

# **Together again for the first time: Collaboration as a tool for improving the wildlife rehabilitation sector**

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## **Abstract**

*The first AWRC Conference in 2003 was titled “Coming Together”. Fifteen years later and people involved in wildlife rehabilitation still gather from all over Australia and beyond to share and learn from each other. But many of the concerns that originally inspired us to come together still undermine our best efforts – volunteer numbers, leadership & governance issues, conflict and stress. What could we achieve if we could take the goodwill, common aspirations and sense of community we share at these conferences and apply them to our daily efforts back home? If we could embrace the collaboration, policies and processes to achieve better outcomes for our volunteers, for the public and for wildlife in need. This paper considers options for improvement in the sector at a personal, local & global level.*

**Keywords:** *Wildlife, Rehabilitation, Planning, Governance, Teamwork, Collaboration*

## **Introduction**

For wildlife rehabilitators, the quality of wildlife rehabilitation is and should always be the priority. There is no doubt we are committed to the welfare of animals in care: a paper by NSW Office of Environment & Heritage (Haering et al)<sup>1</sup> suggests wildlife carers contribute significantly more time, energy and money than the average Australian Volunteer, and the independent review of biodiversity legislation in NSW said that wildlife carers provide a valuable service to the community.<sup>2</sup> Yet both papers found that our interactions with our own species can be somewhat less positive, and that the sector struggles with engaging and retaining volunteers, volunteer morale, conflict and stress. This paper considers actions that can be taken to remove some of the barriers that prevent us from becoming a more robust, reliable and respected sector.

The author of this paper draws on experience in the wildlife sector as a volunteer, association chair, founding member of the NSW Wildlife Council and Australian Wildlife Rehabilitation Conference, co-founder of Australian Fauna Care and the ‘Don’t Shoot Bats’ Campaign, and appointee to NSW Animal Welfare Advisory Council. He also has more years’ experience in organisational management and consulting than he cares to admit.

## **Results**

When wildlife organisations are willing to work together effectively across the sector to produce training, standards and processes beyond hands-on wildlife care, we will be able to effect operational improvements that translate to attracting and retaining more committed and capable volunteers, which in turn leads to better outcomes for wildlife.

## **Discussion**

Corporate organisations put significant effort and money into assuring they have the right governance: the organisation’s structure, rules, relationships, policies, systems and processes.<sup>3</sup> Commercial organisations focus on the bottom line and would not invest in governance unless it genuinely improved the bottom line, but the volunteer sector is yet to follow suit. An Australian survey identified ‘bad management and governance’ as a key issue in the volunteer sector<sup>4</sup> and all eight of Volunteering Australia’s “National Standards”

address the need for good governance practice.<sup>5</sup> Yet the NSW wildlife rehabilitation review<sup>6</sup> found some organisations reluctant to address this issue, citing a need to focus their attention on hands-on wildlife care as their priority.

Australian wildlife rehabilitation was based on individuals taking in/caring for injured & orphaned wildlife. It didn't move towards networked models until the 1980's, at around the same time that current wildlife rehabilitation legislation came into force. Since then, the sector has developed in a fragmented manner, with varying legislation, governance and regulations in different states and territories – and this fragmentation in itself is a barrier to meaningful improvement in management across the sector.

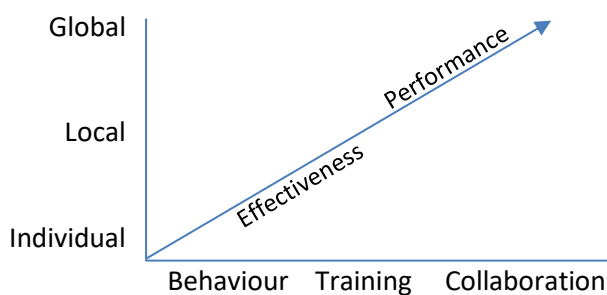
While there has been significant improvement in the methods, materials and processes of wildlife rehabilitation, the same cannot be said for effective governance. The recent OEH paper says there is “a need for improvement in group leadership, conflict and dispute resolution, refresher training, compliance and enforcement”.

