

FROM THE CHAIR: MINIMUM STANDARDS IN WILDLIFE REHABILITATION

There has been some discussion around the internet of late regarding the DEC Minimum Standards in Wildlife Rehabilitation. The rumour circulating (due, it is believed, to a misinterpretation of DEC information rather than any kind of will to mislead) was that the Minimum Standards were about to be enshrined in State legislation and that we were all about to be legally obliged to adhere to them.

We asked Marg Buckland, head of DEC's Community Involvement Unit, about the rumours and she was kind enough to clarify a few points.

The Minimum Standards will be written into the Wildlife Conservation Act regulations eventually, until that time they will be used as a guideline for the department's staff and rehabilitators. This process has been spoken about since 2006, there is no reason for anyone to feel intimidated or threatened as we all working together on the best outcomes for our wildlife.

We don't know when the legislation will change, just that its been flagged for change, so we are working towards the process to ensure everyone is on the same page and it should just roll into the change when it happens.

Adhering to – and preferably exceeding – minimum standards is always going to be a good thing. It does raise a few questions, however, such as how DEC plans to support us in complying with standards, and what happens if rehabilitators are unable to do so.

Standards are an important part of maintaining a quality cycle. It means that a baseline is set. We've all heard the horror stories about people releasing birds out of aviaries that are too small to give the animal the best chance of release, and we know that the many groups' standards equal or exceed the DEC standards, so as long as we all do the right thing the way we've been taught from the outset, there should be no insurmountable issues.

We [DEC] are advising people to look at the Minimum Standards when updating or starting to get involved with wildlife rehabilitation, we would not be forcing people to change to the Minimum Standards overnight, purely to consider them when building new enclosures, changing equipment or purchasing new equipment.

As all wildlife rehabilitators' were involved, or had the choice to be involved during with the consultation period with the development of the Min Standards document, we would hope that it is supported by all wildlife rehabilitators.

Marg makes a valid point about keeping the standards in mind when making changes and upgrades to our facilities. The minimum standards were distributed to all registered rehabilitators some time ago, and we should all have read them, or at least the sections relevant to our own activities. Of some concern are the unregistered rehabilitators, who can't be contacted by DEC because they aren't registered and may not be in contact with registered rehabilitators to be given news and information. Isolation always brings problems. Hopefully, DEC will have the matter in hand and will conduct an outreach/advertising programme as the time for legislating the standards draws nigh. In the meantime, members can help by making sure that any unregistered rehabilitators known to them are provided with accurate information.

At the time the Minimum Standards was developed and the decision was made to have it incorporated into the Wildlife Conservation Act regulations, the Wildlife Rehabilitators Consultation group requested that 28A, (providing anyone with temporary care for sick, injured and orphaned wildlife) be deleted from the Act, so this would no longer be a problem.

It is hoped that we can go to a licensing situation instead, however, this will be decided by the Director at the time.

Once this is in place, it will only be registered wildlife rehabilitators (in future to be known as accredited wildlife rehabilitators) and the volunteers working with them, who will have access to wildlife.

This accreditation process is currently being worked through with the Consultation group and once we have a consensus for the new process, a consultation period will be initiated through the DEC website for people to make comment.

The new accredited process will be for registered wildlife rehabilitators, and their centres or homes, networks or incorporated wildlife groups.

DEC stopped the registration process for registered wildlife rehabilitator status about 12 months ago just before the Minimum Standards were released, as the new accreditation process will reflect much from the standards and the basic rehabilitation course manual.

All registered wildlife rehabilitators in the Directory will be going through the accreditation process so everyone is starting from the same base line.

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Volunteers with the centres and groups will be managed in the usual way through the centre, networks, registered individual rehabilitators, and incorporated groups and they (the centres, networks or incorporated groups) will be responsible for ensuring their volunteers premises would be up to, or working towards the Minimum Standards, if they are caring for wildlife at their home address.

Members should not be worried by the 'A' word (accreditation.) Accreditation is actually a very useful way to carry out self-assessment and improvement in almost any situation. As more information arises and the system evolves, WAWRC will be developing tools and supporting individual members in attaining and maintaining accredited status. When approached and carried out in a positive way, with a focus on quality and improvement, accreditation is actually quite simple, straightforward and should constitute a great step forward for wildlife rehabilitation.

The challenge for DEC and for groups like WAWRC will be to take that positive approach at all levels of our organisations and allocate sufficient resources to bring what is an admirable vision into reality.

Thank you to Marg Buckland of DEC for supplying information on Minimum Standards.

Nancy Tang
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8 July 2009