

Continuous Improvement: From Mining to Mental Health

June Butcher and Margaret Robinson
Kanyana Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre
Lesmurdie
Western Australia

Overview

This paper take a broad look at the continuous improvement in how Kanyana and, by implication, other animal rehabilitation centres, engage with the community on a range of levels.

The areas under consideration in this paper are:

- the resource sector which is a dominant element in the West Australian economy with a significant impact on wildlife habitat and welfare;
- The volunteer workers at Kanyana and how they are introduced and supported to become more skilled and knowledgeable;
- The aged and the infirm, with a focus on Alzheimer's sufferers;
- Juvenile offenders;
- And finally, the range of approaches developed in a spirit of continuous improvement to ensure effective delivery of key educational and awareness-promoting messages to the wider community.

The resource sector

In Western Australia, particularly in the Pilbara region in the north west of the state, mining is big. Although not as extensively destructive as broad-acre agriculture, resource developments nonetheless have significant impacts on local wildlife through habitat disturbance and animal injury.

Mining people often get to witness their impact on native animals firsthand when they encounter animals injured by vehicles, contaminated by various chemicals or caught in fences or machinery.

For generations though, native animals didn't figure in resource development thinking. These days, they receive more positive attention.

Taking action

In Western Australia, the point has been reached where resource companies are asking Kanyana to train their staff to do more than just kill or ignore an injured animal.

To date, Kanyana has delivered Wildlife First Aid courses to about half a dozen mining companies in the West and the numbers are growing.

What is taught and how it is taught will be addressed later in this paper along with the wider impacts that wildlife care have on human lives.

But first it is useful to sketch the journey that Kanyana has taken to help resource companies become more proactive in looking after the wildlife that they inevitably encounter.

The Goldfields

Kanyana started working with resource companies when Newcrest Mining, the big gold miner in WA, made an approach to see what could be done about the wildlife that came into its care.

Newcrest's problem was that 100% of the animals they encountered in the course of their work, died. That was in 2004.

Kanyana staff helped Newcrest firstly with training and in setting up a small treatment room, in a sea container.

Arrangements were put in place for injured animals to be airlifted from the Telfer mine-site, 1000 kilometres to Perth, so they could be treated more effectively at the Kanyana hospital.

As well, a release aviary was set up on the Telfer site.

The result was an immediate and sustained improvement in survival rates. The number of dead animals on Newcrest's conscience was quickly halved and Newcrest and Kanyana set up a working partnership that continues today.

This partnership is a model that is now being used to assist other companies in the Pilbara iron ore region such as Fortescue Metals and BHP.

Legislation

This change of attitude among resource company people was not sudden. Mining developments have been increasingly scaffolded by public pressure and resultant legislation requiring environmental assessments to be done prior to breaking any ground.

The Environmental Protection Act was first passed in 1986 with the dual aims of

1. Protecting the environment and
2. Preventing, controlling and abating pollution and environmental harm.

Between 1986 and 2012, the Act has been amended and strengthened several times and while protests against planned mining projects continue, the fact is that the Environmental assessments that now precede a mining development are far more sophisticated and effective.

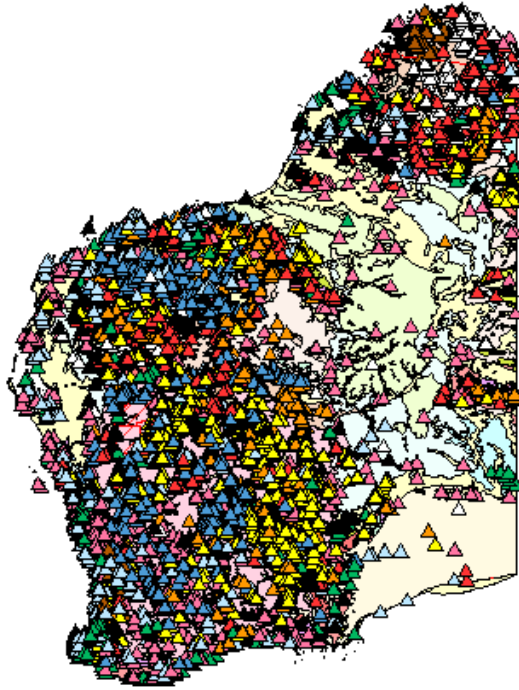
And it's fair to say that the miners have shifted their consciences to a higher level.

Where once wildlife on a mine-site was a problem that was best solved by being ignored, now resource company people have thrown away their 'too hard' basket.

Where before they were reluctant conservationists, these days we can observe that they are actively seeking the skills and the necessary infrastructure to address the challenges that wildlife bring.

