

Mentoring new carers a special type of wildlife education

*Deborah Turnbull
Centre for Innovative Conservation Strategies
Griffith University, Queensland
ph: 07 3266 1323
Email: d.turnbull@griffith.edu.au*

ABSTRACT: At the 2005 conference I talked about some of the different types of people from the general public who we, as wildlife carers, educate. There was the ego-centric who is only concerned with how wildlife 'interfered' with his or her life and who wanted wildlife 'managed'. The other extreme was the eco-centric who may know more than us about ecology or marine biology, but is at a loss as to what to do with a baby possum brought in by the neighbour's cat. I see new wildlife carers as a special group from the general public who, for whatever reason, want to care for wildlife at a more intimate level. New carers fit somewhere in between the ego-centric and the eco-centric.

Introduction


Each new carer who decides to take on the responsibility of rehabilitating wildlife is an individual. Each one starts caring for a different reason, although there is usually a degree of interest in the environment or love of wildlife. Some carers start young while still living at home, others wait until retirement. They come from all walks of life and bring a range of previous experiences with animals, wildlife and the environment.

It would be great to think that we are dealing with a group of eco-centrics who are passionate about the environment and the wildlife living in it, but we cannot assume this to be the case. Many start for reasons other than conservation. Some may be motivated primarily by animal welfare concerns. Some people need to be needed by someone or something and may be better off with a pet they can form a deeper connection with. Some people think it would be 'a good experience for the children', and others are just looking for something along the lines of a hobby to fill in spare time. Fortunately this is a minority.

It is easy to look at the eco-centrics and think they may make better carers than the ego-centrics, but extreme eco-centrics may also find wildlife caring difficult. Some find the switch from thinking at a species level, to focusing on the individual a challenge. They may have a deep understanding of how global warming works, but not quite grasp the notion of regular feeds and routines. Again, this extreme is not common.

The average new carer will be partially motivated by 'feel good' reasons, partially through animal welfare concerns, and partially to 'do something for the environment'. As mentors we need to identify and cultivate the strengths a person brings with them to caring, and also identify weakness or gaps in knowledge so we can help them develop into competent rehabilitators with a broad knowledge.

At last year's conference I proposed a theoretical model of public education by wildlife carers. I said that wildlife carers who were good environmental educators possessed a set of values and skills that included: respect, integrity, passion, an ethic of care, knowledge, communication skills, and problem solving skills. It follows that good mentors, who are educating a sub-set of the general public, will also have these values and skills. A detailed discussion of these values and skills can be found in last year's conference proceedings.



In this paper I am going to look at how a few of those values and skills relate to beginning carers. I will look at the development of an ethic of care, the acquisition of knowledge and problem solving in new carers, and integrity in mentors.

Ethic of Care

I believe that is our ethic of care that sets wildlife carers apart from all others. Many people care about animals or the environment, but the nature of the way wildlife carers care is different. The caring relationship between carers and their animals is unique and needs to be learned and refined over time. New carers will naturally tend towards over-handling their new charges – particularly furry ones who will happily cuddle back. I think it is unrealistic to expect otherwise. Our job as mentors is to encourage and support new carers as they develop that special ethic of care that is specific to wildlife rehabilitation.

New carers, who may be more ego-centric in their motivation to care, sometimes simply care too much. Loving animals is not the same as caring for them, particularly in the wildlife rehabilitation sense. Many people come to wildlife caring with pets, or having had pets as children. Their understanding of interactions with animals is based on interactions with pets. The relationship between a pet and its owner is different from the relationship between a wild animal and its carer. We may all say we love our wild animals, but we do not expect them to love us back the way we might expect our dog to love us back. A ringtail possum crawling down its carer's shirt is not a sign of love, it is a demonstration of instinctive possum behaviour – to look for mum's pouch. I have only had one new carer who did not fully grasp this difference between over-loving and caring – she quit wildlife caring after being bitten by a lovely little rainbow lorikeet she was cuddling! There are many reasons why we start new carers with older animals rather than babies, and this is one. It demonstrates the wildness of animals first hand. It is easier for new carers to learn about the appropriate relationship between a wild animal and its carer with a slightly older and wilder animal than a fully dependent baby.

Modelling caring behaviour is one of the best ways to teach new carers about appropriate caring. I was recently at a meeting of wildlife carers and at least six people had babies with them. The babies were not seen. Someone would just slip away for a while with a basket. This provided an excellent example to the new carers who were present. We need to spend time with new carers showing and talking about the difference between caring and mothering. We feed babies and return them to their bed without any fuss. We don't 'hang on' to animals or baby them for too long. They go from basket, to kindy cage to aviary as they reach different developmental stages. I admit my first ringtail possums did not go outside until they were well over 300 grams, even though they should have gone out much earlier. What I needed at that time was a mentor telling me it was time for them to become independent. Course notes give a guide to the developmental stages of animals but it is also good to talk to new carers about various developmental stages as they occur with the animal in their hands at the time. Learning from my own mistake, when over-protective 'Sally' was making all sorts of excuses for not moving her possums outside I went over to her house and watched over the move in person.


