

# IDEALS AND REALITIES: PRESENTING WILDLIFE ETHICS TO VOLUNTEERS

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

**Introduction.** All wildlife rehabilitators make decisions based on a set of ethical principles. It doesn't matter whether they have been working for years in a well-established wildlife center or if they are just beginning in the field. How these ethics are communicated to volunteers greatly affects the level of volunteer retention, satisfaction and commitment. Identifying, articulating and presenting an ethical perspective in an effective way can take time and patience; however, it is an essential investment in good relations with the volunteers with whom rehabilitators work.

**Goals.** According to the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association (NWRA) Code of Ethics (Miller 2000) the goal of all wildlife rehabilitators is to promote the well being of wildlife and their habitat. This goal includes both rehabilitating individual wild animals and educating human beings about wild animals' needs and behaviors. While education may be the secondary goals of some wildlife rehabilitators, investing time and energy into the articulation of the ethical considerations that guide their work will enable them to more effectively achieve their first objective: the care of wildlife. In this paper the author addresses the educational component of wildlife rehabilitation, which ultimately and directly furthers the work wildlife rehabilitators do with each individual animal.

## WHAT ARE ETHICS?

**Definition and interpretation.** Many different things guide rehabilitators: the law, intuition, past experience, opinions, etc. Underlying all of these are ethics. Ethics are the platform upon which all wildlife rehabilitators base their actions. The following is the author's working definition of ethics:

1. A principle of right or good conduct, or a body of principles (Morris 1971). *Principle* means a basic truth, law or assumption, or a rule or standard, especially of good behavior. (Morris 1971)

The NWRA created an 11-point Code of Ethics that is offered to wildlife rehabilitators as a guide; however, each individual will interpret the code according to their particular point of view. For example, point number eight reads:

- 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 animals 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.

There is a wide range of interpretations regarding what animals, if any, are appropriate for education, foster-parenting or captive breeding. Ethics determines this interpretation. Each wildlife rehabilitator makes choices during the course of a day regarding right or good conduct about a wide variety of topics. These can include: using live animals in education, the rehabilitation of non-native species, the feeding of live prey, when to leave wildlife alone, and many other topics. (See Table 1 for an expanded list of topics and sub-topics.)

## **WHY DISCUSS ETHICS?**

**Creating commitment.** It is very important for the wildlife rehabilitator to be transparent and clear about their position when communicating with volunteers, the public and other wildlife rehabilitators about how rehabilitators care for wildlife. Many of the issues that arise in the field of wildlife rehabilitation are controversial. People feel passionately about wild animals and often hold strong opinions about the way they should be cared for. When rehabilitators work with volunteers, which is so often the case, it is essential to have volunteers that are in alignment with the rehabilitator's ethical perspective. Acknowledging where a wildlife rehabilitator stands at the beginning of the volunteer recruiting process can save time and energy by dispelling myths and clarifying expectations. Volunteer commitment and retention can be greatly enhanced by providing them with the information they need to gain a complete picture of wildlife rehabilitation in any given center or home-based operation. Giving potential volunteers this information before they commit can help ensure that their commitment is based upon realistic expectations and a clear understanding of what is going to happen in a given situation. The volunteer understands that the rehabilitator isn't hiding anything that could be potentially upsetting.

## **IDENTIFYING ETHICS**

**Taking a moment.** It is extremely important for each wildlife rehabilitator or team of rehabilitators to take the time to identify the issues that are most important in their set of circumstances. This does not have to be a complicated process. To begin, look at the conflicts that have occurred due to misunderstandings, expectations and miscommunications. What were these about and what information would have made a difference? This is precisely the information worth mentioning. What issues consistently present themselves in a wildlife rehabilitation setting? There is a list of suggested topics in

Table 1. Once the topics are identified, all that needs to be done is creating a way of delivering the message.

## **PRESENTING ETHICS**

**Intention and approach.** There are many opportunities to present ethics to volunteers. It could be in a formal interview, a training, a workshop, a conversation or in written information. A wildlife rehabilitator can approach the presentation of an ethical perspective in one of two ways. The rehabilitator may try to convince another person or group of people that a certain choice is ethically correct and therefore certain actions should or shouldn't be taken. The other approach is to simply inform a person about a humane solution or ethical perspective held by the rehabilitator. The person who is presented with the information will then choose whether to act in accord with the information.

**Creating trust.** Wildlife rehabilitators invest a lot of time and energy in volunteer training to ensure that volunteers are prepared to meet the needs of the volunteer position. Presenting the issues that can create discomfort and being open to discussions from the beginning of the recruiting process can help ensure that the investment is worthwhile. Interviewing each interested person is a useful way to present important points while the person is still considering making a volunteer commitment. Clearing up misguided expectations and false assumptions as well as giving potential volunteers pertinent information about the organization (e.g., the history and philosophy, job details and required trainings) not only helps to avoid misunderstandings, but also creates a sense of solidarity by allowing them to identify with the organization. During an interview it is important to allow time for questions and discussion so that potential volunteers can process the information and get all their questions answered. Volunteering at a wildlife rehabilitation facility is not for everyone and discussing these issues is a good way to determine if the volunteer position

and the person are well suited to each other. Letting people know where the wildlife rehabilitator stands allows potential volunteers to make an informed choice about whether to support the work or not.

