

Abstract

Australian Marine Wildlife Research & Rescue Organisation (AMWRRO)

Briefly touch on the history behind AMWRRO and why, when, where and how this organisation started and became South Australia's only organisation licensed by the DEH to rescue and rehabilitate the large majority of marine wildlife species.

Focus on marine wildlife rehabilitation techniques and facilities that are used to best house marine wildlife (minimum standards); seabirds in particular.

Departmental responsibilities and policy changes that currently allow the general public to hold and house these animals in main stream suburbia and the complication that will erupt as a consequence; mainly stress related.

Husbandry issues that some cares do not take into consideration and therefore induce additional stress onto the animal – albeit unintentionally.

Biography

Aaron Machado – President and Founder of AMWRRO has been rescuing & researching marine wildlife for over a decade after the killing of six Indo Pacific Bottlenose dolphins in the Port River Estuary in 1998.

Since such time and working in conjunction with the Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH) Aaron was officially asked to join the DEH Marine Rescue Response Unit for dolphins and seals. Working with DEH and the South Australian Museum; Aarons' research included collecting dolphins, seals and whales for further study and was employed as the Assistant Collection Manager for the South Australian Museum and managed the only one of its kind in Australia - marine mammal post mortem facility located at Bolivar – SA.

Conducting post-mortems and additional research into the cause of deaths of these animals is something that is done on a daily basis.

Now having built the first of its kind in Australia – Natural Wetland Rehabilitation facility for Marine Wildlife – Aaron and his team continue to push the boundaries and policies that require changes within DEH, to better the overall care facilities and departmental responsibilities surrounding these animals throughout S.A.

Australian Marine Wildlife Research & Rescue Organisation Inc.

AMWRRO

General proceedings and overview of an organisation that changed policies and practices concerning Marine Wildlife within South Australia

Australian Marine Wildlife Research & Rescue Organisation Inc (AMWRRO) was officially launched in 2010, continuing the work of Project Dolphin Safe Assoc Inc (PDS) which was started in 1998 after the killing of six Port River dolphins.

The initial objectives of PDS were to patrol the Port River estuary and associated waters, to act as a deterrent to those wanting to inflict harm on marine wildlife, and to remove floating debris that could pose a risk to these creatures and their environment.

In the years to follow PDS incorporated several additional objectives which were considered important for these animals and their habitats but which were not being dealt with by the appropriate authorities. These included:

- Restoration of sensitive habitats;
- Removal of rubbish that had contact with tidal movements;
- Educational awareness activities;
- Revegetation;
- Rescues response;
- And, most importantly, on-ground relevant research that would actually help animals into the future.

Within the first five years of patrolling the Port River Estuary, PDS officials found several pelicans in the Port River that required rescuing and did so accordingly. Shortly thereafter, Australian Seabird Rescue's (ASR) Founder Lance Ferris held the ASR workshop in Adelaide of which several PDS officials attended and immediately thereafter; South Australian Seabird Rescue (SASR) started as a sister initiative of PDS, utilising the pre-existing infrastructure, manpower and local knowledge.

PDS and SASR jointly became South Australia's response to injured marine wildlife and the only organisation licensed in the state by the Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH) to rescue and rehabilitate seabirds, all sea turtles and all seal species.

Due to the ever-growing number of marine animals rescued and rehabilitated by PDS volunteers, the organisation built the Natural Wetland Rehabilitation Facility - the first of its kind in Australia – for injured marine wildlife. To date this amazing facility has seen hundreds of animals pass through, showing unbelievable recovery time plus the ability to maintain the wildness required in order to survive in their natural environment.

After 10 years it became clear that PDS had outgrown its name, and the decision was made by the management committee to rename the organisation. With constitutional objectives once more amended to incorporate all that we have done over the years, and will now continue to do, PDS became the Australian Marine Wildlife Research & Rescue Organisation (AMWRRO).

AMWRRO has been called on for assistance and advice in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, Perth and Tasmania, as well as in South Australia. The organisation is well known across the continent for our ability to rescue, rehabilitate and successfully release injured marine wildlife that would normally be euthanised due to lack of resources, facilities and the expertise required to rescue and house these creatures, and to maintain the wildness needed for successful release back into the wild.

Finding and addressing the major problem concerning marine wildlife; Is to acknowledge the real problem in the first place...

With over 8 years worth of data now collected – in 2006 AMWRRO and Lance Ferris C/- Australian Seabird Rescue had developed a theory, a theory that would change the way marine wildlife rescue organisations addressed this problem and attempted to manage it in the future if a real difference was to be made.

For years discarded fishing tackle was blamed for entanglements and clean up operations rendered useless as seabirds, dolphins and seals were still found entangled and suffering horrific wounds.

