Editorial

Veterinary Conservation Biology

IN July, I attended the symposium at Taronga Zoo on "Wildlife Health and Management in Australasia" organized by the Australian Association of Veterinary Conservation Biologists, the World Association of Wildlife Veterinarians, the Wildlife Disease Association: Australasian Section, and the Wildlife Society of the New Zealand Veterinary Association. It is worth listing all these, not just because they organized a great symposium, but because I had never heard of any of them before and suspect I may not be alone. Comprehensively, these veterinary associations are concerned about conservation biology, as was the symposium. The symposium, the Proceedings of which will be reviewed in a later edition of *Pacific Conservation Biology*, had sections on "conservation biology in Australasia", "sustainable utilization of wildlife", "wildlife translocation", "marine wildlife" and "wildlife health", all of which embraced issues that are topical among non-veterinary conservation biologists in the Pacific Region. However, the spin was different and, for me, eye-opening.

As you might expect from a veterinary symposium, there was a great deal of discussion about wildlife diseases and pathology, but the focus was on their importance to conservation biology. This ranged from control methods for feral cats to parasite control in small reserves, as well as the importance of disease and parasites in translocation programmes and issues of conflict between conservation and animal welfare. There was even a paper on the "need" to conserve rare parasites — rare because their hosts have become rare. To protect these elements of biodiversity, it was suggested that threatened fauna should not be treated with antiparasiticides before translocation. Not something I had thought about, and the papers presented at the symposium convinced me that full involvement of veterinarians in biological conservation programmes is long overdue. To test this, the plenary papers from the symposium will be published in the fourth issue of this volume of *Pacific Conservation Biology*.

Animal welfare and ethics

The symposium at Taronga had its quota of animal welfare groups represented in the back rows. These people raised their usual concerns about the treatment of animals by biologists and veterinarians and the pain and suffering that may be inflicted by research workers and wildlife managers. It is a simplistic message, which imparts human emotions and feelings to non-human animals, and places the welfare and rights of the individual above that of the species. Thus, it is cruel and inhumane to control feral cats or foxes regardless of the impact that these introduced predators may have on the survival of entire species or populations of native fauna. In response to such emotions, it was pleasing to see the strong stance by the assembled veterinarians who condemned the animal welfare groups for impeding research and management programmes essential for the conservation of native fauna.

No one denies the necessity of treating animals (any animal) with respect and as humanely as possible, but animal welfare groups must understand that the survival of species takes priority over the rights or welfare of the individual. My own code of ethics places the survival of a species above that of individual humans, but I am not optimistic about the prospects of winning that debate.

Anyone engaged in research on animals in Australia has encountered these differences in personal ethics when seeking to obtain clearance from an ethics committee for a research or teaching programme. Ethics approval is required not only for studies involving the handling or experimentation on animals, but it is also expected for observational studies. Ethics committees, many of which seem to lack experience in the study of wild animals, increasingly demand details or impose conditions that are either impossible to provide or to comply with. As a result, some zoologists at universities in Perth (at least) no longer attempt to do certain kinds of research regardless of the need for or importance of the data for conservation. The teaching of zoology to students has long been impaired by the constraints imposed by animal welfare groups and ethics committees. It has been suggested to me that this is precisely the outcome that some members of ethics committees are seeking to achieve; placing the welfare of the individual animal above all other considerations. I find this unethical in the extreme and wonder if ethics committees should not themselves require ethics approval before convening.

Are research zoologists so uncaring of the welfare of the animals that they study that they require this special and intense scrutiny. One university ethics committee is of the view that ethics approval is a "necessary part of research".

I find such comments offensive. Firstly, a considerable amount of good research was conducted prior to the advent of ethics committees and their approval forms. So ethics approval is hardly necessary to do research. Secondly, the implication of the statement and the entire process is that people studying animals or conducting experiments involving animals are "unethical" until proven otherwise. Listening to the representatives of animal welfare groups at conferences makes it fairly clear that all research involving animals is, and always will be, "unethical". It is also evident that research scientists are an easy target. In my opinion, they are also too compliant.

I am sure there have been and will continue to be instances in which animals are treated cruelly or experimented on unnecessarily. Such acts cannot be condoned, but in my nearly 50 years of field work on wild animals I have never encountered premeditated cruelty. Some field techniques may be distasteful, some animals may be collected, and other animals killed inadvertently (e.g., see Recher *et al.* 1985), but all researchers that I have known have a high level of concern for the animals they work with and do their best to mitigate pain and death. They did this before there was a requirement for ethics approval, they do it now, and they will continue to do it when ethics approvals are no longer required.

It is time to reconsider the requirements imposed on research biologists by ethics legislation and committees. Especially, the requirements and need for ethics approval for observational fieldwork must be justified and made explicit. The *Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Experimental Purposes* which guides ethics policy in Australia says little about observational studies other than to declare that such ". . . studies of free-living animals have the potential to cause adverse effects because of interference with the normal behaviour of the animals, particularly if there is an effect on the rearing of young. If interference with animals is substantial, the continuation of the procedure is to be reviewed." The lack of precision in this statement is enormous, as is the emphasis on the rearing of young. Similarly, some ethics committees appear to have a greater level of concern for the well-being of threatened fauna, than common animals. While acceding to the need to exercise extreme care when working with the last few individuals of a population or species, if there are ethical concerns with proposed studies, then they must apply equally to common and rare fauna.

As was evident at the Taronga symposium, scientists working with wild animals care deeply about the welfare of the individuals they study. They also care for the survival of species. In an era of unprecedented population and species extinction, we cannot afford to have conservation research disrupted or prevented by individuals who are prepared to allow species to become extinct to protect the welfare of individuals. Members of ethics committees should be required to demonstrate a knowledge of scientific methods and research (observational studies, as well as experimental) or have professional training in animal care and handling. If there is a need to regulate research on fauna, then the regulation should come from within the scientific community and not be imposed from the outside.

REFERENCES

Recher, H. F., Gowing, G. and Armstrong, T., 1985. Causes and frequency of deaths among birds mist-netted for banding studies at two localities. *Aust. Wildl. Res.* **12:** 321–26.

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