

A GAP IN THE MARKET: POTENTIAL FOR A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION

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The Battle

In my mind there is no question as to whether or not wildlife rehabilitation is conservation - so to be here, in a room full of conservationists is a great feeling. Although we each may differ slightly, in our beliefs about how best to protect and preserve our native species ... we are all fighting on the same side of the same battle.

Wildlife carers *care* about wildlife, in every sense of the word. And that's why I want to talk to you about wildlife conservation. In Australia, there exists a gap in the market - a vacancy in the environment movement - for dedicated, professional wildlife conservationists, focused solely upon wildlife goals. You are the people who can fill this gap.

Now, for me being in front of an audience generally means a classroom of twelve year olds. They interrupt and ask questions ... and all in all it's very easy to fill twenty minutes. To them, I'm not a teacher, but a guest speaker - someone who pops up every month to vary the routine a little - so the diversionary factor of my visits helps hold their interest. Also, since the children's form teacher usually sits about four feet from me, poised in case of a riot ... it's guaranteed the class is going to sit relatively still, and listen.

In this case, you're all a little past that age. There is no class teacher present to ensure you pay attention and you're perfectly free to go out and have another cup of coffee if I become too boring.

But this is the nature of the environment movement. The major problem facing conservationists, past, present and future is not *how* to fix environmental problems - in many cases science has already devised solutions - but how to *interest* the audience *in* these problems. And who is the audience? The vast general public, who, in their minds anyway, have far more important things to think about than the natural environment and its inhabitants.

Governments may make the decisions, but as we are all well aware, governments do as little as possible as often as possible, particularly regarding controversial matters. And environmental issues are almost always controversial. (No offence intended to any government officials in the room).

The catalyst for political change is the vote count ... thus, the only way to put positive conservation decisions through State and Federal parliaments - and keep them there - is to have the majority of voters on our side. But how do we stop the voters from going out for that cup of coffee whenever we start talking?

Talking to children is terrific. They see the world in terms of ideas - of possibilities. As a result, their minds are capable of processing pure logic. They have no bias, few or no preconceived notions, and their thoughts and opinions are not yet constrained by personal experiences. Even the children of logging families will give conservationists a fair hearing.

Such children are the conservationists of tomorrow. Unfortunately, however, they can't vote today. So in order to have a future environment for them to conserve ... we have to convince their parents *now*. And adults are not so easily won by a cute joey in an oversized handbag. They may be loggers, farmers with wombats holes under their fences, graziers with more kangaroos than sheep ... or tourist operators with possums in the roof. Or, they might just be urban-dwelling accountants, taxi drivers, librarians - who's lives are so far removed from the natural world we treasure that it no longer appears relevant to them.

You see, at a certain age, anthropocentrism kicks in ... and a disturbing number of people out there only care about something if they *perceive* it will effect them personally. They have lives, jobs, mortgages, cinema tickets ... they prefer not to be hassled by problems which, as far as they can see, aren't their own. Environmental issues often sound complicated ... and many people would rather leave it all to 'someone else' to worry about.

This is where lack of knowledge comes into play. As wildlife carers, we can't help but understand that the Earth is a single ecosystem, and all its components - both biotic and abiotic - are inextricably interlinked. A change in the health status of any one component - whether it be a species, river, or weather pattern - can and will impact upon the other 'components'. We know that such impacts, no matter how small, can, over time, cause a domino effect, when the whole system may suffer.

But outside this room, there's a large chunk of the human race, the majority in fact, totally unaware of this concept. It's not that people are unintelligent - but simply that the information is not being presented in such a way that they can relate to it. Environmentalists have been trying to get their point across for years - but they have failed to capture the audience's attention. Most humans live for themselves, in their own busy world, pursuing their own personal goals.

I live in the bush, where my family and I run a 500 acre conservation, ecotourism and farming property. Hundreds of tourists pass through our gates each year, and I have lost count of the number who end their stay with the words "now it's time to return to the *real world*" ... in the city. Mostly, I bite my tongue, but every now and then diplomacy deserts me and I reply - "no, this is the real world: the natural world, where everything is created, bred and pollinated. The city is an artificial world, meaningful only to humans." Some get it ... most look blank.

But this is our audience. Biased, busy and ecologically uninformed. Three hurdles to overcome.

A Gap in the Market

The key to overcoming these hurdles is education - but to be educated, people have to listen. And most people are very selective about to whom they will listen. So - enter the environmental NGOs. Large advocacy organisations like the Australian Conservation Foundation, The Wilderness Society and their contemporaries ... working constantly to raise awareness and broaden environmental education. They are knowledgeable, dedicated, and their intelligent presentation captures attention - they win people's support by proving to them, scientifically, how environmental problems can and will effect *them* and *their lives*.

