

The Development of Minimum Standards for Wildlife Rehabilitation in Western Australia

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ABSTRACT: In 2005 the Department of Environment and Conservation, the Wildlife Rehabilitation Consultation Group and a number of key individual wildlife rehabilitators in WA discussed the need to develop Minimum Standards for Wildlife Rehabilitation in Western Australia. The National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association and International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council, USA have produced National Minimum Standards in 2000 and it was this document that has provided the basis for the WA Standards.

Research into what was currently available in Australia confirmed that most State's have a Code of Practice for Wildlife Rehabilitation and that the content of these Codes are a combination of husbandry & procedural information and guidelines. It was also recognized that in many of the states the government agency relating to the care of wildlife is not closely involved with wildlife rehabilitators in its state.

Western Australia is unique in that DEC works closely with rehabilitators and that there is a formal approach to introductory and ongoing training for wildlife rehabilitation.

This paper discusses the both the development and the processes involved to implement the Standards.


Introduction

In 2005, the Wildlife Rehabilitation Consultation Group, Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) and a number of key individual wildlife rehabilitators discussed the need to develop Minimum Standards for Wildlife Rehabilitation in Western Australia. In 2006 the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association (NWRA) and International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (IWRC), based in the United States of America, produced the Minimum Standards for Wildlife Rehabilitation, edited by Dr. Erica Miller. With full permission from the author and the two organisations this document provides the basis for the WA Standards.

In 2006 the DEC Community Involvement Unit introduced a permanent Project Officer position to facilitate ongoing projects relating to the education and training of volunteers for the Agency and priority was given to developing the Standards.

The objective of the Minimum Standards is to provide a reference tool for Wildlife Rehabilitators, outlining the standards of care required to maximize the success of rehabilitation and release of wildlife species in Western Australia.

The Nature Protection and Community Involvement Departments within DEC foster a close working relationship with volunteer wildlife rehabilitators. This includes provision of a structured approach to introductory and ongoing training for potential volunteers and Registered Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitators. It was felt that there is a good foundation for developing formal Minimum Standards for Wildlife Rehabilitation in WA. Many of the States in Australia currently have a Code of Practice for Wildlife Rehabilitation. In most cases the Codes consist of a combination of husbandry & procedural information and guidelines, legislative reference and in the case of the Victorian and Queensland Codes, minimum cage sizes for wildlife species. These Codes do not function as formal Minimum Standards that must be complied with. If the Standards prove successful in WA, such an approach may be considered and successfully implement in Australia.



Consultation process

During the project planning stage we identified the need for broad consultation with appropriate stakeholders i.e. experienced rehabilitators both independent and those representing larger rehabilitation centers, advisory bodies and academic institutes in the industry of wildlife rehabilitation. This would provide accurate and current content that would support implementation of such a formal approach to rehabilitation and release of native fauna. In addition this would allow for ownership of the Standards by rehabilitators and the Agency combined, therefore promoting the close working relationship between the two groups.

We identified that members of the Wildlife Rehabilitation Consultation Group, representing rehabilitators in WA would provide the initial basis for consultation and, in addition to this group, other experienced and credible rehabilitators were invited to be a part of the consultation process. Many hours was spent gaining information from rehabilitators. This was achieved by face-to-face meetings, telephone and email. A consistent approach was followed during these information gathering consultations to ensure that the details provided met the criteria for the Standards. People were selected for their specialist interest and known knowledge and skills in specific species and areas of wildlife care and rehabilitation. Information recommended during this process was documented and made available to all those involved in the consultation process. In some instances there were significant differences in opinion and a consensus was reached based on open discussion.

On completion of the First Draft we broadened the consultation process to include all registered and non-registered volunteer rehabilitators on the DEC database, this totalled over 1300 people. Correspondence was sent to all individuals and the First Draft was available for comment on the DEC website for a set time period. All comments and feedback received have been addressed and further consultation has taken place.

Content of the MS

We looked closely at the desired content of the standards to ensure that the document is comprehensive and user friendly. The layout of the NWRA and IWRC Standards provided an excellent basis for this. We determined that the Standards would not cover day-to-day basic husbandry information and that where possible there would be clear statements of the minimum standard required in the broader issues of care, rehabilitation and release.

It is important to note that it is beyond the scope of the Standards to document all the fundamental details of care and rehabilitation. Generic statements of what must be considered are provided and relies on the users knowledge or ability to research current understanding of more specific biological needs for the species as it works through the process of rehabilitation and release. An example of this would be the following:

A rehabilitator is working through the process of raising and releasing Australian Magpies, *Gymnorhina tibicen*. The Standards provides the rehabilitator with specific information on the minimum size of housing the birds must be placed in as they move from nestlings to fledglings and flight. This specific information is supported with statements to direct the rehabilitator to make decisions about what must be considered to identify psychological, acclimatization and nutritional needs, readiness for release and release site. It ensures that consideration is given to the health status of the species prior to release and reporting and recording data. The Standards rely on the persons ability to network and further research specifically on the needs of *G. tibicen*.

A **snapshot** into the content of the Standards includes:

Stages of Care

Stage 1 Intensive Care (IC) has two main purposes: to restrict activity and to maximise environmental support by provision of medication, heat, humidity and supplementary nutrition. IC is maintained primarily indoors. The holding area should be small enough to facilitate easy observation and capture, thereby minimizing capture stress and the possibility of injury during repeated periods of capture and treatment. Animals and birds confined to their pouch/nest prior to weaning and fledging are included in this category.

