



## **Ethical Options for Unreleasable Wildlife in Rehabilitation: A Question of Balance**

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*The issues raised in this paper were presented by the authors, in the format of an informal debate at the National Wildlife Rehabilitation Conference held in Canberra, July 22-24 2008.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

It is estimated that in the state of New South Wales, wildlife rehabilitation groups respond to about 60,000 calls per year. The number of animals is even greater than this as some calls are for multiple animals, such as a nest of chicks, or a mass event such as a heat-stress incident or bushfire resulting in tens or even hundreds of animals coming into care.

Statistics indicate that less than a third of these will be released back into the wild. Some of the animals are dead when the animal is retrieved or die soon after. Many will die from complications, or have to be euthanased as a result of their injury / condition. Others may suffer setbacks during the course of their rehabilitation. Given that all of these animals are injured, sick, or orphaned, a 33% survival rate is considered to be quite good. The survival rate of many species in the wild is not much better, and sometimes far worse.

This paper looks at the ethical and practical issues which arise for those animals which do not meet the criteria for release, but which could survive in an 'artificial environment' where they are supported through human intervention for the remainder of their life.

### **CONTEXT**

Wildlife rehabilitation as a 'sector' has existed for a very short time. Just two generations ago there was effectively no organized conservation movement, and wildlife rehabilitation was viewed as the conceit of a few eccentrics. Nature was admired as a nice place to visit, and wildlife were seen as an inexhaustible resource for mankind's pleasure.

In Australia, wildlife rehabilitation really began to take off in the 1960s, at which time there were few (if any) specific products, books, standards or guidelines for anyone wishing to raise or rehabilitate wildlife with the sole aim of releasing them back into their natural habitat.

As recently as 2003, a well known animal welfare figure in Australia made the comment that wildlife rehabilitation was a worthy humane endeavour, but one which played no part in the conservation of wildlife. In the intervening years, it has been recognized that wildlife practitioners can and do contribute to conservation of species, especially through accurate record-keeping, as well as playing a key role in the nation's bio-security.

Consequently, in today's environment we see a range of approaches to wildlife rehabilitation, from individual self-taught, home-based practitioners, to trained researchers, scientists and veterinarians.

## ASSUMPTIONS

The authors of this paper subscribe to the code of ethics which was developed jointly by the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Association and the (American) National Wildlife Rehabilitation Association. This code has been adopted (with minor changes for local conditions) by a number of state wildlife rehabilitation organisations in Australia.

The following extract is of particular relevance to this discussion, and the authors make the assumption that the following is a reasonable ethical starting point:

*“A wildlife rehabilitator should strive to provide professional and humane care in all phases of wildlife rehabilitation, respecting the wildness and maintaining the dignity of each animal in life and in death. Releasable native fauna should be maintained in a wild condition and released as soon as appropriate. Non-releasable animals which are inappropriate for education, foster-parenting, or captive breeding have a right to euthanasia”.*

Consequently, this paper takes the position that any option considered in determining the fate of an animal must weigh the welfare of the individual animal against other considerations.

The authors consider that it is unethical to retain any wild animal, that has come into care (for the purpose of rehabilitation) for personal gain, including the ‘pleasure’ of owning what amounts to a personal zoo.

## WHAT IS RELEASABLE?

It is useful to state what we mean by “releasable” as the requirements for release vary. For example, a Peregrine Falcon should be 100% fit before release, whereas a blue-tongue lizard has been known to survive in the wild with three of its legs missing! While there are many considerations, we propose the following definition for the purposes of this paper.