Some would-be rehabilitators never quite develop the right ethic of care. After a year of caring, 'Annie' was still loving her animals to death. Her general husbandry was good, so it was difficult to simply stop giving her animals. 'Rick' was very proud to be a wildlife carer and wanted everyone to know and to love his babies as much as he did. As with Annie, Rick was developing into a good carer, except for the constant 'show and tell' with friends and family. What can you do in this situation? To start with, I would give Annie and Rick animals that were already reasonably independent and that did not need to be hand fed, and I would supervise their placement in appropriate accommodation. It is important to explain why this is being done and

to ensure the new carer does not see it as some form of punishment. It is just part of the learning process. I would also encourage them to visit other experienced carers to watch how they interact with their animals. Although it can be difficult to organise, observing animals in the wild can open people's eyes as to how young some animals are when they are forced into an independent life. A very stern word from one of the most experienced and respected carers in Rick's group resulted in an immediate reduction in his show and tell activities. He now has a rather sizeable photo album to show his friends.

Knowledge

Groups can and should take on as much of the responsibility for passing on factual knowledge as they can. I have mentored a number of new carers and there is a substantial difference between those who have done a thorough course focusing on their preferred species, and those who have done only a general course or none at all. They have all the gear and quality notes to refer to which makes the mentor's job a lot easier. A cohesive group that keeps all its members up-to-date, or a network of local carers who keep themselves up-to-date, also eases the burden on individual mentors. No one mentor has all the answers and I see the mentoring process as best achieved through a team approach. I am currently co-mentoring a new carer who calls on a number of senior carers in the group. We are all comfortable with this and know that we are all giving the same answers to the easy questions and refer to each other when someone else has more experience in a particular area. Some time ago I was involved with a group that was the opposite – different members gave 'Joy' very different advice about milk dilution rates, among other things, which led to some fatal and near-fatal problems with her marsupial babies.

Wildlife caring is not just about the individual animal in our hands. We all have a broad environmental interest and knowledge. Some of this knowledge we brought with us to caring, some we have learned because we are carers. Broader environmental knowledge is important because that is where we release our critters. It gives our job a wider meaning and a greater purpose. We are fortunate that some new carers come to us from the eco-centric end of the continuum I introduced earlier. 'Sam' came to me with a degree in environmental studies. He had an excellent understanding of issues at the release-end of the rehabilitation process – carrying capacity, territorial behaviour, habitat types and tree identification. He was just in a bit of a hurry to get babies to that release point! For carers without a degree in environmental studies there are many environmental groups that I recommend they consider joining, the first one being their local catchment or bushcare group. Such groups can offer a vast amount of information on the local natural environment. Associations such as Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland offer a wider and more issues-based perspective. I believe this is all important information for wildlife carers. We need to have at least a basic understanding of the big wide world our babies are going to be released into. We need to know something about habitats, food chains, threats, and the behaviours of other species our releasees will be sharing their new home with. When we interact with the general public they expect us to know something about the broader environment as well as the critter in our hands, and so we should. Without a healthy environment, what we do has little purpose.



The final point I would like to discuss here is resources. Even if they are provided with extensive course notes, most new carers are learning sponges and will read anything they can get their hands on. This can lead to problems. 'Andy' was an internet freak and obtained much information from American web-sites where many of our native animals are kept as pets. 'Margaret' had been given some out-dated care notes with dilution rates for milk formulas that have since been significantly changed. It is easy for new carers to get themselves into trouble unknowingly. I now make a point of at least glancing over any books, web-sites or other materials my new carers find. If they have found something dodgy I need to know about it. If they find something good I want to share it.

There are some excellent books sitting on carers' shelves. Keep up to date with where some of the best can be purchased, and whether or not they have been revised. There are also some great web-sites such as the Australian Registry of Wildlife Health and the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland site. Mentors and new carers alike need to keep abreast of the latest resources. All senior carers, whether they mentor or not, have a role to play in evaluating these resources and sharing the best of them with their colleagues. As I have already said, I believe a team approach to mentoring new carers is most effective.

Problem Solving

In the early stages, the mentor does most of the problem solving for the new carer. As they become more competent and confident, new carers begin problem solving for themselves.

