

The Australian Animal Welfare Strategy – An Opportunity for National Consistency

ABSTRACT

The white settlement of Australia established independent colonies around the country which each created their own laws and administrative arrangements. Even in the 19th century it became clear that this was inefficient and confusing so, as everyone knows, in 1901 the colonies all signed the Australian Constitution which created the Federation of Australia. The Constitution devolved some of the powers and responsibilities of the states to the new Australian Government. These included things like trade, defence and taxation – roles which clearly should be addressed as one nation. It did not transfer the majority of the States functions including animal welfare and wildlife management so coordination of these functions is by agreement between the “colonies”. Such coordination is always challenging – the three different rail gauges proves that.

In the 21st century, the focus is on Australia, not individual states and territories so we need to improve the consistency of our laws and practices by working with other jurisdictions and developing policies that will be adopted in all of them. The Australian Road Rules is a good example. The Australian Animal Welfare Strategy is an agreement between the Australian Government, the State and Territory Governments, animal industries and animal welfare groups to harmonise our legislation, arrangements and policies in regard to animal welfare. This paper provides a brief insight into the development, aims, achievements and potential of the Strategy with a focus on the Animals in the Wild Sector which seeks to improve the welfare of both feral animals and native fauna.

INTRODUCTION

The National Consultative Committee on Animal Welfare (NCCAW) is an advisory committee to the Australian Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forests. It comprises representatives of the State and Territory Governments, the animal industries and the animal welfare and rights groups. About a decade ago, NCCAW agreed that Australia should have an Animal Welfare Strategy. This was for four reasons:

- Members genuinely wanted to improve the welfare of Australian animals (whether native or introduced)
- Lots of people were doing lots of things to achieve this but many things were being done eight times – because they were being repeated in each jurisdiction. It would be far more efficient to do it once.
- Australia is one nation. If a certain cage size or management technique is acceptable in one jurisdiction it should be acceptable in all. Conversely if something is unacceptable in one, it should probably be unacceptable in all.
- Our trading partners trade with Australia, not with individual jurisdictions. Animal welfare was becoming a non-tariff trade barrier in the European markets in particular and, if Australia's standards varied from state to state it was difficult to negotiate trade agreements.

So, the process started.

In developing any strategy or document, the purpose and the audience have to be defined. Initially, this was difficult. The farming community wanted a document for trade purposes – demonstrating that Australia has high welfare standards. The animal welfare and animal rights groups wanted a document highlighting the existing animal welfare issues and a work program to address them. Members agreed that it should be a high level strategy – but wanted to include the specific issues that were important to them. Everyone agreed it should be succinct – but wanted their issues explained in detail. Detail and brevity do not work well together. The strategy took five years to develop and was eventually agreed by all parties. Nothing like it had been attempted before so everyone was working from a blank canvass.

The Vision of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy is "The welfare of all animals in Australia is promoted and protected by the development and adoption of sound animal welfare standards and practices."

It strives to achieve this through three goals:

1. an enhanced national approach and commitment to ensure high standards of animal welfare based on a concise outline of current processes
2. sustainable improvements in animal welfare based on national and international benchmarks, scientific evaluation and research, taking into account changes in whole of community standards, and
3. effective communication, education and training across the whole community to promote an improved understanding of animal welfare.

Under each of the goals are priorities and actions. Such an overarching program could only be achieved by breaking "animals" into subgroups. Thus six working groups were established:

- Production animals
- Animals in the wild
- Animals in work, recreation and sport and display
- Companion animals
- Animal in research and teaching
- Aquatic animals

Overseeing the whole program is the AAWS Advisory Committee. The members of the committee were selected on their expertise in each of the sectors and acted as mentors to the Sector Chairs.

Within the membership of each sectoral group is at least one:

- industry representative
- academic
- member of Animals Australia
- member of the RSPCA
- Government representative.