*A wild animal that has been maintained for rehabilitation should be released as soon as it is ready to be released – no sooner and no later. It is releasable if it is free from disease, fit, healthy and capable of living in its natural habitat without the need for ongoing support.*

Specifically, for an animal to be ready for release, it must:

- Be able to locate and access food in the environment in which it is released
- Not be humanized or imprinted
- Display natural / wild behaviour particularly in regard to its relationship with others of its own species, its interactions with prey species, and its reaction to predatory species

In addition to the readiness of the animal there are other ‘extrinsic’ issues to be considered in relation to ‘readiness for release’. Without going into any detail these include:

- Seasonal issues (mating / migration etc)
- Timing (morning / evening)
- Appropriate habitat
- Territoriality
- Availability of food
- Predators and conspecifics
- Weather

## WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS?

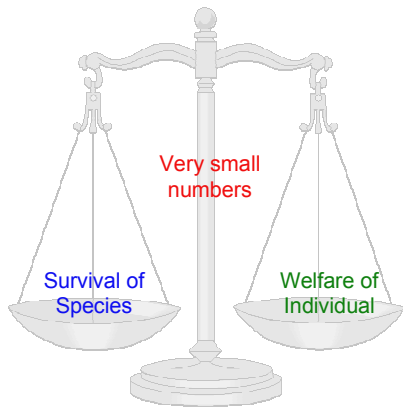
At one end of the spectrum, there is an argument that every animal that does not meet the criteria for release should be euthanased.

At the other extreme, is the argument that only animals that are in pain or extreme discomfort should be euthanased and that everything else that can't be released should be kept in permanent captivity.

Options for permanent care, which are explored in this paper include:

- Captive breeding
- Holding as pets
- Retaining in zoos
- Retaining for educational use
- Retaining as 'foster-parent' animals for others of the same species

## CAPTIVE BREEDING PROGRAMS



Authorised captive breeding programs are an acceptable alternative to euthanasia for wildlife that can not be released, provided that the animal meets the stringent requirements. Realistically, there are few such programs, and those that do exist tend to be for endangered species.

Not only does the animal have to be a critically endangered species to be eligible for such a program, but its injuries must not preclude breeding, and there must be others in captivity with which it can breed. Given that there are no authorised captive breeding programs for the vast majority of animals that come into care, this is an option for such a small minority as to be largely irrelevant to this discussion.

In terms of the ethics, the survival of the species must take preference over the welfare of the individual in the situation where a species is critically endangered.

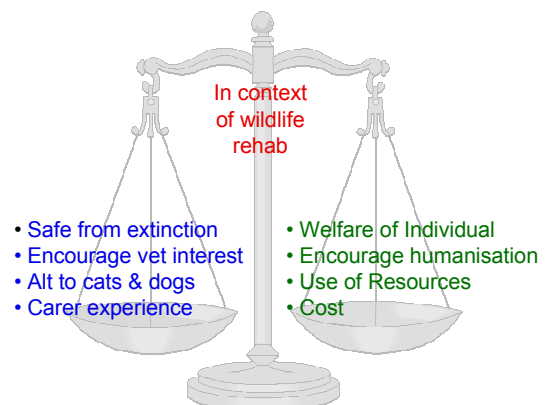
## UNRELEASABLES AS PETS

In addition to the ethical and practical issues, it is currently illegal in most states of Australia to take animals from the wild, and retain them as pets. In those states this would apply to wild animals held for the purposes of rehabilitation.

Some captive-bred Australian native species are legally kept as pets, including birds such as budgerigars, cockatoos and cockatiels. Some reptile species are also allowed to be kept as pets and in the USA, Australian Sugar Gliders are sold as 'pocket pets'.

Arguments *in favour* of keeping wildlife as pets include:

- It is argued that no species that has been kept as a pet has ever become extinct
- It is kinder to keep an animal in captivity (provided that the living conditions are acceptable) if the only alternative is death.
- Vets would develop greater skills and experience in dealing with natives



- It would be better for the environment to have Quolls and Bilbies as pets rather than cats and rabbits, so that if they escape, they don't add to the number of destructive feral animals in the environment.
- Carers could increase their knowledge and skills with native animals through keeping them as pets.

