

Carer creching, the benefits of being together
Brendon Neilly
Senior Project Officer
Wildlife Licensing and Management Unit
Parks and Wildlife Division
NSW Department of environment and Conservation

Since 1985 the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (now NSW Department of Environment and Conservation, DEC) has issued licences to community groups and individuals to undertake the rehabilitation and release of sick, injured and orphaned native fauna. The licensing of these activities enables the DEC to meet three key areas of responsibility related to injured and orphaned wildlife, these being the welfare of the individual animal, the conservation of native species impacted upon by human activities, and the public expectation that something will be done for these temporarily disadvantaged animals.

In NSW there are now nearly 30 organisations and a similar number of individuals licensed to undertake wildlife rehabilitation. This actually equates to approximately 4000 people involved in wildlife rehabilitation, but this figure does not include all of the veterinary surgeons, DEC staff and long-suffering spouses and other family members that make this process possible.

The relationship between the DEC and those people involved in wildlife rehabilitation can be volatile. And while many involved would prefer to view it as one of cooperation and facilitation, those who may not support the direction or decisions of the DEC see it as restrictive at best and draconian at worst. Many groups and individuals have expressed concerns in relation to animal care standards, DEC policy, government support and many other issues. In most cases these concerns have been raised through informal means, and as a result they may not have been incorporated into a formal policy review. In addition numerous letters to both the Director General of the DEC and the Minister for the Environment have also raised these issues.

The issues raised to the Minister and the Director General will often result in direct action in one form or another. This process of addressing concerns on a "squeaky wheel" priority basis for something as significant as wildlife rehabilitation is fraught with inequity. In an effort to get to the heart of these problems, a series of four workshops were conducted in May 2004 to give wildlife rehabilitation stakeholders across the state an opportunity to have their say on their conservation initiative.

The workshops aimed to provide a forum for those involved in wildlife rehabilitation to speak their mind on what they perceived to be the key issues relating to rehabilitation. The results of the workshops were to be compiled to provide a snapshot of the current issues, with feedback to those who attended and to all carers through their groups and individually licensed carers. The

Director General DEC and the NSW Minister for the Environment were provided with details of the outcomes from the workshops.

Invitations were sent to all licensed wildlife rehabilitation organisations and all currently licensed individual carers along with a brief agenda and a few suggestions for discussion topics. Invitations specified to which workshop the group/individual had been invited. To ensure that all wildlife rehabilitators had an opportunity to attend, places were limited to two representatives from each group operating in the area. For large organisations such as WIRES this translated to two representatives from each of the regional branches and two representing the branches operating in the Sydney Metropolitan Area and the head office at Forestville.

Workshops were held in Sydney, Queanbeyan, Grafton and Armidale with approximately 60 people attending in total, including 10 individually licensed carers and representatives from 24 of the licensed organisations.

As indicated previously, the agenda outlined four general areas for discussion. These topics and the key points that were raised in each are presented below. While the material has been summarised no effort has been made to skew the issues raised one way or the other.

The Workshop process

The opportunity to draw people together from many of the groups to discuss the current state of play and to open communication channels was one of the immediate benefits of the workshop process. The level of agreement as to the key problems was both surprising and encouraging and provided a useful common ground from which to begin discussions. It was clear that most people had put considerable thought into their comments and submissions, which led to an educated, and at times, animated discussion.

The process itself was seen as beneficial and something that should be undertaken on a regular basis. Many rehabilitators believed that this was the first opportunity that they'd had to discuss their activities and all agreed that this was the first effort the DEC had made to canvas their opinions. The location and timing of the workshops was also discussed with a general feeling that an additional workshop in the far south or west would have been beneficial.

On the topic of communication, in the time since the workshops the Wildlife Licensing and Management Unit (WL&MU) has received several complaints/enquiries as to why one group or another was not invited to attend. In all cases invitations were sent to the current mailing address on file at the time of the mailout. While every effort was made to ensure that all parties were invited, if the address details change and the DEC WL&MU is not notified, communication becomes difficult if not impossible

1. Wildlife rehabilitation policy (the policy")

Most comments agreed that the policy, which was last reviewed in 2001, generally identifies and supports the current activities that wildlife

rehabilitators undertake and as such provides a firm base for their activities. In addition, it provides a relatively clear position statement as to the DEC's expectations of those involved in wildlife rehabilitation and provides clear delineation of the scope of their activities.