For example, the Wild Sector membership is derived from the following organisations:

- Dept for Environment and Heritage South Australia - Chair
- University of Queensland
- University of Sydney
- RSPCA Australia
- Dept of Agriculture Fisheries and Forests
- Animals Australia
- Environment Australia
- Dept of Primary Industries Queensland
- Vertebrate Pest Committee
- Murdoch University WA
- Kangaroo Industry Association of Australia
- Women in Shooting and Hunting (WiSH)
- Invasive Animals CRC
- Taronga Zoo

The Wild Sector considers animal welfare in feral animal management, in conservation of protected and threatened species and in commercial utilisation of wildlife – so has a broad membership. The combined skill set and knowledge is amazing and equally amazing is that the members work well together and respect each other's views.

In addition there were three cross-sectoral groups established:

- Research and development working group
- Communications working group
- Education and training working group

THE EARLY DAYS

This was a brand new initiative in 2005 so the starting point was to determine where Australia is with its animal welfare arrangements and what the priorities really are. Setting the framework required:

- Agree on a national implementation plan to make the strategy a reality
- Appoint members of the Sectoral Groups
- Undertake stocktakes for each sector to find out what is out there
- Develop sectoral Action Plans
- Undertake a survey of social studies and community attitudes to animal welfare
- Develop a communication strategy
- Work out, compare and contrast the legislation and co-regulation (quality assurance programs) across Australia
- Harmonise animal welfare legislation in all jurisdictions as much as possible
- Determine what welfare standards currently apply
- Establish Cross-sectoral groups
- Expand international profile
- Coordinate research and development
- Stocktake and benchmark education programs already available

And review progress five years after implementation.

All this was achieved in five years.

SUCCESS RELATING TO ALL SECTORS

Many of the achievements of the AAWS relate to all the sectors.

1. Engagement and maintenance of broad stakeholder networks

In all there are about 120 people involved in the AAWS committees. Everyone contributes on top of their real job and nobody gets paid for doing so. All members (or the organisations they represent) pay their own expenses. There have been remarkably few resignations and remarkably few arguments which is one of the greatest achievements of the AAWS. People who come from totally different backgrounds and perspectives are willing to listen and try to understand, and find compromise positions even if they don't agree with each other.

2 Agreement on consistency of jurisdictional welfare legislation

Through the AAWS the jurisdictions have agreed on 23 aspects of animal welfare legislation which should be consistent across Australia. The Ministers have agreed in principle and some of the legislation has been amended to facilitate this. This was highlighted as being the single most important issue in the livestock sector.

3 Formation of AAWS Research Centre (CAWE, AWSC, CSIRO)

The Centre for Animal Welfare and Ethics and the University of Queensland, the Animal Welfare Science Centre at Monash University and the CSIRO have formed a collaborative working relationship through the AAWS so they share information and funding for animal welfare research to maximise outcomes.

4 Broad stakeholder consultation verified research areas which need to be explored

The identified issues, in no particular order were:

- Social science issues – do people care about welfare, what do they know about it and are they prepared to pay for it?
- Pain management – in all the sectors. This applies to feral animal control techniques through to farm animal husbandry and research animals
- Assessing the welfare of animals – what actually matters to the animal rather than what matters to the people who care about the animals?
- Human/ animal interaction – both good and bad. How much do animals contribute to society and do humans give as much back. Again, this applies across all the sectors
- The definition of animal welfare – what are we actually talking about? Animal welfare means good health, good food, feeling safe and a million other things. Are we all talking about the same thing?
- Housing/husbandry – what facilities and infrastructure does an elephant, or a mouse or a hen or a kangaroo need to have an acceptable quality of life?
- Transport issues – how long can a sheep or an alpaca or a pig stay on a truck without suffering? It was agreed that standards would be based on science, not what someone thinks sounds about right.
- Alternatives/better practice – everything can be improved. We need innovation to find out how.
- Pharmaceuticals – drugs and how they work and how they can help animals. For example, what is the best anaesthetic for a crocodile?