Spread of activity

The map below shows the level of mining activity in Western Australia. It shows the mines, the deposits and the leases where exploration may be happening.



Mining, as the newspapers constantly report, is what WA does. These days it's done with some recognition of the impact it has on habitat and ecosystems.

Yet beyond any single mine-site and beyond any single wildlife first aid course there lies the larger question of habitat destruction. In a state the size of Western Australia there are some radical solutions currently being tested to address the habitat problem.

Millions of dollars are being spent on restoring and revegetating spent mine-sites.

And then there is Gorgon.

This is Australia's biggest resource development to date. It's centred on Barrow Island off the Pilbara coast.

Barrow Island has a unique suite of animals including Spectacled Hare Wallabies, Golden Bandicoots, Barrow Island Boodies, Barrow Island Possums and the Euro.

The Gorgon developers, principally Chevron, have a relocation project under way which is placing 800 animals per year out of harm's way.

For the next three years, animals will be caught and sent either to nearby islands or to Lorna Glen station near Kalgoorlie.

Nothing of this magnitude has ever been done before and it shows what lengths resource people can go to, if sufficiently motivated, to satisfy conservation concerns and still make a profit.

Feminisation of mining

Another important aspect of the change in attitude among miners has been the rise of the Environmental Officer as a key contributor to a mine's long term success.

It can be observed that this role is predominantly a female role and the continuing 'feminisation' of the resource sector is bringing a more caring approach to what was once of very masculine and aggressive industry.

The result is that it's no longer appropriate to bash a joey on the head if it happens to get hurt on a mine-site.

If an animal is beyond saving, there are now other more humane and certain ways of euthanasing it.

The response of Environmental Officers firstly to the existence of Kanyana's Wildlife First Aid course and secondly to its content has been very gratifying.

Kanyana trainers have seen firsthand that mining people now want to have the knowledge and skills to do a better, safer and more caring job of managing wildlife and mining.

Speaking the language

Mining people tend to be no-nonsense types. Fancy words and soft hands are not immediately on their list of lifetime goals.

In the training courses, we find that straight talk works best and that trainers must have a high level of knowledge because the standard of questions grows over the duration of a Wildlife First Aid course.

The participating men and women often start out with sceptical expressions on their faces but as soon as they realise that there is practical advice and know-how to be had, they start listening.

And soon after that, they start the questions. When they see that we are there to help them solve their problems, energy levels rise and brains engage.

The training courses keep the theory to a minimum and emphasise practical skills.

The Training

Kanyana's mine-site training focuses on the practical skills and knowledge that Environmental staff, plus bulldozer drivers, diggers, and other workers need to know in order to provide appropriate First Aid to injured wildlife.

In the past the training has exclusively involved Kanyana staff flying to the mine-site itself, but recently, more of these courses are conducted at Kanyana.

Holding courses at Kanyana provides the facilities to give a more detailed presentation.

Facilities that are encountered at the mines have presented many and various challenges, ranging from lost equipment in flight, equipment failures, and on one occasion when Perth airport was closed for 36 hours, staying overnight at the mine – with no warning, no changes of clothing etc.

However, with on-site training, we are able to provide a much more ‘rounded’ experience with live birds, mammals and reptiles.

Being able to observe first-hand, assessment processes, tube rehydration, hotbox setups, and actual animal care is profoundly more beneficial in teaching these vital skills to course participants.

Course outline

At the start of the course, the Basic Setup for immediate first aid is described and a photo shown of the first aid station at our Telfer mine-site as an example for participants to implement at their own mine.

The Course content thereafter covers:

- Immediate first steps when encountering a sick or injured animal
- How to handle an animal safely – for both the handler and the animal
- How to conduct an initial assessment
- How to decide, on the basis of the assessment if the animal is viable or not
- How to apply first aid or if necessary, euthanase the animal humanely
- And finally, how to pack an animal for safe transportation by air to Kanyana for further treatment as required.

The Kanyana Training Manual, which participants take away with them, provides further support in consolidating knowledge and skills.

Essential demonstrations are done to show how to assess an injured animal, how to keep animals warm, how to administer oral rehydration, and then how to prepare and pack an animal – bird, reptile or mammal - for airlift to Kanyana.

Participants then get to practice these essential skills. Interestingly, it has been observed that the men can get quite squeamish at this point and will only reluctantly pick up a dead bird.

Finally we describe how to release an animal back to the wild successfully – at their mine-site location.

Responses

Participant responses are uniformly positive.

Comments like “I didn’t expect to learn anything here – but I did” are common.

What is clear from the many courses that have been conducted, is that course participants take away skills that solve a painful problem for them.

