportunities provided to use their skills (Figure 8). The survey results and consultations also suggested that volunteers would like more opportunities for advanced training and professional development.

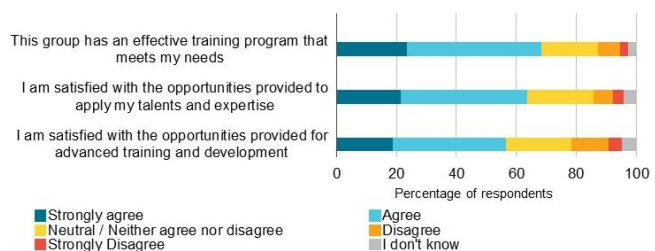


Figure 8: Percentage response to statements about group training (n values 681, 681 and 696 from top to bottom).

Overall only 17% (n=653) of respondents believed their group needed to improve its training ‘A lot’ to ‘A great deal’. However, 38% (n=653) also said their group needed to improve its supervision and mentoring program by at least a moderate amount.

Standards of care: We asked volunteers about their familiarity with the OEH Codes of Practice. About 66% (n=757) said they were ‘Very’ to ‘Extremely’ familiar with the Codes and 34% were less familiar with them (‘Somewhat’ to ‘Not at all’ familiar). Species Coordinators (80%) and animal carers (71%) reported higher levels of familiarity (OEH 2018).

Responses to various other aspects of a group’s standards of animal care are provided in Figure 9. About 80% (n=740) of all respondents said their group was ‘Very’ to ‘Extremely’ good at providing high quality animal care, which was higher than the response from Species Coordinators specifically (75%;

OEH 2018). The results show respondents were less certain their groups have good compliance monitoring and enforcement processes in place; however, less than 15% said their group was ‘Not so good’ or ‘Not good at all’ in both these areas.

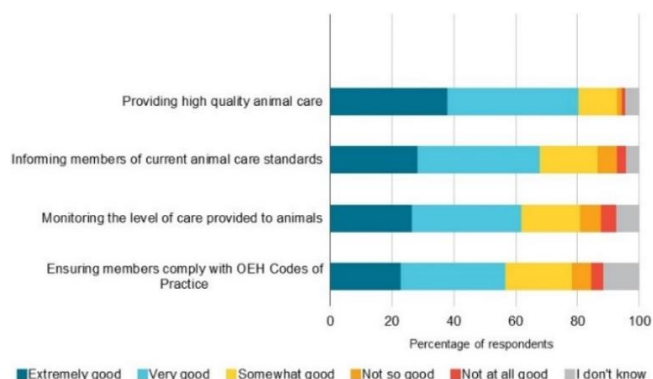


Figure 9: Percentage response of volunteers to the question ‘How good is your group at the following?’ (n=740).

Respondents said government could improve animal welfare standards by periodically reviewing its Codes of Practice; building stronger connections with veterinarians and other wildlife professionals to encourage and promote best practice in the sector; and keeping a strong presence in helping groups leverage compliance and enforcement of their members against the Codes of Practice.

Service capacity: Volunteers were asked to rate their group’s response to phone calls and capacity to deliver services within their licensed geographic boundary (Figure 10).

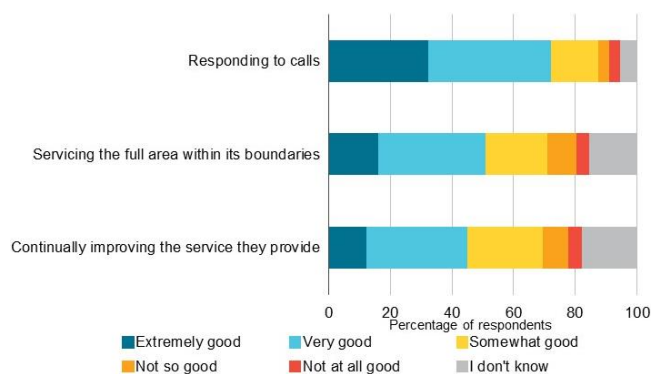


Figure 10: Percentage response of volunteers to the question ‘How good is your group at the following?’ (n=652).