As a result, these organisations achieve much in the realm of landscape conservation, and as an ACF councillor I'm proud to work with them. But, their focus is necessarily broad to counter the vast array of environmental issues we face in Australia. For every win, there are a dozen more battles waiting in the wings. Thus, their annual campaign plans are frequently crowded, their staff are overworked, and their budgets, always overstretched. And somewhere between renewable energies, old growth forests and sustainable societies ... pure, simple, old-fashioned wildlife conservation is too easily left behind.

Here exists that gap in the market in relation to wildlife conservation in Australia. And this, I believe, is where you may come in.

Wildlife Carers live and breath wildlife conservation. You make the ultimate sacrifice, disrupting your homes, rearranging your work, and scraping together all your spare cash for the next bag of Wombaroo or a new whiz-bang aviary with all the mod cons. And when you're not changing bandages or sitting up at 3 AM with a bottle in one hand and wombat in the other ... you're out clambering through the undergrowth hoping to spot free-living versions of the very creatures living in your homes! It's who you are ... and who, indeed, better, to advocate sharply focused wildlife conservation right across Australia.

When our national organisation comes together, we will have a genuine opportunity ... not just to support, train and supervise rehabilitators like our smaller groups have in the past ... but to advocate 100% Wildlife Care ... to make a real *difference* to wildlife in this country.

We can change the rules which allow wombats to be shot without a permit east of the Hume. We can change the names of the “common such and such” to something which more accurately reflects its ecology, and does not present the “there are so many of them it doesn’t matter” picture. We can nationalize rehabilitation codes of practice and improve adherence and enforcement. We can bring about laws to confine domestic pets after dark ... and have wildlife education made a permanent part of the secondary school curriculum.

But we need focus. All environmental issues are of equal importance ... and in most cases, all are interconnected. However, there are so many organisations which already deal with the broad-scale concept - it is time for one organisation - eventually, I hope, equally as large and powerful as the rest, to concentrate solely and unwaveringly on wildlife. No matter how much each of us may care about other issues - nor how important those issue are - this organisation must remain true to it’s goal. Caring for Wildlife - in every way.

Now - some of you may be thinking, what gap in the market? After all, there are already activist groups out there who do concentrate predominantly upon wildlife issues. But regrettably, there is a problem with these groups - the audience does not take them seriously. They are too small; too scattered and frequently too emotional - and the average, biased, busy person rarely listens to them. Too often, they simply write them off as sentimental, unrealistic “greenies”, and cease paying attention. Those opposed to conservation play upon this perception, deliberately inflaming the naturally fiery natures of activists, inciting them to *react* rather than *respond*, to scream rather than inform.

Our organisation should not be based upon activism. Starting afresh, we have the potential to be bigger and better than that. Taking the ACF as an example - I see great possibilities for a national organisation to model itself in a similar fashion. Large, stable, powerful, with a sound skill-base and scientific foundations. It will take time, much work, cooperation and funding, but it can be done.

Structure

The current plan for state committees supporting the national council is ideal. Structurally, a national organisation would require three departments, each overseen by a separate sub-committee and managed by a separate staff.

Department 1 would carry out the predictable activities of a rehabilitation support network: training; coordinating; supplying materials; and ensuring quality of care and adherence to a nationalized code of practice. This department would work most closely with state branches, ensuring good networking between rehabilitators.

Department 2 would manage all conservation campaigns and advocacy work: lobbying; working with government agencies; meeting with special interest and community groups; in order to achieve conservation outcomes based on stated policy goals. This department would work with state branches on state-based conservation issues.

Department 3 would manage all fundraising, seek membership and control media and public relations. This department would be responsible for ensuring state branches maintained continuity of presentation.

Overarching these three departments would be the national governing body or council. Democratically elected, with equal numbers of representatives from each state, this council would steer the organisation: developing policies and goals; maintaining direction and generally represent the organisation.

Secrets to Success

Presentation is the key. Science is more powerful than emotion ... and a respectable, educated individual speaking calmly to an interviewer will always win many more votes than a bedraggled student chained to a bulldozer. You never get a second chance at a first impression, and we must ensure the impression we make is one of professionalism, intelligence, integrity, rationality, and knowledge.

To present ourselves successfully, and thus to campaign successfully, our group needs three things. Dedication, unity and credibility.

