

## WILDLIFE CONSERVATION AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Adriana Simmonds  
Human Seeds  
27 Toppings Road, Wonga Park VIC 315  
[adriana.simmonds@humanseeds.com.au](mailto:adriana.simmonds@humanseeds.com.au)

The rehabilitation of injured, orphaned, sick and displaced native animals is a very complex activity, which is in itself a full time job. Countless volunteers across the nation devote their lives to give relief, hope and a second chance in life to many creatures in distress.

However, the role of the “wildlife people” is becoming more and more important today, extending beyond the rehabilitation of individuals, to becoming significant participants and contributors in many other fields such as conservation, ecology, veterinary science, public health, planning and education.

Our skills, our knowledge, our observations and our experience working with native animals, are now more relevant than ever before, and they are giving us the opportunities to become more than wildlife rehabilitators:

- We are researchers:  
Our work gives us the opportunity to collect data and information about our native animals which is helping to complete the puzzle about their behaviour, their diet, their reproduction, their health, their physiology and much more. A couple of decades ago, little was known about native animals and, even though there is still much to learn, today we have a much better knowledge about them due to the continuous contributions from different sources, including wildlife carers.  
One important example is the information generated by carers over the years about techniques for successfully releasing rehabilitated wildlife.
- We are monitors:  
Due to our constant contact with animals that come and go, to and from our shelters, we are usually the first ones to detect anomalies in populations, such as their increase or decline in some areas, poisonings, new illnesses presented, problems affecting them and their causes, just to mention some of them.  
Regarding the above example of generating releasing techniques for rehabilitated wildlife, our role as monitors has helped to validate those techniques.
- We are healers:  
Even though most carers are not veterinarians, most of us keep injured and sick wildlife in our shelters, which receive some kind of medical treatment. For these cases, the help and support given by veterinarian doctors is invaluable.  
Carers are gaining more skills and experience when dealing with injured and sick animals thanks to the instructions, supervision and guidance offered by them.

Those skills gained are really useful not only in our day to day activities as carers, but also during difficult situations such as natural disasters, where many animals are affected in one single event.

At the same time, carers make a big contribution giving important feedback to veterinarians, encouraging mutual help and support.

- We are a free community service:  
When members of the public encounter a native animal in distress, most of the time they are also in distress because they have a problem in their hands. Most of them do not know what to do or how to handle the situation. When we attend and take care of each case, we are not only solving a problem to the animal itself, but we are also providing a free community service by taking a problem out of the hands of those members of the public.  
We are also relieving government organisations, both at local and state levels, from taking calls from members of the public, giving advice, organising rescues/euthanasia, rehabilitating and releasing wildlife
- We are advocates:  
Our voices are becoming stronger and louder. More and more wildlife people are getting involved in advocacy, reaching out beyond the walls of their shelters or practices and taking action to protect and save wildlife at a local, national and international level.  
More and more of us are interested in raising awareness, expressing our opinions and pushing for a better future for all forms of life.

Another important role we need to include in our list is a very important one: the role of educators.

Community education is vital in wildlife conservation!

Why? Because most of the problems affecting wildlife, those very problems we rehabilitators are trying to fix, are caused by humans.

With a simple root cause analysis exercise we can determine that humans are the main reason for wildlife in distress in the first place. Therefore, it makes sense to start working with humans to try to reduce or avoid those situations as much as possible.

It is necessary to start inculcating, within all sectors of society, the right attitude and appreciation towards native animals and the environment, as well as providing the right information about them.

In most cases, when we are involved with wildlife in trouble, our actions are reactive. In general, we assess the situation and make the decisions needed to fix it accordingly. That is fantastic and we need to continue doing this.

However, it is also important to start thinking in a proactive manner. That means that we need to start working towards reducing or avoiding those problems before they

present themselves. This is a very long process which takes time, dedication and effort, but it is worth trying. This process is Community Education.

Some of the ways in which we wildlife rehabilitators can become educators include:

1. Educating members of the public who bring wildlife to us:

Wildlife rehabilitation is not only an opportunity to help an animal, but it is also an opportunity to educate people who report an incident or bring an animal to us.

In many cases, we can take that person from a simple caller or an animal deliverer, to an active wildlife helper.

In my personal case, the typical example is the family who brings a baby possum they found in their backyard. This is a great opportunity to get children involved, giving them a tour through the shelter and explaining what is going to happen to the animal they have rescued. Inviting them to be informed about the rehabilitation process of the animal and asking them to take the animal back to be released where it was found, when possible.