After encountering hundreds of pelicans with hooks embedded deep in their eyes, heads, wings, necks, legs and or swallowed – the questions were being asked;

1/ how does a bird that stands approximately 1 metre tall manage to get entangled around its head or in its eye?

2/ Why would a pelican or deep diving bird swallow a discarded hook if found on the beach?

3/ Why are these birds still becoming entangled in fishing tackle even after huge clean up events removed thousands of metres of line and tackle? Similar questions just kept flowing...

The answer was simple and was staring us in the face, it was never discarded tackle that was the problem, it was and still is active fishing that has caused this problem!

Active fishing and or unattended set lines was always the problem for marine wildlife, not discarded tackle. Although some animals presented injuries that resemble discarded tackle injuries – but only a mere 4%; these are typically foraging birds e.g. Ibis, White Faced Herons and Banded Stilts etc. Some smaller bird species have also been known to use discarded tackle for nesting material and this too can create a problem for the newly hatched chicks (and at time parent birds), however, in South Australia 96% of seabirds that have a tackle related injury are as a consequence of active fishing, not discarded tackle!

AMWRRO is not suggesting that fishermen are intentionally catching these animals but they are “accidentally” hooking them and cutting them free, thinking they are doing the right thing. This is surely a death sentence for the individual if not reported and more importantly if not found in time.

How to tackle this problem and make a difference?

Education is the only way this problem can be addressed and more importantly, acknowledging the real issue is the first and foremost problem to overcome considering we are talking about peoples’ recreational time; of which is a precious thing.

Dealing with the departmental red tape and animals once in care

AMWRRO along with other wildlife rescue organisations in South Australia have a unique situation and department to deal with when it comes to releasing wildlife that has been in care for a considerable length of time.

Understandably, the Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH) have concerns regarding the animals overall welfare once released – and so they should, that’s why they are there.

However, this situation can change and AMWRRO has proven that this is possible if you have the right evidence, support, knowledge and facilities to rehabilitate a wild animal without imprinting it.

AMWRRO has and will continue to release marine wildlife that have undergone several months of intensive rehabilitation, surgeries and close human interactions despite the rules and regulations that exist here in South Australia, and we do this in conjunction with DEH.

In 2003 when SASR started as a sister initiative of PDS, contact was made with DEH regarding seabird enclosures and the necessary requirements needed in order to be licensed to hold and care for these animals. This involved a 2 x 3 meter area with a large pond (sea shell), sand floors and a perch. On inspection by DEH we were granted approval and we started rescuing more and more seabirds.

However, the success rate for cormorants was approximately 55% - a poor statistic at best and one of which needed addressing.

Thinking outside of the square I started putting myself in the animals position; - I'm sick and injured, I can not feed myself properly, I can not use my wings properly to fly elsewhere (entangled), I'm starting to feel very tired (no food for many days), I'm starting to loose weight, I'm starting to feel hot and cold (infection starting to set in) and now I can not even be bothered trying to fly away from predators (humans). Whilst sitting on a beach an alien walks up to me (wildlife rescue person), grabs me and puts me in a UFO (pet pack) and takes me to a bigger UFO (vehicle), suddenly it becomes very bumpy, very loud (music or window open with the sound of cars and trucks close by) and before long I'm sitting on a table in another world (vet clinic), before long another alien comes in and starts poking me and causes more pain to an area that is already painful and then I'm put back into the UFO! I'm now taken to another world (wildlife carers house) and put in another area that I've never seen before – I can hear all sorts of predators e.g. dogs, children and other aliens all around me (next door neighbours) and then I keep getting poked by the first alien that abducted me from the beach. Its starting to get dark and I should be with the others (colony or haul out zone for large numbers of seabirds) but can not find my way out of this world, I'm sure there are predators that will come during the night to eat me so I can not sleep and must stay alert but can not due to the infection, lack of energy and the stressful days I've already endured.

This animal dies overnight from stress and is found in the morning by the well intentioned wildlife carers – this happened all too often before thinking outside the square and acknowledging the problem.

Once the problem was acknowledged the solution was easy, build a facility that would allow the animal(s) to experience minimal stress and stay in touch with a wild environment; this inturn allowed AMWRRO to change policies and therefore to swing the decisions that DEH would make when applying for release permits.

AMWRRO has saved and returned hundreds of marine animals back to their natural environment with minimal stress and that would have normally died as a consequence of well intentioned people despite not having the right tools to do the job that was required of them in the first place.

The overall message – think “outside the square” as much as possible and work “with” the animals you rescue to make their stay in care as stress free as possible – for their sake.

Thank you.