

1. Veterinary considerations for the rescue, treatment, rehabilitation and release of wildlife

Larry Vogelnest

The rescue, treatment, rehabilitation and release of wildlife serves three important purposes. Firstly, it provides an opportunity to learn about wildlife and our environment. Secondly, it may contribute to the conservation of species. Finally, and probably most importantly, it addresses the welfare of an animal that may be suffering from injury or illness or has been orphaned. It is our duty as decent human beings (and certainly as veterinarians and wildlife professionals) to relieve the suffering of animals. This may be as simple as providing first aid or facilitating euthanasia. It is essential, however, that attempts at relieving suffering do not perpetuate an animal's suffering. For a wild animal, simply being in the presence of a human being, or being placed in a confined foreign environment, may induce suffering. This is an important consideration and one of the key factors that influence differences in ones approach to management of injured wildlife compared with domestic animals.

Caring for wild animals provides an opportunity to learn more about their biology, natural history, habitats, abundance, behaviour, husbandry and care. It inspires people to develop compassion and an understanding of our wildlife and our natural environment. It educates people, and it is perhaps through this that wildlife rescue and rehabilitation contributes most to

the conservation of wildlife and the environment. Despite the many benefits, it is rare that the rehabilitation and release of an individual animal contributes directly to the conservation of a species. However, this may well be the case in situations where a population is so critically endangered that each individual is crucial to its survival. Rehabilitated animals may contribute to re-introduction programs, reinforce or supplement existing populations and can be a powerful tool for conservation (IUCN 2000; Woodford 2001).

Veterinarians have several key responsibilities with respect to the rescue, treatment, rehabilitation and release of wildlife. These include animal welfare, disease risk assessment and management, human health protection and provision of euthanasia and appropriate legal advice. They must also maintain accurate records, assist with wildlife emergencies and become involved in policy development. They also have a responsibility to provide sound, rational and scientifically based advice to various groups, from members of the public to politicians. Frequently, wildlife agency personnel are trained biologists who generally consider the dynamics and welfare of populations and ecosystems as a greater priority than the individual. They therefore frequently dismiss the perspectives and expertise of wildlife carers who focus on the individual. Conversely, wildlife carers