Praising them for their efforts to save a life as well as giving them useful information about ways to live harmoniously with wildlife, will promote a positive attitude and a duty of care.

Not everybody has the same disposition, but those who are open to receive our message, will be improving themselves and multiplying the message as well.

2. Getting involved with our local government and non government entities like councils, parks, water authorities, environmental and community groups:

Promoting a professional, supportive and respectful relationship with different government entities is very helpful.

The importance of working with local government is that they also need to be educated about wildlife issues.

They are constantly making decisions that affect wildlife and the environment and our chances of becoming an effective voice for them increases when the relationship is kept as professional and positive as possible.

Being good negotiators as well as offering scientific data and information gives weight to our points.

Getting involved with environmental groups and other organisations gives us the opportunity to learn new things, spread a good message and gain support.

3. Guest speakers:

Many schools and community groups invite their local carers as guest speakers to talk about their work. This is a fantastic way to reach people of all ages and backgrounds.

These spaces are great to talk about the main problems that the wildlife are facing in our local areas and how we can all help to reduce or avoid those problems.

Talking to local groups also gives us the opportunity to share the kind of work we do and to raise awareness about wildlife and the environment in general.

Each area within the country has different problems affecting wildlife, so the community education that needs to be promoted may differ according with the location. However, there are some problems that are common to most areas, which need to be addressed:

- Road accidents:
  - Work with local councils for signs advising about wildlife in the area
  - Designing new/better signs
  - Display phone number of local wildlife organisations to report car accidents
  - Educate about hours when animals are more active and therefore, accidents are most frequent
  - Promote careful driving and speed reduction
  
- Responsible pet ownership:
  - Cats:
    - Explain the nature of the cats as predators: statistics of wildlife attacked by feral, stray and pet cats
    - Promote keeping cats indoors/contained 24/7: benefits for the wildlife, the cats themselves and the family's health, as well as the savings in vet bills
    - Provide information about keeping cats indoors/contained: cat runs
  - Dogs:
    - Explain the nature of the dogs as predators: statistics of wildlife attacked by dogs
    - Provide information about walking dogs on leash
  
- Entanglement:
  - Fences:
    - Explain the nature of entanglement on fences: dangerous fences, species affected, injuries caused
    - Promote wildlife friendly fencing
    - Promote making visible fencing in hot spots
  - Netting:
    - Explain dangers of black, thin, lose netting used to protect trees
    - Promote use of thick colourful nettings
    - Promote the use of nets on frames to avoid entanglement
  - Rubbish:
    - Explain how wildlife gets entangled in rubbish
    - Promote responsible management of rubbish
  
- Habitat Destruction:
  - Present statistics and reasons for land clearing
  - Explain the effects of land clearing in wildlife and ecosystems in general
  - Explain the habitat destruction due to environmental weeds and other introduced plants.
  - Explain the environmental cost and dangers of exotic gardens
  - Present conservation steps on habitats: protect, enhance, restore

- Promote indigenous planting
- Promote weed removal
- Promote the creation of aquatic habitats
- Promote the creation of wildlife corridors

Education should be fun, engaging, positive and empowering. The problems should be presented as they are, but people need to be encouraged to be proactive and help the wildlife and the environment in their day to day ways of life.

After many years of environmental education here in Australia and overseas, I have realised that education is one of the most powerful tools we have. It also may be the only hope for a better future for all forms of life.

Our wildlife is facing many challenges presented by humans in many different ways; the pain, the distress, the deaths and even the extinction they are suffering is hard to measure. It is imperative that we wildlife people start to educate our communities if we want to start reducing those challenges.

It is important to recognise that through education, the changes we initiate in people are more permanent, because they will be produced by conviction, not by force.

*A real victory is not when you defeat your enemies, a real victory is when you turn them around and bring them to your side.*

A.Simmonds

**ADRIANA SIMMONDS:** I am a Colombian Biologist specialised in Zoology, who fell in love with Australian wildlife since the very moment I arrived into the country 13 years ago. I have been looking after injured, orphaned and sick native animals for the past 11 years. I coordinated the food drops for Wildlife Victoria during and after the 2009 bushfires. Soon after, due to the increasing demand for information from the community, I became and have been the Education Officer for the past 3 years. Today I am the founder and director of “Human Seeds”, an organisation dedicated to environmental education, through which many people have been reached.