The arguments *against* keeping rehabilitating wildlife as pets include:

- If the wildlife sector was to condone keeping unreleasable wildlife as pets, it may be seen to justify and even encourage keeping animals inappropriately.
- It clouds the genuine objectives of wildlife care – especially for new wildlife carers. It provides an easy 'out' to rationalize poor practice.
- It blurs the lines of responsibility and opens the door to breeding and selling offspring for profit
- These pets would be taking up time, space, food and money that could have been used for caring for wildlife in need.
- Keeping an animal from a gregarious species it prevents them from interacting naturally with others, unless you intend to keep a whole mob / flock / colony.
- There are already too many cases of cruelty and abandonment of pets – why raise the potential of including wildlife in these statistics?
- If keeping native animals as pets becomes acceptable it may well encourage the "harvesting" of native animals from the wild.

Some wildlife carers are known to retain animals in care on a permanent basis. In some cases these animals may be incapacitated in some form, but in other cases, they are kept only because they have been 'humanised' to the point where they are unreleasable. That is, they are only unreleasable because the carer has made them so. There are documented cases of where individuals have second and third generation animals in their 'care'.

It is important to note that this paper is only considering the option of pets in relation to wildlife being held for the purposes of rehabilitation, not the issue of Australian Natives as pets in general.

While there are interesting arguments in favour, there are just as many problems for the carers, for the wildlife rehabilitation sector, and for the welfare of the animals for this to be considered a viable or ethical option for animals which can not be released back into the wild.

## UNRELEASABLES AS EDUCATIONAL ANIMALS

If an animal is relatively healthy, but can not be released, there is an argument put forward that it could be retained for the purposes of education. The arguments include:



- The value of educating the public may do more good for the long-term welfare of the species than saving (or euthanasing) one individual
- There is value in wildlife carers learning about wildlife based on a real animal as opposed to viewing diagrams or working with dead animals.
- Live animals can change peoples perspectives (especially in regard to unpopular species such as bats), in ways that photos and words can not

- Keeping a small number of animals, strictly controlled by the local wildlife group and/or government authority, is valid when the only other option is euthanasia.

The arguments *against* retaining wildlife for these education purposes include:

- Regardless of the intent, the welfare of the animal needs to be considered
- Potential to send a subliminal message that it is OK to keep wildlife in permanent captivity – all you need is a good excuse!
- Many of the concepts can be taught using diagrams and dead animals
- Potential OH&S issues in taking live animals into public areas
- Most animals will stress if handled by a number of people
- It is the role of zoos provide such interpretive education experiences
- The injuries sustained by the animals may impact on their educational / PR value
- To be handled, an animal would have to be completely humanized. Apart from sending a message that this is acceptable, it also prevents the animal from displaying natural behavior, and thus reduces its educational value

To be fair, we recognize that zoos tend to specialize in exotic animals, and that taking the message to the people may reach people who do not go out of their way to visit zoos.

The arguments raised in favour of this option are more compelling and ‘honourable’ than those of keeping these animals as pets. However, at the very least, it is clear that there are as many arguments against as there are in favour. The authors encourage use of the precautionary principle, so as to give weight to the welfare of the individual animals, and to take into account that this option may be used as a rationalization to retain animals for a less ethical purpose.

## UNRELEASABLES AS ‘FOSTER PARENTS’

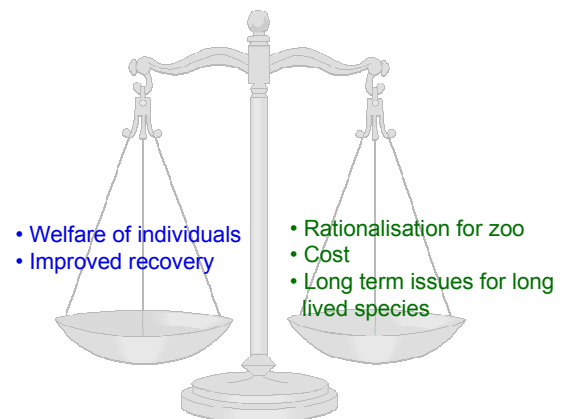
It is important to clarify that this refers to using unreleasables as companions for other wildlife in care – not as human companions (pets).