Stage 2 Acclimatisation and physical therapy comprise the next phase of the rehabilitation process with the animal recovering from illness or injury. In the case of orphaned animals and birds, stage 2 includes the process of weaning/fledging. This stage can be maintained with a combination of housing indoors and outdoors.


Stage 3 Pre-Release includes unlimited activity using large outdoor aviaries/enclosures. This environment provides physical and psychological experiences and conditioning or reconditioning through extended flights for birds and walks, runs and/or climbs for reptiles/mammals. This housing should allow animals and birds to improve their strength, develop stamina and coordination, restore muscle tone, find food and continue to acclimatise to current weather conditions and other elemental stimuli e.g. wind, noise and the general environment.

Basic Housing Requirements

The size, and set up of the environment a species may require to prepare for release was identified as an important component. The Standards has determined basic requirements for housing including furniture needs and minimum sizes of holding for most species likely to be moving through the process of rehabilitation and release. This covers all 3 stages as noted above. The sizes provided in various legislation (see References) were discussed and noted as not appropriate based on the association with maintaining animals and birds in captivity. Through consultation the sizes selected were provided by those caring for the sick and injured and those releasing animals back into the wild. This is supported with anecdotal evidence of release successes when housing animals in the sizes recommended.

Release Considerations

This section covers fundamental standards for release including noting that the species is at an appropriate level of fitness, is of the appropriate stage of development e.g. independent, breeding season considerations & normal parameters of behavior. It also discusses methods to determine soft and hard release options and where and when to release.



Recording and Reporting Requirements

Maintenance of accurate data is important for monitoring and reflecting on changes and progress of animals in the care of the rehabilitator. Standards and legislative requirements on recording and reporting are discussed in this section. However, it is noted that this is an area that requires some improvement but is currently limited by the lack of Agency resources and an effective database.

Human health risks and disease control

This area includes veterinary involvement in sick and injured wildlife cases, euthanasia methods that can be employed by the person caring for the animal, diseases and transmission between animals and humans and standards of hygiene that must be maintained to minimise the risk of disease transmission.

Once the Standards are in effect

A feedback & review system must be developed and implemented to ensure that the Standards do not remain static and that they change as new information and technology is made available and as data becomes available to support successes in release cases. It has been recommended that the Standards are initially reviewed in 3 years. This provides a period long enough for them to be in effect and to determine if there are unrealistic standards and/or the need to improve in areas.

In Western Australia there is currently a lack of any formal post release monitoring of most species and particularly the common species (which are the most frequently rehabilitated and released). Follow on recommendations to DEC are to develop a database for recording species identification, location of release and outcomes of release. Follow up monitoring would provide us with information on the success of our actions.

Wildlife Officers employed with Nature Protection DEC, undergo in-house training on a regular bases. Part of this training includes developing skills and knowledge required to complete Wildlife Rehabilitator Assessments. An assessment of a person's property and of their level of competency occurs when they apply to become a Registered Wildlife Rehabilitator or if a complaint has been made to DEC against a person in their capacity as a rehabilitator. DEC Officers are required to attend the property, meet with the person and work through an assessment process to ensure the standards of care are appropriate. With the introduction of the Minimum Standards, this process can be formalized and consistency amongst assessments, DEC staff and rehabilitators can be achieved.



Change to Legislation

The Western Australia 1972 Wildlife Conservation Regulations (Part 4) states;– *‘Keeping of Fauna in Captivity 28A’*: allows anyone to temporarily keep in captivity of confinement fauna that is sick, diseased or injured or that is abandoned juvenile fauna, for the purpose of caring for it until it recovers or becomes capable of fending for itself”.

A person does not require any qualifications/skills or experience to care for and rehabilitate wildlife in WA. Discussions have been held with the Senior Wildlife Officer and Senior Management at DEC to review current legislation, with the aim to incorporate the Minimum Standards into the Regulations for the Wildlife Conservation Act and replace Regulation 28A with mandatory registration/licensing of anyone wanting to care for and rehabilitate wildlife. The advantages of a formal system such as this would provide Wildlife Officers with a due process to enforce the Minimum Standards for the protection of native wildlife. Currently, the Wildlife Officers will be using the Standards as a guideline.

DEC provides courses in Basic Wildlife Rehabilitation, Special Topics (covering issues that are current at the time) and Advanced Topics on various areas of wildlife care. A record of continued professional development may be considered as criteria to maintain Registration, thus ensure that a rehabilitator is current in their skills and knowledge.

Summary

The Standards have been developed and will be implemented for the purpose of providing an appropriate level of care for native fauna in Western Australia. Current Wildlife Rehabilitators are enthusiastic at the introduction of the Standards as their passion and motivation for the animals they care for is a priority to them.

DEC Wildlife Officers will provide the support that is required to assist Wildlife Rehabilitators in meeting the Standards. In some cases a rehabilitator may question that they are able to comply with the Standards in any particular area and should identify what their niche is within this passionate industry to ensure that their contribution continues.

BIOGRAPHY:

Michelle Rouffignac is the Nursing Supervisor at Perth Zoological Gardens Veterinary Department. She developed the Minimum Standards whilst working on Secondment with the Department of Environment and Conservation for a 6 month period in 2006.