The results show that a higher percentage (73%; n=652) of respondents thought their group’s response to calls was ‘Very’ to ‘Extremely’ good compared to their ability to service the group’s full area of operation (52%). About 14% said their group was ‘Not so’ or ‘Not at all’ good at providing service across their territory compared to only 7% for call response.

About 45% said their group was ‘Very’ to ‘Extremely’ good at continually improving the service they provide, although (17%) said they did not know.

Reporting: Nearly 68% (n=740) of respondents said their group was ‘Very’ to ‘Extremely’ good at record keeping; about 20% said ‘Somewhat good’; and 8% ‘Not so’ to ‘Not at all’ good. Species Coordinators, who have some responsibility for oversight of records, were less positive with only 58% stating their group’s record keeping was at least ‘Very good’ and 14% ‘Not so’ to ‘Not at all’ good (OEH 2018). Group leaders identified deficiencies in the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) reporting template as a factor that has led to inconsistent data interpretation by members and subsequently impacted the data quality across all groups.

Delivery of services: Supporting bodies

Volunteers were asked to evaluate support services provided by the NWC, veterinary practitioners and government. Almost half (49%; n=405) of all respondents said they did not know what the peak body did or is meant to do and only 17% reported their work to be ‘Very’ to ‘Extremely’ effective (Figure 11).

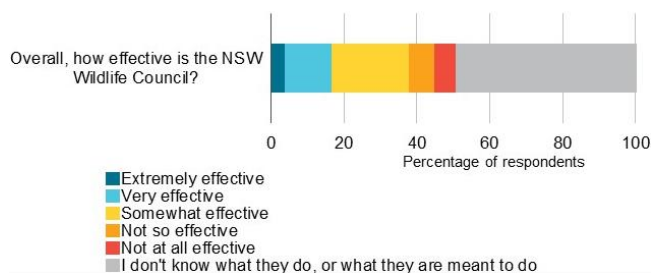


Figure 11: Percentage response of volunteers to the question ‘Overall how effective is the peak body?’ (n=405).

When asked what the peak body does well, respondents acknowledged achievements in the development of animal welfare standards, acquisition of sector wide public liability insurance and provision of small grants to volunteers. Respondents said the peak body needed to be a united, stronger advocate for the sector, more communicative, strategic in its outlook and receive more assistance from government to help it effectively achieve its objectives.

The results show most respondents (66%; n=665) were satisfied with the veterinary services provided to wildlife rehabilitators. About 16% were ‘Neither satisfied nor Dissatisfied’ and only 12% were dissatisfied. When asked about specific aspects of services (Figure 12), about 80% (n=665) of respondents agreed that local veterinarians are prepared to receive animals;

72% agreed they respond to requests for assistance and 65% agreed they provide some form of financial assistance. However, although there was a relatively high level of agreement (68%) about the high standard of care their local vet provides, only about half agreed and 22% disagreed that their local vet understands native animal triage and treatment protocols.

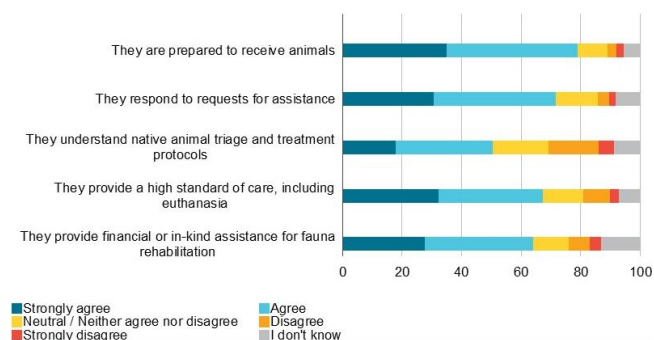


Figure 12: Percentage response of volunteers to the question ‘To what extent do you agree with the following about your local vets?’ (n=665).

Respondents said veterinary services would be improved if there was more investment in dedicated wildlife hospitals, greater funding assistance for private veterinary practitioners, and if more specific formal training and ongoing professional development opportunities were given to veterinarians and veterinary nurses. They also said greater consistency in the triage and treatment of animals would be achieved by developing standard manuals and protocols for vets. Other issues raised were compulsory vaccination of vets against wildlife diseases to enable them to treat more species and better record keeping by vets for animals deposited by members of the public.