The workshops identified several areas where the policy could be improved/clarified. In many cases these may require a "tweaking" to clarify the situation. For example, a better definition of "veterinary care" is required to clarify if it is permissible for veterinary nurses to hold injured native fauna. Also a re-wording of the section relating to fauna being held by an unlicensed member of the public to better support the activities of wildlife rehabilitators is required.

In addition to the points above the following were also raised;

- The DEC must ensure that the decision making in relation to wildlife rehabilitation is consistent at all levels
- The one group per area DEC policy with set boundaries leads to "dead zones" adjacent to where the boundaries overlap
- The DEC should facilitate inter and intra group conflict mediation
- The policy must be regularly reviewed to ensure its currency
- There is a perception that management energy is focused on the "squeaky wheel"
- DEC must always apply the policy equitably as inequity is divisive
- DEC should have a clear decision tree for the issuing of licences
- Individually licensed carers provide community service in remote areas and may lead to the development of a rehabilitation group but they must interact with existing groups

There was a general feeling that the DEC does not commit staff resources to enforce DEC policy in relation to wildlife rehabilitation and other native fauna issues. This often undermines the position of rehabilitation groups in dealings with the public and some members. It was noted that in areas where the DEC is actively involved in rehabilitation issues, at Area office level, the interaction is generally beneficial and results in more positive rehabilitation outcomes. In those areas where the DEC has a lesser involvement inter and intra-group conflict seems to be greater. Without timely intervention this often results in individuals/groups acting outside of the DEC policies and, in some cases, the law.

Wildlife release and associated topics also generated lengthy discussion. Issues included the need for a better definition of "near" as used in the policy and it was also suggested that the methods, locations, timing etc of release should be clearly spelt out for some species. It was suggested that if the DEC was serious about protecting biodiversity it should look at prohibiting the release of some species in specific areas or even prohibit the rehabilitation of some species where evidence suggests that the species is negatively impacting on biodiversity. Examples were raised including the release of Currawongs, Noisy Miners and Rainbow Lorikeets. Further, it was suggested that the DEC should not permit the rehabilitation of species in areas where the

same species is subject to damage mitigation management practices such as the legal culling of Grey Kangaroos and flying foxes.

Finally, several points were raised relating to data management and the links between wildlife rehabilitation and the scientific community. The DEC acknowledges that the current reporting requirements placed on rehabilitation groups are minimal and there is little or no secondary use of the data supplied to the DEC. This was viewed as a significant loss and one that should be addressed as soon as possible. Many worthwhile suggestions were raised including the linking of wildlife rehabilitation reporting to the DEC wildlife atlas and the development of more rigorous reporting requirements that could be complied with on a voluntary basis as technology and time permit.

2. Animal care standards

As could be expected the issue of animal care standards was potentially the most controversial area of discussion. All agreed that, in general, there was a positive move towards “outcome” focused rehabilitation concentrating on the ecological role of the species in care and its release and reintegration to the ecosystem. It was then unanimously agreed that there is a need for more post release monitoring to evaluate the effectiveness of the rehabilitation process.

The proposal to develop and establish animal care standards generated intense discussion and was widely supported in principle, as might be expected the detail proved to be the sticking point. While it was agreed that minimum standards should be established and that these should link to industry “best practice”, the mechanisms for their development and who should set them could not be agreed upon. In general it was suggested that the process must involve rehabilitation groups, the DEC and the veterinary community. It was clearly agreed that regardless of the mechanism, standards must be supported through better inter-group communication and focus on rehabilitation outcomes rather than methods.

If animal care standards are developed it will be necessary to review the way in which the DEC and wildlife rehabilitators undertake the training, monitoring and management of those involved in rehabilitation. It was widely agreed that compliance with standards must be monitored. These changes, at the very base level of rehabilitation, will need to be undertaken by both the DEC and rehabilitators and will require a substantial increase in the communication between groups and also in the general level of inter-group cooperation.

There is a perceived risk that the larger groups will dominate any development of standards and that the input from the smaller groups will be overridden by a weight of numbers. The perception is that the larger groups have the human resources available to focus on these “peripheral” issues, while smaller groups simply get the job done. It was also suggested that the development of standards should be linked with the accreditation of trainers and training material. Leading on from this was the inevitable question of who should pay to develop these systems.

Other points included;

- Licensing conditions should be less prescriptive
- Compliance with care standards must be linked with licensing
- Competency based training could be based on existing models eg RFS
- Standards will help to remove personal opinions from care decisions that will in turn reduce the level of conflict within groups.