One of the keys to solving problems for others is good listening. Mentors need to be excellent listeners. It is useful to paraphrase what the person has said to ensure you correctly understand what they are saying. Encourage them to say more until you have enough information to completely understand what they are telling you. As well as helping solve problems, this is one way new carers gain an understanding of the subtleties of the language we use and helps them learn how to clearly identify the problem themselves. 'Bev' was always telling me her young possums had diarrhoea. I learned that this could mean anything from some putrid-smelling liquid to a baby possum passing soft faeces between feeds. I had to ask for more information before I could begin problem solving with Bev. At the end of the listening, summarise what the carer has told you to make sure you have identified the issues that are most important to them. These may not be the issues you see as most pressing. Eventually you will need to deal with both sets of issues. The first apparent answer may not be the root cause or the only cause – keep digging. It takes years of caring to even get close to matching all causes of problems with their resultant effects, and even longer to match solutions.


Small problems occur on a regular basis and experienced carers are constantly adjusting their practices in response. The processes of problem solving needs to be made explicit through thinking aloud and verbalising your thoughts for the new carer. They cannot see inside your head and if you keep the process in there, they will not learn to problem solve for themselves. An example of this is the weaning process which is a little different for each individual animal. We are constantly monitoring and adjusting feeding regimes at this time, carefully judging when to stop hand feeding all together. This is a critical point in the process of raising orphans and it mostly occurs in the heads of experienced carers. Don't just supply a solution to the problem; explain how and why you settled on that particular solution over others. We are dealing with living creatures and can't afford to simply allow new carers to learn from their mistakes. Talk through alternative solutions and allow the new carer to be a part of the process. It will help them remember for next time. I ask them to offer and justify solutions as it provides a window into their thinking. It gives me an indication of how they are developing as carers.

Eventually, new carers will need to begin to problem solve by themselves. An important component of problem solving at all levels of caring experience is knowing when to ask someone else for help. This could be a mentor, a peer or a vet. Inviting a new carer into an existing network of experienced carers who already work closely together provides a supportive environment that encourages the asking of questions.

There are three key factors in successful problem solving: identifying the problem, finding a solution and assessing the outcome. All take time to develop. To be able to see when things are going wrong, carers need to have a good idea of what is right. This is another reason why new carers are given healthy, robust, older orphans before they have to deal with the sick or the very tiny. Fewer problems are likely to occur and the carer begins to get a feel for what is normal for that species.

Finding solutions to problems is something carers never stop learning about. I have been keeping care notes on interesting cases for years and this sometimes helps with new problems. Before that, I relied heavily on the acquired knowledge of my mentors. Occasionally I have found the answer to a problem in a book, but this is unusual. Now I rely heavily on the staff at the Australian Wildlife Hospital. I have a network of problem solvers who help me through the unique or difficult cases. For new carers all problems are unique and difficult. Their mentor is their link to the problem solving network. I share stories of my difficult cases with everyone in my network – new carers and experienced. Some of the diagnostic and treatment details may be a little beyond the understanding of the newest carers but I want them to understand the process as much as I want them to remember that particular problem or that particular solution.

Assessing outcomes cannot be overlooked, even though success and failure can sometimes be difficult to separate. An animal death can be due to an unknown condition that occurred before coming into care, an incorrect diagnosis, incorrect treatment, failure to follow a treatment plan, or a range of general husbandry issues. Necropsies are a useful learning tool but not always possible, and can be a bit daunting for new carers. Talking through losses is also useful. Wildlife carers are really good at telling stories. In my early years of caring I remember listening to all the disaster stories where things went terribly wrong. I learned three important lessons from this: sometimes animals die for an unknown reason, we all make mistakes, and there is nearly always someone who had a very similar case (but we usually don't find out about it until after the animal has died!). Talking about problems that were either successfully or unsuccessfully managed is part of understanding the process.



Integrity

Honesty and trustworthiness are important aspects of integrity. The relationship between a carer and their mentor should be open and honest. New carers are in new territory and they will make mistakes, but we still need to trust that they will offer appropriate care for their animals to the best of their ability. They will make mistakes but if we are not honest with them they will continue to make that mistake. The carer also has a responsibility to be honest with their mentor. If they make a mistake and an animal dies, we need to know the truth. Carers will be honest if the relationship is built on mutual respect. I had been possum-mentoring 'Margaret' for almost a year. Her dream was to get into macropods and one day a young furred pademelon joey came to her. Knowing I was not a macropod carer, Margaret found some old notes on macropod care and proceeded to raise the baby. Of course things went wrong but she was totally honest with me when she told me what she had done. I was also totally honest with her when I said things did not look good and she should get the baby to the wildlife hospital immediately. The baby died and Margaret was very upset. I did not blame her for following bad advice but did stress that she should have spoken to me sooner. I do not care for macropods but I know plenty of good people who do. Sadly, Margaret has not mentioned caring for macropods again. One day I will talk her into taking another joey with the help of an expert macropod mentor