Only 25% (n=650) reported they were satisfied with the level of support provided by the NSW Government through NPWS, and 28% said they did not know what support NPWS provides (Figure 13).

Respondents said NPWS did not appreciate their contribution, meet its own policy commitments or provide enough support, particularly at wildlife emergencies or with animal welfare enforcement actions. Greater acknowledgement and allocation of funding, better strategic tools and systems, more effective compliance, and identification of and access to animal release sites were key issues raised by respondents (OEH 2018).

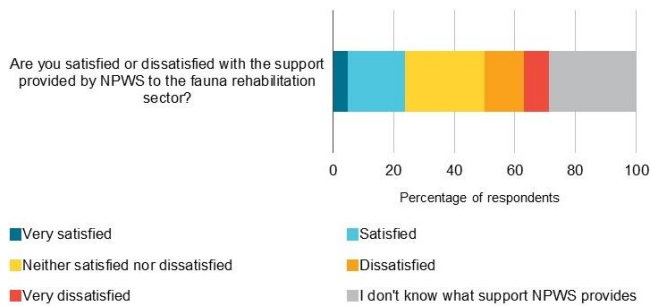


Figure 13: Percentage response of volunteers to the question ‘Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the support provided by NPWS?’ (n=650).

Discussion

In this section, a summary of the survey results and the results of the broader review and consultation process conducted by OEH are discussed in relation to implications for the sector and the future transition towards a new model of service accreditation.

Volunteers in the sector

The findings of this survey and the broader OEH review reinforce those of Byron et al. (2014) and Englefield et al. (2018) that the sector plays a valuable and important role in the community and contributes significant animal welfare, environmental and social services mostly at their own expense. Overall, the total annual value of time and resources contributed by respondents to the survey (representing 17% of the sector) is estimated to be about \$27 million (based on an hourly rate of \$32/hour Consumer Price Index adjusted version of a 2010 rate provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics). This result is additional to other operational expenses incurred by wildlife rehabilitation groups such as annual phone costs (\$2500 to \$600,000), veterinary fees (few hundred dollars to \$15,000), capital acquisition and maintenance. The true value of total expenditure and indirect savings to government from the sector is likely to far exceed this amount (OEH 2018).

Finding and keeping new volunteers was a high priority for survey respondents. We found participation in wildlife rehabilitation in NSW to be similar in age and gender composition to the United States (Kidd et al. 1996), Canada (Dubois 2003) and NSW environmental volunteers more generally (Deakin University 2017), but less balanced across age and gender classes than all forms of volunteering combined (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015; Volunteering Australia 2015a). The sector is predominantly characterised by people over 50, with 51–65 years being the age class of greatest involvement. Volunteers are mostly women, although their involvement declines over the age of 65 when compared to men. Recruitment into the sector from younger people, men and those from culturally diverse

backgrounds is lower compared to other volunteering pursuits (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015; Volunteering Australia 2015a; Deakin University 2017), and pathways for greater involvement of these groups should be explored. The sector could consider forming stronger links with other non-government bodies such as Landcare to align its services more effectively within government’s natural resource management program. This may improve understanding, appreciation and support of the sector, attract more project funding, sponsorship and new and younger members.

Retention of members is an ongoing challenge for the sector with some groups reporting fluctuations in annual membership of 25% and in some areas up to 60% (OEH 2018). Wildlife rehabilitation is very demanding and requires a relatively high investment of time and resources compared to other volunteering pursuits (Volunteering Australia 2015a). Lack of acknowledgement, funding assistance and support, and conflict within groups have been cited here and overseas (Dubois and Fraser 2003; Wimberger et al. 2010) as impediments to the long-term involvement of volunteers in the sector. Strategies for helping support groups in these areas need to be a focus of future government and peak body action.