3. Communication, cooperation and consistency

The suggestion that NSW rehabilitators establish a peak body was met with both interest and suspicion. It was initially assumed that the formation of a peak body was some subversive Government agenda. Indeed, some people still think that this is the hidden agenda. However as the discussions progressed it became clear to most participants that the idea could, if well thought out and managed, deliver very real benefits to wildlife rehabilitation in NSW. The majority of the discussion in this section was taken up with this one issue. The lists below provide the positives and negatives discussed in relation to a NSW peak body.

Positives

- Direct link to NSW Government
- Permit investigation of insurance and other funding support from all levels of government
- Provide a mechanism for direct communication with government and the broader community
- Economies of scale
- Establishment of links with industry and the scientific community
- Lobbying clout

Negatives

- Loss of identity
- More bureaucracy
- Draw energy away from “Core” business
- Homogenisation
- Scope and range must be well defined

It was suggested that the DEC could play an increased role in facilitating communication between groups/individuals and the DEC. Most agreed that e-media could be better used and provide a relatively inexpensive mechanism for communication.

4. Interaction with government

It was suggested that the responsibility for sick, injured and orphaned wildlife has been passed from Government to the rehabilitation groups and as such government must take a greater responsibility for the support of rehabilitation groups. While several options for support are already in discussion it was clearly agreed that the effectiveness of Government support could be greatly

increased if delivered through a peak body. This would ensure that the support was delivered in an equitable fashion, and delivered where it would provide the most benefit. In addition, the Government would be in a position to place reasonable expectations on rehabilitation groups to abide by policies or other legislative requirements if in receipt of such support, which would in turn facilitate developments in rehabilitation.

An additional point raised was the need for independent mediation to be made available to rehabilitation groups when in conflict. Other points are provided below;

- Support should be provided to develop a single contact phone number for rehabilitation in NSW
- Government funding is required to establish a “disaster fund” for wildlife issues
- Public liability insurance for rehabilitation groups should be covered by the Government
- The Government should pay/subsidise vaccination for carers
- The Government should support the development of education material targeting the general public to increase their awareness of rehabilitation
- The Government should involve rehabilitation groups in decision making such as Advisory Committee’s and working groups
- The Government must better support compliance management in relation to wildlife licensing issues
- The DEC should develop clear decision making processes in relation to wildlife rehabilitation licensing

Outcomes

As indicated at the outset, the purpose of the workshops was to provide feedback to the Director General of DEC and the NSW Minister for the Environment on the status of wildlife rehabilitation in NSW and, where possible, provide some recommendations for immediate actions and future directions. The following recommendations have already been made to the Director General DEC and the NSW Minister for the Environment.

1. To facilitate better communication and consistency of decision-making, the DEC is to nominate a specific officer as a wildlife rehabilitation group liaison person in each region/area.
2. That the DEC/Government facilitate the establishment of a wildlife rehabilitation peak body for consultation and liaison between the WRGs and DEC.
3. That the DEC wildlife rehabilitation policy is reviewed to clarify and expand on the current document taking into consideration the comments received through the consultation workshops.
4. That DEC investigate the creation of a limited access page within its website specifically dedicated to wildlife rehabilitation issues. As an interim measure the DEC will consider establishment of a web discussion

group (eg. through Yahoo) to initially be moderated by DEC but ultimately by the liaison group that is proposed to be established.

5. That a meeting be convened between those Government agencies currently providing financial support to wildlife rehabilitators to develop a Whole-of-Government strategy for the support of wildlife rehabilitators, both financially and in kind, including a government funded public liability insurance policy to cover all wildlife rehabilitators and native animal rescue and relocation licensees in NSW.
6. That a mechanism be developed for identifying and supporting disaster relief for wildlife issues. This could be linked to species or populations listed under the TSC Act 1995 and/or be linked to situations where an "incident" is declared.

In addition to the above the NSW Minister for the Environment has already initiated action to investigate the provision of subsidised/free vaccinations for Lyssavirus to wildlife carers and is in addition investigating the provision of concessions on telephone charges for wildlife care groups.

Despite some initial scepticism, it appears that some positive outcomes will flow as a direct consequence the workshop process. It is clear that there is still a great deal of work to be done, and while the recommendations above may prove beneficial in the short term it will be vital for rehabilitation groups to cooperate and make common representations to Government if any of the big picture issues are to be successfully progressed.