Despite the efforts of some state-wide/ large wildlife organisations, the changing demographics of Australia continues to present new challenges to the sector, arising from the needs of an aging and highly mobile population.

The ideal vision for the sector is a world where wildlife rescuers are viewed with the same respect as Surf-lifesavers and Emergency Volunteers; where our volunteers feel adequately prepared, safe and supported; where interpersonal conflict is managed effectively; where committee members are fully prepared for their roles; and where peak bodies are relevant and speak effectively on behalf of wildlife volunteers.

In NSW the regulatory agency has signalled a move to an accreditation approach, that will require wildlife rehabilitation organisations to demonstrate competence in a number of areas, including governance, education and provision of services. If successful, other states could move in the same direction.

*This paper proposes actions we can take at an individual, local and global level to address issues that limit our growth towards a robust, reliable and respected sector. Approached in the right way, we can meet our own goals as well as those of regulatory authorities.*



*The changes required involve individual commitment, targeted training and a broad commitment to collaboration. This will allow us to achieve these goals with less effort on individual wildlife groups - as by its nature, collaboration involves people working toward the common goals, sharing the workload.*

## **Individual Contribution**

**What individuals can do:** Individuals can contribute to the improvement process in simple, intuitive ways. In situations where bullying or other inappropriate behaviour is evident, individuals can refuse to take part, or better still, say something to indicate their unwillingness to get involved in this destructive behaviour.

Each volunteer should be familiar and compliant with their organisations rules and consider how they can make use of their own specific skills to help – not only with wildlife rehabilitation, but with the administration of their organisation.

***What individuals need:*** For individuals to be engaged, they want to feel useful, safe, part of a team, and to know that their efforts are appreciated. They need to know what is expected of them and that they will be supported if and when needed.<sup>7</sup> This is why the executives of organisations need to possess people management, engagement and communication skills; to be capable and consistent in the way they manage, encourage, train and support volunteers.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Local Contribution***

For wildlife groups to provide environments that are positive, supportive and challenging, they must support and encourage volunteers to participate in different ways, beyond hands-on wildlife care.

In the current environment, the work involved in front-line rescue activities, administration, and dealing with the problems identified above, doesn't leave much time to 'upskill' volunteers beyond basic wildlife rehabilitation training.<sup>9</sup> Finding time to implement a raft of new processes is a real concern, but conversely, if we didn't have so many issues – we would have more time! We could start to address many of the problems faced by the sector if all wildlife carers had access to the right support, services and documentation. For example:

### ***Facilities/Services:***

- Volunteer training including wildlife rehabilitation, refresher and administration
- Tactical management / leadership training for committee members and coordinators
- Regular meetings that focus on rehabilitation, education and participation
- A regular, short, focused newsletter and/or social media channels
- An effective buddy system and network of coordinators and/or specialists
- Access to support and counselling services

### ***Documentation:***

All volunteers should get a welcome / induction package when they join – whether hard or soft copy. This should include fixed and variable information – for example:

- Constitution, policies, code of conduct/practice, including conflicts of interest, donations, vet visits, publicity, use of assets, property inspections, reimbursements
- Volunteers job/role descriptions
- Wildlife rescue documentation (rescue / care sheets etc)
- Identification (authority card)
- Procedures including WH&S and conflict management
- Meeting & education calendar, and details of mandatory & optional training
- Organisational structure including names and contact details of office bearers
- Information about organisations shared equipment, facilities, social media
- Information about allowances and reimbursement
- Hints and tips for dealing with members of the public

### ***Committee:***

- Organisations should aim to have a mix of experience and new members in a committee
- Committee members must personally model the behaviour they want to encourage
- Committee roles, rights and responsibilities should be well documented

- Adopt succession planning: for example, to be a committee member you must be an organisational member for a defined period; to be an office bearer, you should be an assistant office bearer for a period; to be a chair, you should have been vice-chair.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Global Contribution***

While the thought of compiling such a comprehensive collection of information, processes and practices is daunting, it is necessary if volunteers are to clearly understand their roles, rights and responsibilities. But it makes little sense for each wildlife organisation to develop its own set of documentation, when it is likely most of the content will be essentially the same for every other wildlife group. This is where broad, sector-wide collaboration can help reduce that burden, and as a bonus, facilitate greater standardisation.

