

Reports and Comments

Netherlands Council on Animal Affairs considers responsibilities for the welfare of free-living wild animals

The Netherlands Council on Animal Affairs (Raad voor Dierenaangelegenheden; RDA) has recently published a report (details below) which addresses the question: “what should society’s (individual or collective) responsibility be towards the welfare (including the health) of non-captive animals; and how can, may and must this responsibility be fulfilled in practice?” The RDA recognises that the frameworks (for dealing with kept and free-living animals) have differed radically. There has been a hands-off policy regarding free-living animals, protection of these being at the ecosystem level with the goal of population conservation level, whilst for kept animals, the focus is at the individual welfare level. However, increasingly, the distinction between free-living and kept is becoming blurred. In The Netherlands, for example, previously kept animals (farmed herbivores) were, at one time, released into the Oostvaardersplassen Nature Reserves to live largely as wild animals with few or no interventions for their welfare. Also, due to increasing urbanisation, the welfare of many free-living wild animals is increasingly dependent on human activities and this brings some responsibilities for them.

These issues are coming more clearly into focus in many countries but, perhaps, are particularly in the spotlight in The Netherlands as it is the only country whose laws include the stipulation that humans have a legal obligation to “provide proper care if an animal is in need of help” regardless of whether the animal is kept or free-living and wild.

It is concluded that “Our moral responsibility for the welfare of animals is context-independent and in principle is to be separated from the way we interpret and fulfil that responsibility, with consideration of other values and practical aspects”, and the Report includes a decision tree to help in judging whether or not to intervene for welfare in various circumstances. It is also recommended that when plans are being made that might be expected to affect free-living wild animals, environmental impact assessments should cover not just population-level effects but impact on welfare also, and assessments should include measures to mitigate the welfare effects and should describe the resulting “societally acceptable compromise”.

Duty of Care Naturally: On the Welfare of Semi-Captive and Wild Animals (November 2012). A4, 27 pages. Raad voor Dierenaangelegenheden (Council for Animal Affairs), PO Box 20401, 2500 EK, The Hague, The Netherlands. Available at: http://www.rda.nl/home/files/duty_of_care_naturally_rda_2012_02.pdf.

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Guidelines for reintroductions and other conservation translocations

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has published these updated and revised Guidelines to take onboard developments since the previous (1998) Guidelines. There have been many planned and monitored reintroductions in the last two decades and much has been learned about the scientific, societal and practical issues. It is pointed out in Annex 1, which outlines the background, that: “The wider scope of the revised Guidelines reflects the fact that conservation is becoming increasingly interventionist, with biodiversity actively managed. A major factor influencing this is climate change, set against a backdrop of massive habitat destruction and fragmentation”.

The Guidelines are divided into two sections. The first 28 pages deal with the Guidelines for the reintroductions and the second part is a further 34 pages of annexes providing further information under the same section headings. Animals (and plants) are translocated for many reasons. This Report deals only with those undertaken for conservation reasons. These may be to repopulate areas from which the species has been lost, to reinforce small populations, or to move animals from parts of their habitat so as to mitigate the effects of habitat loss or degradation or to protect them from specific risks in those areas. Animals may also be translocated for conservation reasons to establish a population outside its natural range (eg if habitat within its range has been lost), or to replace an extinct species to perform some key ecological function in a habitat.

There are a variety of potential risks: some to the animals translocated and released and some to the habitats and/or fauna at the release sites. For example, released animals may introduce novel infections or parasites into the ecosystem at the release site (with adverse conservation and welfare impacts). The Guidelines emphasise the need for clearly defined goals, careful planning, and feasibility and risk assessments, and include a section on deciding when translocation is an acceptable option. It is recommended that, in reaching decisions, the level of risk must be balanced against the expected benefits but that: “Where a high degree of uncertainty remains or it is not possible to assess reliably that a conservation introduction presents low risks, it should not proceed, and alternative conservation solutions should be sought”. The Report also covers social aspects, noting that “community attitudes can be extreme and internally contradictory” and that planning needs to encompass socio-economic aspects, community attitudes and values, and motivations and expectations.

Principles of release strategy, selection of release sites and of monitoring and continuing management are described and, lastly, there is guidance about dissemination of infor-