### **A WORKING MODEL - THE PAWS WILDLIFE CENTER**

**The interview.** Prior to setting an appointment for an interview, potential volunteers have submitted an application, read a job description and have an idea about what tasks the volunteer position includes. Once a potential volunteer determines that coming in for an interview is worthwhile, a 1-hour period of time is dedicated to that process. During this time, the ethical perspective of PAWS Wildlife Center regarding keeping wild animals wild, the rehabilitation of non-native species and euthanasia are presented. The potential volunteer is informed so that they can make a choice about committing to a volunteer position with realistic expectations. At the end of the interview, extending an invitation to think about it is an important way to let the potential volunteer know that this is not a commitment to make lightly. A potential volunteer will sometimes determine that the volunteer position is not appropriate for them. The hour spent with them is not wasted time. As previously stated, volunteering in a wildlife rehabilitation setting is not for everyone. It is far better that the person realizes that they do not want to volunteer before time and energy have been invested in their training. Likewise, it is essential that each rehabilitator evaluate their volunteers carefully. The interview process allows the rehabilitator to actually choose someone rather than simply hoping for the best.

**The Wildlife Ethics Workshop.** Once a person commits to a volunteer position at PAWS, they are then required to attend basic skills training for their particular volunteer position as well as a 3-hour Wildlife Ethics Workshop within the first month of volunteering. A Wildlife Ethics Workshop equips a volunteer with information that will help them better

serve the animals in their care and it also gives them an educational experience that they can draw upon when answering questions from a member of the public, another volunteer or in future interactions with anyone on behalf of wild animals. This workshop exposes volunteers to a wide variety of wildlife related topics. It is essential to present stories and examples to support your assertions and just as essential is addressing other points of view; this creates an atmosphere of open-mindedness.

**Table 1. Suggested topics for Wildlife Ethics Workshop.**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Related Topics</b>
Live educational animals	Quality of life Zoos Classroom visits Breeding programs
Native vs. non-native	Triage policies Should/shouldn't rehabilitate
Permitting requirements	How to become a wildlife rehabilitator Should permits be required
Feeding of live prey	Is it necessary? When?_Why?
Zoonoses	Necessary precautions Advice to the public
Endangered vs. non-endangered species	Importance of each Rehabilitation resources for each
When to leave wildlife alone	Predator/prey relationship Large/dangerous animals Kidnapping (deer fawn/fledglings, etc) Marine mammals Domestic cats
Euthanasia	Reasons Techniques Feelings
Imprinting, Habituation and Taming	Definitions Relevance to wildlife rehabilitation
Aversion Techniques	Reversing habituation Successes and failures
Feeding wild animals in backyards and parks	Diminished foraging skills Spread of disease Nuisance to neighbors Migration cues Unnaturally large numbers of animals Nutrition Losing fear of humans
Marine Mammals	National Marine Fisheries Services Legal issues Procedures

**Workshop delivery.** There are many ways to inform volunteers in an interesting and memorable way. A trivia quiz or other interactive icebreaker is useful while waiting for everyone to arrive for the workshop. This will encourage participation and will best serve the volunteer if it reflects information about the animals that inhabit the area served by a rehabilitation facility. An information packet filled with articles, definitions, summaries, a list of release criteria and resource information gives volunteers a valuable learning tool, and video clips are also excellent ways to illustrate a point. Anything that makes the presentation interesting and varied is worth including as long as it is relevant to the wildlife related issues in the area.

**A successful workshop.** There are several things that will help ensure a successful workshop. Acknowledging in the beginning that not everyone will agree about everything discussed during the workshop will help create a more comfortable atmosphere. Participants need to feel safe to disagree; in fact that is one of the most important requirements of a rich learning environment. The facilitator must also keep the conversation focused. It is not uncommon that participants will begin sharing stories or giving examples of something that is specifically or vaguely related to the topic at hand. As the workshop facilitator, it is very important to maintain the focus and ensure that all the chosen topics are addressed.

It is very important to get feedback from volunteers. Often times, a potential volunteer will be unprepared for the discussion; maybe they hadn't thought about the food that is fed to carnivores or hadn't thought a lot about euthanasia in a wildlife rehabilitation setting. It is also essential that an evaluation be given to volunteers after any kind of workshop, especially one that is about wildlife ethics. A wildlife rehabilitator will need to find out if the

information was perceived as valuable, if there are any suggestions for improvement, which topics were most challenging and anything else that is important to each rehabilitator's particular situation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Identifying, articulating and presenting well-defined ethical perspectives are necessary if a wildlife rehabilitator hopes to cultivate fruitful relationships with the people with whom they work most closely. Taking the time to prepare the information and communicate with volunteers regarding difficult ethical issues is essential to build strength in a volunteer force and create community support. Facilitating a workshop may not be appropriate for all wildlife rehabilitators, depending on numbers of volunteers with whom they work; however creating a way to convey the information need not be complicated or expensive; it takes some time and a little creativity. Whether a wildlife rehabilitator has one volunteer or 100 volunteers taking the time to communicate the rehabilitator's particular perspective on wildlife ethics will move their work forward with committed and well-informed partners.



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