

NSW Wildlife Council – supporting the NSW Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector

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Introduction

This paper summarises the key activities of the peak body, NSW Wildlife Council, in support of the NSW wildlife rehabilitation sector from inception through to the present day. The paper outlines work to date in the development and approval of Rehabilitation Codes of Practice for Protected Fauna generally and species-specific groups of fauna.

The paper alludes to the changing circumstances to this sector due to Legislative reforms in New South Wales as that State transfers from the National Parks and Wildlife Act to the Biodiversity Conservation Act, and briefly touches on the processes taken by the Government to evaluate the current activities of licensed groups and their volunteers. Recognition is given to the volunteer-stress and grief levels that can be experienced from volunteering with injured, orphaned and sick fauna.

Conclusion

The paper predicts there will be significant changes to the state model of licensing of volunteer Associations Incorporated with the specific charter of rescue, rehabilitation and release of injured, orphaned and sick protected fauna in NSW. It hypothesises about forward funding and what is the most appropriate model for a peak body into the future.

NSW Wildlife Council – supporting the NSW Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector

Audrey Koosmen, Chair, NSW Wildlife Council,

I wish to thank the Organising Committee for the magnificent program they have organised for today and the next 3 days. It is inspiring to see the range of conference topics and delegates.

We last presented to the Australian Wildlife Rehabilitation Conference in 2005 on the Gold Coast as the Steering Committee formed to develop a peak body in NSW. The NSW Wildlife Council (NWC) was formed in April 2006 and is the peak policy body for wildlife rescue and rehabilitation in NSW. NWC represents more than 3850 wildlife rehabilitators from 26 licensed groups and independent licence holders volunteering across the state. NWC's Mission Statement is "Achieving optimal outcomes for Australian wildlife", especially the sick, injured or orphaned. In NSW the wildlife rehabilitation model is somewhat different from other states in that the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service, Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH), Department of Planning and Environment grants wildlife rescue and rehabilitation licences in the main to individually constituted volunteer groups. These groups are Associations Incorporated with the charter for rescue, rehabilitation and release of injured, orphaned and sick native wildlife and most have charitable status with Tax Deductibility for donations. Those groups in turn issue rescue and or care authorities under licence to their volunteers who have undertaken appropriate training courses for what species groups they rescue or rehabilitate. Training and mentoring of volunteers is a pivotal path to good release outcomes.

Most groups offer a 24-hour, 7 days a week wildlife rescue telephone number answered by volunteers to cover their licensed area of operation. The NWC is funded by grants from the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and NSW Roads & Maritime Services on a three year agreement. It provides opportunities for collaboration with all facets of state government, the rehabilitation sector and other external stakeholders on a range of issues affecting biodiversity, conservation and wildlife rehabilitation and welfare. NWC liaises on matters of common interest with Wildlife Information Rescue and Education Service (WIRES). WIRES operates independently of the Council through its branch networks in NSW.

Individual member groups of the Council elect from within their own groups a Representative delegate and an Alternate delegate to the Council. These are confirmed annually after the groups' annual general meetings. There is one vote per group. The NWC meets quarterly and encourages attendance by all groups. Members' travel and accommodation costs to attend meetings are reimbursed by the Council. It is the Reps' and Alternates' responsibility to represent their group on the Council and to inform their membership of the activities of the Council. A summary report is prepared and sent shortly after each meeting. The Management committee is made up of the executive of Chair, Vice Chair, Treasurer, Secretary and Media officer and two Ordinary committee members. Sub committees are formed to take on specific projects and tasks.

The NWC has over the years established strong partnerships with affiliate organisations such as the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) achieving the development of the Wildlife Rescue mobile phone App that recognises where the phone is situated and brings up the rescue phone number for the group or groups licensed in that geographic area. This ensures a speedy rescue response for any wildlife needing assistance or advice to the caller. The App is under current upgrade and additional features may help identify wildlife "hot spots" and allow more data collection and storage.

Liaison and training with responding Agencies during emergency events such as heat stress and wild fires ensures best outcomes for affected wildlife. NWC's partnering with the Nature Conservation Council now sees wildlife issues specifically considered under NCC's broad umbrella of habitat management. Membership of the Nature Conservation Council provides the vehicle for insurance for all NWC's member groups and their volunteers. NWC's payment of Public and Products Liability Insurance, Volunteer's Accident Insurance and Director's and Officer's Insurance premiums takes a considerable financial burden off individual member groups.

Since inception the NWC has provided feedback and submissions regarding issues facing native fauna in terms of conservation management and legislation. The Council is included in ministerial round table meetings to highlight the needs of native fauna. It is a member of the Flying-fox Consultative Committee. NWC has supported the Wombat and Koala Conferences and members are involved in the Koala Genome Sampling Project.

A major achievement has been the development, in partnership with the NSW Firearms Registry, of the NWC Firearms Safety Brief (FSB), and a NSW Police Policy for the training and conditions required to be followed by licensed wildlife rescuers. This enables issue of the Animal Welfare category on firearms licences. Prior to this development there was no formal approval for wildlife rehabilitators to be able to attend to roadside euthanasia by firearm of

the many animals impacted by motor vehicle collision. Firearms Co-ordinators within groups can now supervise and approve FSB training for members holding a Firearms Licence. They can recommend approval of original issue or renewal of the Animal Welfare category. This is the NSW requirement for using a firearm to euthanase wildlife in a public place. It has been a significant step forward in achieving optimal outcomes for Australian wildlife as we all know how many fauna are fatally impacted by vehicle-caused injury and the pain and suffering we can shorten by swift and appropriate action.