5 COAG Strategy for Research, Development and Extension

The Council of Australian Governments comprises the Prime Minister, the Premiers and the Chief Ministers of all Australian jurisdictions. They are developing a national strategy for research, development and extension which is expected to be completed by March 2010. The work that AAWS has completed is contributing to that process

SUCCESS RELATING TO THE WILD SECTOR

Some of the following were the direct responsibility of the Wild Sector, others were undertaken by other sectors but have direct or indirect application to the Wild Sector.

1 Draft exhibition standards

There are no national enforceable standards for the keeping of animals in zoos and wildlife parks. A working group has developed generic standards and is now commencing taxon specific standards. These will be of direct relevance to wildlife carers because for the first time there will be a benchmark for facilities. It is not envisaged that rescuers will be required to have the same standards as the major zoos but some of the standards would apply. Wildlife care groups and Government agencies which issue permits could modify the standards as a starting point for rehabilitation facilities. Public comments have been received and considered and the general standards are now being finalised for recommendation to the jurisdictions.

2 Ministerial Council for non-production animals

In all Australian jurisdictions, the Minister for Primary Industries has an interest in the welfare of production animals. The Ministers meet twice a year at the Primary Industries Ministerial Council meetings (PIMC). However, in about half the jurisdictions, animal welfare and companion animal management legislation does not reside in the agriculture portfolio. In some they are located in Local Government, in others they are in the Environment Department. This means that no single Ministerial Council has a direct responsibility for non-production animal welfare. At the request of AAWS PIMC has agreed to consider nationally significant issues relating to non-production animal

welfare on the advice of the relevant Minister in their jurisdictions. This makes national programs and agreements possible.

3 Model for ranking humaneness of various pest animal control methods published

In any given vertebrate pest situation, there are a number of control methods possible. For example, to kill rabbits a land owner may choose to shoot, trap or poison. There are many things to consider when making this decision – if the land is near a road, shooting may not be an option. If the land is a public park poisons or traps could be a hazard. One of the considerations should always be the most humane way to kill the rabbits. The ranking humanness model has been developed for this purpose – so when a feral animal control program is being developed, all the costs and benefits of the options are considered and the most humane method possible is identified.

4. Review of NCCAW positions on wildlife as pets and rescue rehabilitation and release

The National Consultative Committee had position statements on wildlife as pets and on the rescue, rehabilitation and release of fauna. Position statements are not intended to be endorsed or adopted by all the jurisdictions, they are advisory so when and if the jurisdictions are amending their legislation or policies, the NCCAW position will be considered as part of the process. These two position statements were developed over a decade ago. The Wild Sector, through the AAWS has been asked to review them. This has commenced but is not yet complete.

5 Factors underpinning success and failure of translocations published.

There have been dozens of translocations and reintroductions of threatened species all over Australia. South Australian examples include Greater Stick Nest Rats, Mala, Magpie Geese and Tamar Wallabies. Some have been successful, others haven't. The Wild Sector commissioned a literature search on such introductions and what went right and what went wrong. Hopefully this will be used when people are designing reintroduction programs and will maximise the conservation and welfare outcomes.

6 International animal welfare conference in 2008

In 2008 the AAWS convened an International Animal Welfare Conference which was attended by 350 people coming from all over the world. Each of the sectors was asked to prepare conference papers, which they did.

7 Input into standards in relation to the Caring for Country camel initiative

Australia has about a million feral camels throughout the remote regions. This is one of the biggest environmental threats to the arid lands but, because it is not in the public view, it tends to be ignored. The Australian and jurisdictional governments have agreed that it must be addressed and has dedicated considerable funding to ensure that it is. It is important that camel numbers are reduced – but it is equally important that it is done humanely. The Wild Sector has contributed to the standards for shooting, mustering and slaughtering camels so that before any program is initiated, we can be confident that it will be done well and no camels will be left injured.