Any new learner needs to know they can make little mistakes or ask 'silly' questions without being ridiculed. I don't think I know a possum carer who didn't 'lose' a 90g ringie through underestimating their ability to escape and then climb or crawl into the most unlikely of places. I remember 'Sam' ringing me in a panic with one of her first baby ringtails, "It must have worms, because it's licking its bottom." A mentor has a responsibility to their charges to keep these little mishaps confidential. Sometimes, though, we are mentoring someone who repeatedly makes huge errors. 'Peter' would not keep his birds in cages. He felt sorry for them. There were several disaster stories in his house, the worst being when a dove flew into a ceiling fan. It is not easy to keep these stories confidential. In fact I needed to share this experience with someone else. I needed someone to support me through my attempt at turning Peter into a good wildlife carer. Throughout this process I kept two things in mind. First, I debriefed with just one trusted colleague and she understood the need for confidentiality. I knew the stories would go no further. Second, I did not belittle Peter either to his face or in front of others. He could not seem to grasp any of the basics of wildlife caring, but he was still a person who deserved to be treated with respect. When it became obvious that Peter was not gaining the necessary skills or following my instructions I reported my concerns to the head of the wildlife care group we were in at the time. The decision of whether or not to renew Peter's licence was not my decision.

Integrity implies reliability. New carers need to know they can talk to someone fairly quickly if things start to go pear-shaped for them. Again, surrounding the new carer with a network of experienced carers eases the burden of any one person having to be available around the clock. It is usually fairly easy to find a time between work and other commitments when carer and mentor can touch base on a regular basis. Having a back-up mentor who is available at different times is also useful. No matter how good a mentor is over the phone, I think it is important that they, or another experienced carer, see what the new carer is doing. I like to see baby possums and hold them a few times if they are a carer's first babies, so I know they are well and thriving. It can be difficult to pull things back if things go wrong and are left too long. I like to go to a beginning carer's house and see their facilities. When 'Leigh' and 'Bill' began bird caring, I knew all their cages and when they got a new bird I could tell them which of their cages to use. They were given a few cages when they first began caring that were simply inappropriate for anything and best sent to the dump. Every so often I would call around to make sure they had the right perch sizes and that they were keeping on top of cleanliness.

Improving the quality of mentoring

Being a mentor to a new carer is a big responsibility and something I take very seriously. I consider it an honour to be asked to do this. I set high standards for mentors and try to live up to them at all times. I am lucky that I have had a couple of exceptional mentors myself who not only taught me how to care for wildlife, but who are now helping me to be a better mentor. The role of a good mentor in developing a quality carer cannot be underestimated.

But mentors do not have to do it all alone. Networking amongst senior carers and inviting new carers into these networks is an important part of the process of developing better carers. This includes all carers whether they have been caring for a month, a year, or a lifetime. A network of experienced carers contains a wealth of knowledge, a knowledge base that is constantly changing and growing. Not all carers in the network will be directly involved in mentoring new carers but they all play a role. In my network, at least one of us attends each national conference, one is always searching for new veterinary research, one is constantly questioning the ethics of what each of us is doing, one is always looking for new books on anything to do with wildlife, two are actively involved in their local catchment groups, and so the list goes on.

Wildlife care groups also have a role to play in the mentoring process. The very first mentor I ever had should not have been a mentor. She passed on many sloppy and straight out bad habits. Our group executive supported and encouraged her as a mentor within the group. This should not have happened. Fortunately I met up with some other carers from different groups and soon started to learn better practices. Mentors need to be developed and supported by their peers. You don't simply wake up one morning and think, "I'll become a mentor today." Like the rest of wildlife caring, becoming a mentor is a process. Also like caring, good mentors are those who are constantly looking for ways to improve their practices. A supportive group will provide opportunities for mentors and other senior carers to continue to develop not only their caring skills but also their mentoring skills.

BIOGRAPHY: I have been caring for wildlife for about seven years, starting with birds and then branching into possums and finally reptiles. There have been a few extras along the way, including injured adult gliders and echidnas. My ultimate goal would be to raise a baby wombat. Outside of the day-to-day care of wildlife I have an interest in environmental education and conservation research. I am a member of my local catchment group, and am also a volunteer for Wildlife Warriors, including two years of answering the phone and heating up heat-bags at the wildlife hospital. Six various sized parrots and one blue-tongue skink call me Mum.