Furthermore, changes to social demographics in Australia such as declining rates of home ownership and increasing family participation in the workforce (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2013) are likely in the longer term to structurally impact the sector in NSW, which is still mostly home-based. Where possible, more centrally-based wildlife rehabilitation facilities should be encouraged and integrated within the current NSW model because they offer opportunities for a broader range of people to become involved in the sector in different roles and different intensities of effort. They may also minimise capital costs, encourage greater sharing of resources between groups and provide for better mentoring, supervision and oversight of volunteers (OEH 2018).

Service delivery and evaluation

This survey has provided a snapshot of volunteers’ views about the service their wildlife rehabilitation group provides in five key areas: governance, training, standards of care, service capacity and reporting. The results have been incorporated within a broader review of the sector (OEH 2018) and will guide recommendations to help strategically support providers of wildlife rehabilitation services into the future and transition them towards a new model of service accreditation.

Good governance practices enable not-for-profit organisations to function effectively, bind together, and support and promote the well-being of their volunteers (Volunteering Australia 2015b). The Executive Committee and senior volunteers are responsible for leading and promoting a positive culture in their group through the development and implementation of effective systems of governance. Most respondents to this survey reported they were satisfied with their leaders, but identified a need for improvement. Leaders of groups concurred with this view and most suggested they would benefit from standard induction training to help them better understand and more effectively perform their role (OEH 2018). They also identified a need for more emphasis on leadership succession planning across the sector to ensure their groups remain stable.

Effective communication is an important component of a group's governance procedures and provides for volunteer engagement, inclusion and well-being (Volunteering Australia 2015b). Most respondents to this survey were satisfied with how their group communicates, but were not very familiar with the constitution of the group or thought it was very useful. Volunteers suggested improvements in transparency of decision making and the management of internal disputes and disciplinary issues. The OEH (2018) review observed the best constitutions in the sector were those that met the requirements of the NSW Government's Model Constitution, were available in plain English, and were 'fit for purpose', i.e. relevant to the activity of wildlife rehabilitation rather than being a generic document. The review recommended the development of a standard governance resources toolkit for groups and the development of an induction 'Welcome Kit' for new volunteers to ensure they are familiar with the group's governance arrangements upon entry to the group. Byron et al. (2014) identified a need for clearer guidelines for resolving conflicts in the sector, which has been adopted as a recommendation in the OEH (2018) review.

OEH has compared the governance arrangement of groups with the *National Standards for Volunteer Involvement* (Volunteering Australia 2015b) and found many examples of good practice, but high variability in the sector in terms of leadership and management, volunteer engagement and recognition, workplace safety and well-being, and continuous improvement. The OEH (2018) review proposed the development of minimum standards in governance for the sector and proposes to incorporate relevant elements of these standards within a future system of accreditation for the sector.

In relation to training, a high percentage of survey respondents found their initial induction and specialised species training to be very to extremely useful and only a small number thought it needed to improve. Refresher training, which is a requirement of the OEH Code of Practice (OEH 2010b), was considered much less useful and not regularly undertaken by the individually licenced rehabilitators independently audited (OEH 2018). The content and learning outcomes of refresher training need to be reviewed and opportunities should be explored for incorporating it within the context of a program of ongoing professional development including attendance at conferences and workshops with volunteers from other groups (OEH 2018). This would enable advanced wildlife rehabilitators to keep up to date and be better integrated with other wildlife and veterinary professional networks.

Standardised training was identified as very to extremely important to most survey respondents and groups overall. OEH during its consultations with the sector and observations of training materials found training content, training resources and competency assessment methods varied between groups, as did the balance between structured versus on-the-job training. This has led to some inconsistency in training outcomes and potentially some disparity in the levels of competency held by volunteers.

Minimum training standards would likely lead to higher standards of care across the sector and enable volunteers to more effectively transfer their skills between groups. It would also ensure that new recruits entered the sector with a more common understanding of the ethics, expectations and challenges of being a wildlife rehabilitator. The OEH (2018) review also recommended that groups maintain a record of their members' training to ensure they are current and applicable to the animals under their care.