8 CoPs and SoPs for feral animals finalised

At about the time the AAWS commenced the Vertebrate Pest Committee had commissioned a series of Codes of Practice and Standard Operating Procedures for feral animal control techniques. Even the most humane and safe technique can be cruel and dangerous if it is done badly. The CoPs and SoPs provide a template on how to do them well. The AAWS supported this process and it is now in the final stages. They are not intended to become law but simply guidance documents. Most of the large feral animal management programs are conducted by, or in partnership with Government. It is likely that as a policy position, in the foreseeable future, adherence to the CoPs and SoPs will be required in any Government endorsed program.

9 Unacceptable control techniques identified and steps for prohibition commenced

While working on the Humane Model, there were some techniques that all participants agreed were unacceptable methods of feral animal control. They are:

- The use of broad acre strychnine
- Serrated steel jawed traps
- Chloropicrin for rabbit control
- Phosphorous for pig control and
- Warfarin for pig control

A paper is being prepared for the consideration of PIMC to prohibit these techniques across Australia. This is one of the great strengths of the AAWS. It is unlikely that any jurisdiction would have unilaterally banned these but, acting together Australia can do it.

10 Welfare guidelines for aquatic animals published

In general legislation addressing the welfare of fish is not as well developed as that for mammals. This means that there is not a legislative head of power to require standards but recommendations can be made. The Aquatic Sector has developed guidelines for the welfare of aquatic animals and is developing Codes of Practice for commercial wild capture, aquaculture and ornamental fish

11 Trialled fertility control as a non-fatal method of camel population reduction.

The animal welfare and rights groups favour non-fatal feral animal control methods over fatal. If fertility control of camels were possible it could address the increasing population while minimising the welfare risks of conventional control methods. Several potentially effective compounds were tested to determine whether or not fertility control was a realistic option. For numerous reasons which are beyond the scope of this paper, none were proven viable even in controlled situations, let alone in the remote arid areas in which camels live. Hopefully even though there was no immediate benefit, the work will have resulted in one more step in the long term aim of fertility control of feral animal populations.

12 Training DVD for indigenous care of community dogs

The Companion Animal Sector identified camp dogs as a major welfare issue. The reasons for this are extremely complex and mixed in with cultural, social and economic issues way beyond the scope of animal welfare. Through using the networks created by AAWS, a culturally sympathetic DVD has been produced encouraging the fair treatment of dogs. By changing attitudes to dogs the welfare of all animals in remote indigenous communities may be improved.

INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

These will not be discussed in detail but the AAWS has made a difference on the international stage as well as within Australia.

1 World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)

- Development of welfare strategies in Middle East and Asia/Oceania
- UAE animal welfare regulations
- Joint Australia/NZ OIE Collaborating Research Centre

2 Recognition of AAWS by EU

- MOU agreement on welfare cooperation signed September 2008

3 Commonwealth Veterinary Association

- convened 2-day welfare program at 4th Pan Commonwealth Vet Conference, Barbados, November 2007

– Samoa November 2008

4 FAO expert Panel on capacity building for good animal welfare practices

- DAFF on the expert panel
- 12 recommendations to FAO favourably received
- Opportunities for broader collaboration to make progress

WHERE TO FROM HERE

The original Australian Government funding for the AAWS lasted four years. Before agreeing to continue the program, the Australian Government commissioned a review of what had been achieved to determine whether or not it was an effective use of public funds. The AAWS 2008-09 Review acknowledged impressive progress. This was a new initiative set up for a four year lifespan so there was no process defined for the appointment or resignation of members and no succession planning for the long term. This is being addressed. The Government has agreed to continue funding support but has highlighted that it is essential for the sectors to begin to identify funding sources other than Commonwealth money. It also acknowledged the substantial contribution made by the jurisdictions in costs and wages and the personal in kind contributions made by the 120 people involved in the committees and working groups.

The AAWS is a partnership between animal welfare and rights groups, animal industries and Governments of all jurisdictions. It works on mutual respect and focussing on what we have in common rather than matters in which we do not agree. It provides an opportunity to make real change and improvements for the animals and people of Australia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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