Since 2010 the NWC in consultation with its own groups, and with WIRES, has coordinated the development, review and/or update of a number of Codes of Practice for Rehabilitation of native fauna (April 2011) including species-specific codes for Koalas (December 2011), Flying-foxes (January 2012), Wombats (October 2015), Birds of Prey (November 2016), and Macropods (awaiting sign off). The Codes set Standards and Guidelines for the care and housing of protected fauna that is incapable of fending for itself and that is being held temporarily by a rehabilitation licence authority holder. Standards are enforceable and guidelines describe the agreed best practice. With such a geographical spread and a large number of licensed rehabilitation groups and the WIRES branch network operating over this large state, it is important that rehabilitators work to an approved framework designed for best rehabilitation and wildlife welfare protocols. The Codes guide rehabilitators through

- the original rescue,
- transport,
- a case assessment decision tree,
- protocols for euthanasia,
- care procedures,
- husbandry,
- housing
- release suitability
- methods of release.

NWC's separate poster presentation will outline the very popular Rehabilitator Grants Scheme that has been able to fund 5 or more wildlife rehabilitation enclosure or equipment projects annually for the past 6 years and continuing. The Grants scheme is open to all licensed rehabilitators in NSW and historically provided an annual total budget of \$5,000 to licensed rehabilitators in amounts from \$500. In 2017 we doubled the budget to \$10,000 offering up to \$2,000 for projects that would be difficult for individuals to afford.

NWC set aside a budget of \$6,500 this year to offer each member group one reimbursement of \$250 registration fee to attend this conference. We felt this better helped NWC member groups than offering sponsorship to the conference.

I earlier described the wildlife rehabilitation model that operated under the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1975, and that is likely to change under the new Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016. There has been a state of uncertainty about the future rehabilitation model, whether it will be under licence or by an accreditation system, but we understand that the NSW Government is keen to continue the volunteer group system in its endeavour to reform procedures and cut red tape without adversely impacting environmental outcomes. We feel we have been in a holding pattern for this two years period of legislative change and hope there will be some certainty for us in the months ahead.

Peter Stathis of Office of Environment & Heritage this morning described some of the findings from a State-wide survey on Wildlife Rehabilitation. This survey was part of a multi-pronged review of the rehabilitation sector that included but was not limited to group audits, rehabilitator audits and premises inspections, surveys of rehabilitators and vets and vet staffs. We believe this resulted for the first time in documented evidence-based data that demonstrates the importance of the rehabilitation sector and the avoided costs to government of the work all we rehabilitators do for the benefit of our injured, orphaned and sick wildlife.

The Council has been a key partner in the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 ongoing Stakeholder consultations. At time of writing (April 2018) we expect a Discussion Paper for public comment to be published imminently. The outcomes will have a profound effect on the NSW rehabilitation sector going forward.

Where do we go from here? is our biggest question. It is quite obvious that a peak body cannot possibly work successfully on a totally volunteer basis and completely achieve meaningful goals. Individual groups do not have the funds to take away from their core business of rescue, rehabilitation and release. In most cases the people on the Council representing their group already punch way above their weight on what should be expected from them in terms of time commitment. We in the Council recognise that while the Codes of Practice are a great step forward in education and to assist wildlife volunteers work towards common goals, they are not complete without follow up resources. Without funds to structure proper training materials the codes will not be as effective as they could be, nor will the Council meet its Objective to “Foster the sharing of available resources among rehabilitators and collect, assemble and disseminate accurate and up to date information on all aspects of wildlife care, rescue, rehabilitation and release”.

We recognise that many wildlife rehabilitators are not aware of the Council’s work, and this has been confirmed by the rehabilitator survey. We recognise that very many wildlife rehabilitators want to be just left alone to get on with their rescue and rehab work and not keep records or attend training. We puzzle how to capture their imaginations and give them the desire to be more included in our common goals for good wildlife rehabilitation outcomes. We puzzle over what we can do to get the message across with our own time and resource restraints.

We recognise rescue and rehabilitation can bring many challenges to individuals, not only in cost and time management, in sleep deprivation, and in real grieving over causes and losses. Some will say “if you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen”, and perhaps we do have a role to better vet the emotional suitability of some people when embarking on their rehabilitation volunteering. It would not be “normal” not to feel some grief and frustration and angst in rehabilitation work. Notwithstanding that, sometimes the sheer volume of bad outcomes from more frequent weather related or disaster events affecting wildlife take their toll. The feelings of helplessness in witnessing the results of habitat loss and other key threatening processes for our wildlife make this unique type of volunteering a challenge to the most emotionally balanced among us. There is a paper tomorrow on potential impact of wildlife rescue on mental health. We have unsuccessfully sought readily-available avenues of assistance to volunteers with grief counselling and look forward to any fresh ideas.

Anyone who has rescued an injured or orphaned native animal, has nursed it back to health, has equipped it to return to its place, fit and free in its natural habitat, knows the satisfaction gained, the sense of achievement and the value of good wildlife welfare outcomes. We in the

Council hope we may be able to continue providing overarching support to our rehabilitation groups and their members in their work *Achieving optimal outcomes for Australian wildlife*.

NWC thanks the organisers for the opportunity to share with the broader sector NWC's operations and the changing processes for wildlife rehabilitation in NSW.

ⁱ NWC Wildlife Council Inc., Constitution (Revised) 24 November 2015