Ongoing mentoring is also an important part of a volunteer's development (Turnbull 2007) and the results from this survey demonstrate that volunteers want improvements to their group's supervision and mentor program. OEH in its consultations with the sector found that some groups had a structured approach to the selection of mentors and tried to ensure that new recruits had some interaction with experienced carers. The OEH (2018) review concluded that groups with an organised mentoring program are more likely to have volunteers that feel included and confident and competent to perform their role. The review recommended the development of resources that help train and support prospective mentors and suggested that groups work together and share

mentoring responsibilities in areas where there is an undersupply.

Survey respondents reported relatively high levels of familiarity with the OEH Codes of Practice, which specify minimum standards for the care of animals in NSW, but the percentage response was lower than desired. A high percentage of respondents also considered their group was good at providing high quality animal care. The results align with the findings of the independent audit undertaken by OEH which found no widespread evidence in the sector of systemic non-compliance with its standards (OEH 2018). The most common areas of non-compliance found in the audit were with enclosure sizes, housing materials and exposure of native animals to pets.

The OEH (2018) review found most groups incorporate the Codes of Practice and OEH licence conditions within their training and some have processes for periodically reminding volunteers of these requirements. The review also found most groups provide their members with an extensive range of resources to help guide decisions around triage, treatment and first aid. However, there is a need for more consistency in the quality and currency of resources available to volunteers and the sector overall would benefit from a greater sharing of resources and closer links with professional scientific and veterinary networks.

Survey respondents identified a need for enhanced monitoring and assurance of standards in their groups and there was a strong desire for government to have an ongoing role in this area. The OEH (2018) review also found compliance and assurance to be a challenge for groups with lack of time, remote locations and access to private homes cited as constraints to regular monitoring. Some groups also said that Species Coordinators need to communicate better and give more help to members wanting to improve their standards of care.

At least 73% of respondents to this survey thought their group's response to calls for assistance were good; however, some here and during consultations complained about the performance of other groups. The nature of complaints included not answering calls, forwarding calls the following day or giving poor advice over the phone. The OEH (2018) review identified examples of good practice in the management of phone services across the sector, including use of sophisticated phone technology that can track call progress and identify available rescuers based on their proximity to the injured animal. It also found some groups provide training to phone operators

and have phone rosters and manuals to help operators respond to calls in a consistent manner.

Overall, the sector receives about 180,000 calls a year and call volume can range from 1–10 to 800 calls a day, with most providers offering a 24-hour seven day a week service (OEH 2018). Nearly all groups operate and pay for their own service, which can vary from \$2500 to \$600,000 each year. Many groups have their own branded road signage, and phone and rescue services are generally contained within the geographic areas they are licensed to operate. OEH (2018) identified a significant duplication of effort and cost with the provision of phone services and a high potential for confusion within the community about which group to contact. The review recommended the introduction of a single NSW wildlife rescue number and standardised road signage to improve the community's ability to report injured wildlife to rescue services.

The keeping and submission of records is mandatory in NSW and about 68% of respondents and 58% of Species Coordinators thought their group was good at reporting. The OEH (2018) review found high levels of compliance with its annual report requirements and many examples of good practice in the sector, with groups' commitment to record keeping including systems for maintaining data integrity. Since 2010–2011, up to 625,000 individual animal records have been submitted to OEH and the data has the potential to inform ongoing management and conservation planning for numerous protected and threatened species. Group leaders and volunteers have identified a need for OEH to improve its standard report template, as variability in how data fields are being interpreted has had an impact on the overall quality of data submitted to OEH.

Supporting services

This survey assessed volunteers' views about the NWC, veterinary practitioners and government, with the objective of identifying how these services could better support the sector. The NWC was established to provide a strong unified voice for the sector and has played an important role in coordinating input to government policy and raising standards of animal care. Respondents to this survey recognised several of these achievements but remained largely unaware and unconvinced of its role and effectiveness within the sector. The OEH (2018) review identified a need for NWC representatives to better communicate the work of the peak body to their constituent volunteers. It also recommended a review of its current model of governance and strategic plan to focus on 'whole of sector' challenges and improvements to service

delivery, including improving and fostering greater cooperation and sharing of information, resources and expertise by participants in the sector.