A number of wildlife carers report that having an older ‘foster parent’ seemed to have a calming influence, and improved the prospects for success in a number of circumstances, especially for gregarious species such as macropods and flying-foxes.

This raises questions - does the possibility of one animal in rehabilitation doing better, justify the incarceration of another? If the species benefits from socialisation, what about the socialisation needs of the captive ‘foster-parent’? To meet their social needs, it may be necessary to maintain a number of companion animals. Can maintaining a ‘mini-mob’ be justified?

There is a concern that this would lead to a lowering of the bar on what is considered unreleasable, to get the colony to the appropriate numbers. This in turn could effectively lead to a private zoo waiting for animals to come into care. On the other hand, there is unfortunately no shortage of animals such as bats and kangaroos coming into care from whose numbers the ‘foster parents’ could be drawn. In some circumstances, a single facility could be maintained to service a relatively large geographical area. There are already situations where different wildlife groups are sharing facilities.

Even the proponents of this option admit that there is a potential for abuse, and that there would have to be close scrutiny to ensure that it is not abused.



In relation to both educational animals and foster-parents, there are also the practical matters associated with the cost of holding wildlife in long-term captivity. In NSW, one such situation existed where a group of around 7 Flying-foxes were held in permanent care, under licence from DECC. This situation cost the group around \$1500 per year just for food. In addition, the aviary being used was no longer available for rehabilitation, as the captive bats had to be quarantined.

Flying-foxes can live up to 23 years, and once the decision has been made, it is not really possible to release them a few years later. It is a long-term commitment. As these animals age and start to die off, there is the question of whether they need to be replaced, in order to maintain the dynamics.

The wildlife group needs to be committed long-term, and may need to consider what happens if the individual wildlife carer who hosts this mini-colony is no longer capable of doing so.

As with educational animals, the suggestion of retaining these animals in permanent care is not totally without merit - but neither is it without complications, both ethical and practical.

## CONCLUSION

Ethical issues are seldom black and white, which is a pity as it is far easier to encourage compliance, and best practice when boundaries are clear. We began our analysis with just three assumptions:

1. It is the primary objective wildlife rehabilitation to release every animal when it is fit and ready
2. Not every animal that comes into care will be releasable
3. It will be necessary to euthanase some animals

Some may argue against the third point, but it is our position that anyone who refuses to euthanase an animal in great pain that has no prospect for survival, is putting their own emotions above the welfare of the animal.

Because of the nature of wildlife care, and wildlife carers, it goes against the grain to put down an animal that is not in obvious distress or pain.

In developing this paper, it became clear that, just as there will always be a small proportion of arsonists within the fire services, and a few criminals inside the justice system, so too will there always be some hoarders within the animal welfare sector.

It is a matter of record (and some shame) that there are individuals in the wildlife rehabilitation community who maintain what are essentially private zoos for their own ego, on the pretense that they are keeping them as educational or companion animals, and it is this rationalization that is a major concern.

Additionally, there are practical consequences, such as the diversion of scarce funds and resources from the primary goal of rehabilitation.

We acknowledge that there are logical arguments for retaining some unreleasable animals in long term captivity. It is our position that on balance, these arguments are most often outweighed by the welfare concerns for these animals.

There will undoubtedly be situations where a decision will be made to keep these animals in permanent captivity. So, in relation to animals which came in to our care for rehabilitation, and which can not be released, our recommendations, based on ethical considerations, are:

1. Although it goes against the grain, most should be humanely euthanased
2. The number of animals retained in permanent captivity must be kept to an absolute minimum
3. The decision to keep an animal in long-term captivity should never be made by one or two individuals, and should be referred to an appropriate committee or authority to ensure an unbiased and considered decision
4. All legal, ethical and practical considerations need to be taken into account, and where one person puts the case to keep the animal, another should put the opposing case
5. At all costs, care must be taken to avoid rationalizing the retaining of animals, so that they are not being kept for entertainment, profit or ego

*STAN WOOD & STEVE AMESBURY*

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