Instead of being powerless in the face of an injured animal, they can now take effective action. We have seen repeatedly that through acquiring a useable set of skills mining people get immense relief, confidence and satisfaction.

What is also clear is that mining people are emotionally affected by the sometimes distressing animal encounters they have at work.

During course breaks and at the end of the course, they often tell stories of previous incidents and how painful and difficult it was for them – and how much better they feel after doing the course.

Simply knowing how to assess a sick or injured animal and how best put it out of its misery if necessary, touches an emotional trigger.

Wider perspectives on training impacts

Beyond the mining sector, Kanyana staff focus on developing our volunteers so they can participate to their full potential in meeting the needs of sick and injured wildlife.

New volunteers undergo elementary training where they are introduced to the various areas of hospital practice and resident animal husbandry.

Once on a shift, they are encouraged to develop their skills, which include recognising common animals, identifying food types for each species, how to read charts and so on.

Many volunteers have special needs themselves and we fine-tune our training to suit them.

They may come with a carer and the carer too undertakes the training course.

One or more of Kanyana's specialty areas may suit some of these people: maintaining the worm farm, assisting members of the Enrichment Team, building firebreaks and improving onsite safety.

Kanyana staff have observed over many years how this kind of work succeeds in helping more than just the sick or injured animals that are brought in.

We have seen that the people who do the work of caring for wildlife are also getting rescued, each in their own way.

Alzheimer's Impacts

We have Alzheimer's sufferers who come once a week to help with feeding and cleaning. The positive effect of this simple engagement with wild animals has been notable.

The partners of these sufferers report consistent and positive changes both in attitude and communication ability.

One Alzheimer's sufferer hadn't spoken a word to his partner for six months. After becoming a volunteer (with the help of his professional carer), he started coming home and talking energetically about the animals and the work he was doing.

This is a small example of a larger point, namely that humans flourish when they have sustained encounters with animals.

They get over their depressions, their grieving over lost loved ones, their mental illnesses and their lack of self-esteem. They build confidence and they also build bridges to new ways of living.

Juvenile offenders

Over the past couple of years, Kanyana has had young offenders coming twice a week to do their community service.

They build pathways, clear firebreaks and help with enclosures and the results have been heartening.

While it's gratifying to receive help with the work at Kanyana, it's even more gratifying when the effect of that work changes lives for the better.

Parents of these offenders have called Kanyana saying things like: "We don't know what you're doing with our son, but he's started talking to us for the first time in ages."

"He's now getting some direction in his life."

"He's saying he wants to go back to school."

These are signs that something very powerful is at work when humans engage their hearts and minds for the benefit of other animals.

It is something we are continuing to foster and nurture at Kanyana because the benefits flow in so many different directions.

Reaching the community

Wildlife rehabilitation is so much more than just taking care of sick or injured animals.

The job of the wildlife carer reaches beyond the individual animal to touch the lives of many people in the community.

The carer is so often also an educator and in that role the Kanyana team has noted some key variations in how different audiences want their learning to be packaged:

1. Young children want to fall in love with the animals. They want to hold them, pet them and give them names. The experience has to be very personal and as cuddly as possible. We've had kids become troubled to learn that an echidna for example hasn't got a name. How can this be?



2. Primary school children want to do something. They want to help and to feel useful. They have trouble sitting still. Small projects such as filling in observation sheets, doing checklists, collecting food and generally helping, all contribute to this age group's learning.
3. Teenagers want information. They want to be taken seriously and want a stronger intellectual component to what they are learning. At this age they are more concerned with themselves than they are with just about anything else and their interest in wildlife care is tempered by their peers. The boys get cocky if the girls are watching. The girls get serious if the boys leave them alone.
4. Older people, interestingly, are a combination of all the above approaches. They want the information, they want to do useful things and they also want to get close and personal with the animals.

Today Kanyana cares for about 2000 animals a year. It does this with the help of about 300 volunteers and 1.5 paid staff members.

The courses we run help people from the community and from industry to get a better grip on what needs to be done to care properly of our wildlife.

The end result of more than two decades working with people and animals is the realisation that everything and everyone gets rescued in one way or another.

The efforts that we wildlife carers make each day to improve the health and wellbeing of our native animals, rebound on us and bring us those same abiding benefits of health and wellbeing.

JUNE BUTCHER A.M. June is the founder and chair of Kanyana, having started the organisation in her kitchen more than 40 years ago. Kanyana is now recognised as a leading wildlife rehabilitation and research centre and occupies a new, modern facility in Lesmurdie, outside Perth. June has received much recognition for her work with wildlife and is a Member of the Order of Australia and recipient of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia's Serventy Conservation Medal. June was named Senior West Australian of the Year in 2009.