1. Dedication

We have it. It defines the process of wildlife care. None of us is afraid to work hard, stand firm for our beliefs or spend half an hour convincing the farmer next door that wildlife has value. Our everyday commitments to wildlife care will assist our organisation to remain true - dedicated - to the wildlife cause. We will not waver into areas of sustainable cities, human population modelling or anti-nuclear lobbying - because our first and last thought ... as we wake and before we fall asleep ... is wildlife. Such dedication will ensure success.

2. Unity

Unity has been a problem amongst some carers in the past - it has been a major point of weakness point amongst activists. This is why the establishment of a new national organization is so positive. Unity is a problem we *must* resolve ... and I can't emphasize that enough. Conservation involves battles, and if there is even the slightest indication of division amongst us, our opposition can and will tear us, and our arguments, apart. Splinter groups have little or no influence ... but a united front will win public support.

Unity can be held together by making the organisation structurally solid. It is essential that at the national, state - and if added, regional level - we all say and do the same thing.

To achieve this ...

- a. We will need policies to :
 - state clearly our views on a range of wildlife conservation issues
 - guide the way in which we present our views to our audience
 - provide the framework for establishing one, two and five year campaign plans and associated goals.
- b. We will need staff to:
 - contribute to our skills base
 - specialise in knowledge areas
 - support the rehabilitation network
 - carry out campaigns
- c. We will need a Public Relations Officer to :
 - create and maintain our public image, ensuring continuity in our presentation
 - obtain publicity to ensure our voice is heard
 - increase membership
 - and gain funding
- d. We will need dedicated spokespeople, who :
 - convey our policies and goals accurately to our audience
 - can interact effectively with the media
 - ensure continuity in our presentation and voice

3. Credibility

Credibility is more complex ... we're back to science versus emotion once again. Unfortunately, moral arguments rarely win battles - but a precise, scientific approach is very difficult for the public and the media to disregard. This is why organisations such as ACF are so successful. Their campaigns are based on facts and figures, not emotion.

When striving for credibility some thought must be given to the skills base of an organisation. Now we certainly do not lack skills in rehabilitation, but for the public at large, it will be imperative they see us as knowledgeable across all areas of wildlife conservation. If we aim to make a difference, we must include within our main governing body suitable scientists, wildlife managers and wildlife veterinarians who will add weight to our ranks. There are people - some present here - who would fill these roles superbly. In addition, our campaign staff should be qualified in their areas of interest; and our rehabilitation network staff should include experienced carers, handlers and animal husbandry experts.

Credibility is often impacted by association. With whom we choose to work ... with whom we are seen to be aligned. We must choose our battle comrades carefully ... as if we are too closely aligned with another organisation, we will be tarred with the same brush if and when that organisation makes a mistake, or takes a stand which does not reflect our own policy. It is essential for an advocacy organisation such as this to be purely apolitical. We cannot tell people *how* to vote, only what they should look for *when* they vote. Our opposition or the media must not be able to paint us as a "fan club" of a particular party, otherwise we will not be taken seriously. And, being apolitical is essential to obtain charitable status.

Media relations is the make or break area. Activists only make the news when they're in the midst of a melodrama, and thereby least likely to be taken seriously. On the other hand, the 7.30 Report will happily interview ACF or The Wilderness Society when there's a serious issue being discussed. We must ensure we fall into the latter category. We *do* have an audience ... but it's impossible for us to go out there and talk to every member. And we can't make them come and sit nicely in rows like you're doing now. We have to reach out to them with our message, and the only way to do that successfully is through the media. If A Current Affair tells it's viewers that changing the name of the Common Wombat to the Bare-Nosed Wombat is important, they'll listen.

Conclusion

This 'potential future' I've outlined here will require hard work. After all, we're starting from scratch, and there will be times when the battle will be uphill. The ACF has been around for 40 years, so we can't expect to match them in a year, or even five. This is a long-term vision - but conservation is a long-term battle.

Certainly, this organisation would be worthy as no more than a support base for rehabilitation - a national version of the smaller networks we have today. But I believe to go 'the whole hog' would be well worth the extra effort. In the first place, imagine what we could achieve. And in second place, think how an organisation of such size and scope would raise rehabilitation to a new level of professionalism and effectiveness. At last, we would have a voice.

The effects of wildlife rehabilitation will be limited if we are separated from broad-scale wildlife conservation issues. It's time for us to break free of the motherly stereotype of wildlife rehabilitation ... and move ourselves in the realm of all-encompassing Wildlife Care. Care for the Individual, Care for the Species, Care for the Future.