We can create standard policies and procedures from around the sector (and beyond), to create a resource centre for the sector. While individual organisations could adapt and enhance the standardised documents, there is an argument that by adopting standard policies, rules and guidelines without change, we could help unify and strengthen the sector.

Additionally, we can adopt and adapt policies, rules and training from other sources: Organisations such as Volunteering Australia<sup>11</sup>, OurCommunity<sup>12</sup>, Volunteering NSW<sup>13</sup>, Not-For-Profit-Law<sup>14</sup> and quite a few others - offer education, information and templates that could be tailored for use in the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector.

Through collaboration, we can create a host of wildlife rehabilitation specific templates, constitutions, policies, procedures and role descriptions - just about every key document required. It might well be worth seeking funds to pay for one or two appropriately skilled people to do the bulk of the work: experience tells us that using voluntary part-time committees to take on such a task would be unlikely to deliver in a timely fashion.

Enhancing the skills of committee members must be a priority. In few other environments are individuals appointed to key management roles, without ensuring that the candidates have the necessary skills or experience. Everyone voted onto a committee should have the necessary skills, or be trained appropriately as soon as possible, in areas including people management, planning, conflict management, decision-making, treasury and secretarial duties. When our boards/committees are functioning effectively, we can start to address the issues that prevent us from attracting new volunteers, and cause us to lose valuable, experienced carers.

### ***Peak bodies***

Where states and territories opt to put in place a peak body, the issues raised above apply to an even greater extent. People on peak bodies must model the highest levels of integrity, and possess the knowledge and skills suitable for leadership, negotiation, public awareness. They must be prepared to commit the time and energy needed to act as a respected, competent and effective conduit between wildlife rehabilitators, the government and the public.

There is little literature on the effectiveness of peak bodies, but the recent OEH survey indicates that they need to be more strategic, focussed and consultative in their efforts if they are to be relevant to front-line carers. Peak bodies need to:

- be able to recognise existing and emerging issues that face the sector
- encourage and facilitate collaboration
- plug any gaps that exists between administrators of wildlife groups and regulators
- be responsive and effective in dealing with issues and threats as they arise

- bring in specialist help when needed (paid or voluntary) rather than assume their own membership can take on every project personally

### ***Government agencies***

State government agencies that have a regulatory role to play in the wildlife rehabilitation sector also have a responsibility to support volunteer organisations. After all, government agencies would struggle to cope if volunteer wildlife rehabilitation organisations ceased to exist.<sup>1</sup> With a more effective relationship between government agencies and wildlife organisations, the sector is better placed to advise government agencies of existing or emerging threats to the sector – including those that government agencies are best equipped to address, including ‘rogue’ elements in and around the wildlife rehabilitation sector.

Agencies can assist with key wildlife rehabilitation educational initiatives, as OEHL has for the AWRC in 2018, and work to assist key wildlife rehabilitation organisations who are looking to implement centralised facilities such as wildlife clinics or rehabilitation facilities.

### **Conclusion**

There is a need to improve the way we manage our affairs in the wildlife rehabilitation sector. This will happen when there is sufficient will to do so, or change is mandated by authorities. Through collaboration we have the opportunity to shape our own future.

There is no time like the present for major players in every state to seek out people with the skills and willingness to work together to this end. The issues raised in this paper do not infer a need to create a national wildlife rehabilitation body: that may well be a distraction, raising all sorts of other issues. But there is an opportunity for key players to sponsor a focussed, special-interest working party to begin the process of sector-wide collaboration, with an aim to improve our management and governance across the board.

We have known about management, governance and conflict issues for decades but have yet to make a concerted effort to resolve them. And why should we? Because, good governance promotes integrity, accountability, fairness and effectiveness; enabling not-for-profit organisations to function effectively while valuing and contributing to the wellbeing of their volunteers. And when that happens, it is good for the volunteers, good for the public who depend on us, and good for the wildlife we rescue and care for.

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