

# **ETHICS, PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS, REALITIES AND REASONS FOR WILDLIFE REHABILITATION.**

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## **Introduction**

The rehabilitation or attempts to rehabilitate wildlife caught in the interface of human existence and the natural world has become a popular activity among those of us with interest in nature. One must question the value of these efforts to the wildlife, the value to us humans and if the efforts and costs involved could be used more productively to benefit the wildlife we are trying to help.

As an example: when the Exxon Valdez oil tanker ran aground in Prince Rupert Sound, Alaska and spilled millions of gallons of crude oil, hundreds of Northern Sea Otters were oiled, captured and attempts were undertaken to clean and release them.

A facility was constructed for the specific purpose of this project paid for by the oil company. The animals were anaesthetised, cleaned and allowed to recover. In the end all died. The cost was estimated to be US \$40,000.00 per animal. It would have been better to euthanize them all when they were captured and use the money to buy habitat. The one good thing learned from this episode was a very good protocol to anaesthetise Sea Otters.

My reasons for presenting at this conference today in addition to a very good excuse for me to leave my surgery, clients and patients for a little while is to encourage the delegates at this meeting to seriously consider what our involvement with wildlife is, should be, could be and evaluate the actions and efforts involved.

The interface between human activity and the natural world is harsh at best. We humans are the greedy species. Greed is a pervasive quality found in most humans, societies and governments. My late

Father often said: "Shrouds have no pockets." Given human nature as it is, I question if my fellow humans realize this.

Biologists discuss holding capacity: The population of a species that an area can support. This is applied to every species but one, Homo sapiens. And we continue to take over more and more of the land mass of this planet with devastating effects on the other species with which we share this planet.

Many years ago I practiced in a large city with a lake established as a wildlife sanctuary located in a central part of the urban area. The sanctuary was surrounded by a municipal park and many residents of the area frequented the park and were able to view the natural world. It was like sitting in one's lounge and peering through a large picture window at nature in action and many did not like what they saw. Resident Geese bred and raised goslings and Black Crowned Night Herons and Gulls came and ate most of the young. Nature is not kind and unforgiving to the weak, sick and old. Retired ladies formed the "Gosling Watchers Society" and patrolled the edge of the water in vane attempts to protect the young from predation. I suspect many of our fellow humans involved in wildlife rehabilitation became involved because we want to rescue and save animals from nature or the effects of the Industrial Revolution and the urbanization of humans. Perhaps it is an effort in trying to save ourselves and guilt cannot be ruled out as a factor.

Why do species come into our possession for care, rehabilitation and hopefully release? A storm felling a tree with nestling birds, a fire caused by lightning strike resulting in burns to animals unable to escape, heavy rains flooding an area driving the residents out are all examples of natural causes. More often the cause is "man made." Fires set by humans, highway trauma from motor vehicles, dog and cat attacks, inappropriate use of chemicals, and other human activities are but some of the un-natural causes.

## **SPECIES AND PROGRAMS INVOLVED**

Individual species should be divided into groups: introduced pest species, native species, venomous/dangerous species, threatened species and endangered species.

Government policies and regulations must be followed and complied with. Species to be depopulated, (an example would be Rainbow Lorikeets here in Tasmania), should be euthanized. Species listed as endangered must be reported to the appropriate official ideally before any action is taken if at all possible. Venomous species should have licensed handlers available while the individual is examined. I cannot stress enough the importance of keeping records on each and every case with as much information as is possible to obtain. Species, date, sex, weight, finder and their contact address and phone numbers, location where found, observations by the finder, initial evaluation and description of any wounds and observations, treatments and disposition of the case are vital information.

(Refer to # 1) Copies of these records need to be supplied to officials if requested or required. It would be ideal if there was one national reporting site that could collect and evaluate the reports. Nature is running experiments and we need to notate the experiment. Not doing so loses data and samples that are invaluable for the fields of wildlife rehabilitation, conservation biology and human and animal health.

An example of this collecting activity is ticks. The Rickettsia Reference Laboratory in Melbourne is screening for Rickettsial diseases and a research group at Murdoch University is screening ticks for the presence of zoonotic diseases. Both programs will supply collecting material and preaddressed envelopes. Since many of the creatures we have arrive with ticks, there is a golden opportunity to contribute to these projects. There are other research projects underway that we can all contribute to as well.

(#1)

**SPECIES:**

Kangaroo. Wallaby. Wombat. Possum. Devil. Other Dasyurids, Other Small Marsupials. Platypus. Echidna. Bat. Native Bird. Non-native Bird. Marine Mammal. Reptile. Amphibian. Fish.

### **Syndrome:**

Alimentary. Ill thrift/weight loss. Integumentary. Lameness. Neurological. Ophthalmic, Reproductive. Respiratory. Sudden Death. Vascular. Other (Misc.)

### **CASES**

As mentioned before, is it a dangerous species? Protection of humans is a primary responsibility that cannot be over emphasized. Is it a threatened species? If so appropriate reporting, if possible, should be made. I believe that the following evaluation should be applied to each and every wildlife case.

1. Is it treatable and is it humane to do so?
2. Is it releasable and will there be a habitat available for the release?
3. Will the individual be able to complete at least one reproductive cycle after release?
4. Are there samples that need to be collected from the species?
5. If non-releasable, is there an educational institution that would care for it and more important, is the temperament of the creature suitable for a captive existence. Some birds of prey are so stressed in close contact to humans that it is inhumane to keep them as captive educational creatures.

These are very difficult questions to address but must be considered each and every time.

### **PROGRAM STRUCTURE**

Any structured responses to disasters or efforts caring for injured/orphaned wildlife need to model themselves on the Incident Command System. There must be a chain of command and participants given a specific assignment must direct their efforts to

this assignment and not waver or change their job description without express permission from the supervising individual or that individuals alternate. Where multiple intake animals are involved and there are numbers of people working at a location there needs to be assigned persons whose responsibilities are: supplies, transport, historian (gathering pictures and information on the event to help evaluate the performance of the effort.), records collection, volunteers organiser, media spokesperson and evaluation/treatment staff. Each and every assigned person is important as each aspect of the effort is dependent on the structure running smoothly. If the effort is under a larger response there will be a designated Incident Commander and the supervising individual must report up to this person and take directions for that person as well. Seeing a need and taking the initiative to respond to it, by leaving one's assigned role is counterproductive and must never happen. If help is needed a request should be sent up the chain of command and someone else assigned.

### **CARING FOR THE CAREGIVER**

Responding to a disaster or caring for injured and orphaned wildlife is stressful. In spite of all our good efforts there is a high mortality rate among the individuals we are trying to help. Volunteer "Burn Out" is a common occurrence. Becoming attached to a patient puts us at risk from a mental health point. Workers should be discouraged from naming animals. In large scale operations with many volunteers and staff there should be a trained counsellor available to provide individual support and well as serve as the facilitator in debriefing sessions.

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James Michael Harris. Born: London, England, 1934

Education: UK and the USA. Undergraduate training in anthropology.

Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, Michigan State University, College of Veterinary Medicine, 1958

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Special interests: avian, reptile and wildlife species, especially raptors, zoonotic diseases and the human-animal bond.

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