

Summary

Caring for Australian Flying-foxes: New challenges in a changing world

INTRO:

In the late afternoon of Wednesday, 7th January 2004 the flying-foxes of Bellingen Island began to fall. In the next 24 hours an estimated 2% of the world's population of grey-headed flying-foxes died.

Description of heat stress incident, including key rescuer memories. (Baby smashing skull as it fell; male hanging dead 30 cms above water; disoriented flying-foxes drowning or climbing observers).

Caring for Australian Flying-foxes has never been easy.

Organised care almost 20 years old. Initial challenges included

- Watching flying-foxes, getting to know the needs of the animals – housing, feeding, social and release needs
- Developing and refining rescue techniques
- Training carers
- Negotiating through maze of internecine battles, generally over trivialities, between carers and carer groups
- Combating negative public attitudes to flying-foxes – this challenge ongoing.

Big crisis in 1990s – Australian Bat Lyssavirus

Carers have negotiated these obstacles, handled the challenges.

BUT, caring for Australian flying-foxes has never been easy; it is not easy now; it will not be easy in the foreseeable future.

What are the future challenges for those who love and care for these extraordinary and precious animals?

BODY:

The Bellingen heat stress incident provided graphic illustration of our lack of preparedness for mass disasters affecting flying-foxes AND of the carer community's ability to pull together in times of stress.

WWF predicts that 25% of the world's mammals will die in the next 50 years due to the effects of global warming alone.

Global warming is only one of the social and physical changes which threaten our flying-foxes.

List:

- Climate change
- Habitat fragmentation and simplification
- Decreased access to water
- Forest loss and simplification
- Ongoing competition for roost habitat (with humans)
- Emergence and re-emergence of diseases (ABL, leptospirosis, rat lungworm)

6 years ago it was predicted that the grey-headed flying-fox would be extinct within 20 years. At that point, the species was not yet listed as vulnerable to extinction. The species recovery plan is still in formulation.

How can we, as wildlife carers, stave off extinction or, perhaps more realistically, provide palliative care for a dying species?

Especially as the plunge to extinction is likely to bring more suffering individuals into care.

No answers. Simply observations, thoughts.

List:

- Preparation and implementation of mass disaster responses – i.e. along the lines of whale stranding responses?
- Re-working methods of care to routinely cope with mass intake – some ideas, suggestions such as clinic style care
- Increased emphasis on wholistic approach – partnerships with conservation groups preserving habitat
- Political responsibility – consider your vote, put wildlife habitat on your political candidates' agendas.
- Education, education and then more education
- Communication, unity between carers and carer groups

CONCLUSION

Early challenges focussed on getting to know the individual animal and its immediate physical and social needs, then meeting those needs.

New challenges, in this changing social and physical world, include having the courage to meet the physical, political and emotional challenges - including rethinking and reshaping our attitudes and methods.

However we identify and meet those challenges, it must happen now.

Whether we can reverse the fall to extinction or not, our flying-foxes must not pass from the Earth unfought for and unremembered.

Time has run out.

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