In NSW, veterinary services for sick and injured wildlife are provided pro-bono by private independently run veterinary practices with support from government funded wildlife hospitals. In 2017, OEH surveyed veterinary practitioners in NSW and 68 private practices reported they receive nearly 19,000 free-living native animals each year and contribute over \$1 million dollars in services and products to their treatment and care (OEH 2018). Veterinary practitioners in that survey reported that the main constraints on their services to the sector were lack of time and facilities, cost of treatment and lack of knowledge about free-living wildlife. They also identified a need for further training and professional development opportunities in wildlife handling, assessment and treatment, and greater access to standard treatment protocols, which have been adopted as recommendations in OEH (2018). This concurs with findings of Johnson (2008) and Orr (2017).

In its survey of veterinary practitioners OEH (2018) reported that 60% of veterinarians surveyed had no complaints about their local wildlife rehabilitation group and their standards of care. However, of the complaints received more than 50% were about poor behaviour of volunteers towards staff and slow response times for collecting animals. Johnson (2008) has previously identified the need for trust and regular communication to exist between veterinarians and wildlife rehabilitators to achieve best outcomes for animals. OEH (2018) also found that groups with transparent processes for managing out-of-pocket expenses for their volunteers and a structured approach to how they engage with their local veterinary practice are more likely to benefit from the services the practice provides.

Respondents to this survey have reported a low level of satisfaction with government and expressed concern that their work as volunteers is not valued or adequately supported and funded. Volunteers also stated they are now much less engaged with local NPWS staff, but are expected to do more work on behalf of government. Byron et al. (2014) in their review of biodiversity legislation in NSW recognised the need for government to adopt a partnership approach with the wildlife rehabilitation sector and co-design consistent standards of operation including areas such as conflict resolution, training and compliance. The OEH (2014) review has expanded upon the findings of Byron et al. (2014) and made additional recommendations to better equip and support volunteers, and strengthen the ability of

providers to deliver on-ground services and achieve accreditation.

Future accreditation of the sector

The introduction of accreditation for wildlife rehabilitation providers will give greater certainty to government and community that wildlife rescue and rehabilitation services are being delivered in a consistent, reliable and credible manner that accords with established standards. The intended benefits to the sector will include greater community recognition of service; improved volunteer support and management; more transferability of skills between providers; and stronger compliance with established codes of practice. A pathway to accreditation has been proposed by OEH (2018), which will come into effect progressively from 2018–2019. A transitional model has been adopted that will help existing providers adjust to the new regulatory framework until sector wide standards can be developed and implemented. Seven categories of accreditation have been identified, based on the five key service evaluation areas which formed the basis of the wildlife volunteer survey, in addition to veterinary engagement and peak body support. The criteria in the transitional model will be based on the many examples of good practice in these areas currently observed in the sector.

Conclusion

The survey of wildlife rehabilitators was undertaken to give the NSW Government a better understanding of the characteristics, views and aspirations of volunteers in the sector and the value of services they provide to the community. It was part of a larger program of review to inform OEH of the measures needed to enhance the overall strategic capacity of the sector to deliver on-ground services. Over the last five years the wildlife rehabilitation sector has rescued about 90,000 native animals per year on average. The sector also contributes a minimum of \$27 million dollars each year in services that government would struggle to deliver if they ceased to operate. Participation in the sector is characterised by older volunteers, who are mostly women with a passion for helping native animals and the environment. Pathways for greater involvement of younger people and strategies for retaining volunteers while finding and training the next generation of wildlife group leaders are important to the sector.

Volunteers evaluated the delivery of services by their groups in five key areas that will form the basis of a future system of accreditation for the sector. They were satisfied with many aspects of these services but identified a need for improvements in group leadership,

conflict and dispute resolution, refresher training, compliance and enforcement, and delivery of rescue services across the full area within their boundaries. Access to additional funding and resources and the provision of stronger standards and strategic support from the peak body and government were identified as important to volunteers. Better cooperation and sharing between groups was also seen as valuable. Volunteers were mostly satisfied with the service provided by their local veterinary practices; however, they identified a need for greater understanding of native animal triage and treatment protocols across the veterinary sector.

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