Wildlife Rehabilitators Contribute to Public Health

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Wildlife rehabilitators provide temporary care to native wild animals that are orphaned, injured, ill, or in distress in order to release healthy animals that may survive when returned to their natural habitat. They are licensed by state and federal wildlife agencies, but do not charge the public or government agencies for their work. Well over 90% of rehabilitators offer these wildlife services as skilled and highly dedicated volunteers, not as paid staff. In addition to helping wild animals regain their health, the daily work of wildlife rehabilitators positively impacts human health in important ways. Here are some examples.

Provide a qualified, licensed facility that rehabilitates wildlife in safe manner

Research has shown that people often want to help wildlife in trouble, particularly if humans were somehow involved in whatever caused the animal harm, such as bites by cats, collisions with vehicles, or getting tangled in a fishing line. If a wildlife rehabilitator or rehabilitation center is not available, many people try to care for the animal themselves even when there are risks of injury, parasites and disease. Such efforts by well-intentioned people who are unskilled and unaware of the risks from what they perceive as 'small, cute, and cuddly' animals can result in serious health problems for the caregiver and others. Regardless of whether the licensed rehabilitation facility is a free-standing center or located at a designated area of a rehabilitator's home or property, removing the wild animals from their rescuers helps reduce health risks to both.

Provide information to the public

Members of the public often phone wildlife rehabilitators about wild animal questions. While estimates vary, many rehabilitators report that they receive 8 or so calls for information about wildlife for every one call that involves admitting a wild animal in need. Many of these calls involve the rehabilitator in communicating information that can affect human health.

The public frequently contacts rehabilitators with questions about ways to handle human-wildlife conflicts, such as pigeons on a building, or rabbits or deer eating favorite plants. Rehabilitators provide general information on the species and its benefits, and can suggest humane alternatives to prevent or resolve a problem.

For instance, rehabilitators suggest mechanical methods to discourage pigeon nesting or congregating instead of the use of poisons that could potentially harm people and pets. Secondary poisoning occurs when humans or pets eat the targeted and non-targeted animals that consume the poisons. While the toxicity of products used to discourage or prevent wildlife from eating cultivated plants or roosting on buildings is clearly declared on labels, people also may be poisoned if they eat plants on which the toxins were accidentally applied.

Many people phone rehabilitators for help with wild animals that are orphaned, injured, or behaving abnormally, such as collapsed in a yard. Rehabilitators advise the public that there could be risks in picking up or handling any animal, regardless of size, 'cuteness', weakness, or what they believe is unconsciousness. For example, rehabilitators explain that herons are attracted to, and eat shiny, round objects – and could use their very sharp beaks to stab at the rescuer's eyes. What is described as a 'small bird in a coma' may in fact be an adult hawk that desperately marshals its defenses to scratch or bite a human rescuer. Moving an injured deer from a road could result in being kicked. Rehabilitators explain about such risks and ways to minimize or avoid them, which may include having the rehabilitator or another qualified person collect the animal.
In addition, rehabilitators often explain the risks of wildlife disease to the public. While the occurrence of wildlife diseases varies by species and location, rehabilitators provide essential information about those diseases and risks and help people avoid potential exposure. An example is the mother who asked a rehabilitator about her children raising an orphaned fox that was found by a neighbor. The rehabilitator explained that the fox could have parasites or serious diseases and even injure the children. In addition, foxes are wild animals that require specific care and caging and special licenses to raise and rehabilitate to the wild. As a result of this information, the family was not exposed to potential risks – and the neighbor surrendered the fox for rehabilitation.

Rehabilitator Saves Rescuer's Life

A rescuer in New York phoned a rehabilitator to get help for two orphaned raccoons that she had found several days earlier. Although the caller was frustrated, she finally understood that she should not continue care for them due to the risk of rabies, which was high for their area, as well as other considerations. The rehabilitator kept asking if the caller had touched the animals. If she had touched them, the raccoons would need to be immediately tested for rabies and the health department contacted.

The woman assured the rehabilitator that she had worn gloves and never directly touched the animals. The rehabilitator continued her probing questions: how had the caller cared for them and where were they kept? The woman repeated that she had never touched the raccoons. The rehabilitator still probed. Finally, the rescuer described feeding them with a bottle and laughed. When she noticed that the raccoons did not seem to be getting liquid when nursing on the new nipple, the rescuer used the same method she had used to test a nipple with her human children: she placed the nipple in her own mouth to see if it had a hole in it.

This action had directly exposed the rescuer to raccoon saliva! The rehabilitator arranged for the raccoons to be tested for rabies immediately. The positive test results required the rescuer to begin post-exposure rabies treatment. The rehabilitator's knowledge and quick action had saved the woman's life.
Rehabilitators also can inform the public when an animal needs to be tested for a disease and which agency to contact for testing. For instance, a caller may ask if a bat seen hanging and sleeping under a roof during daylight should be captured and tested for rabies. Unless the animal had contact with humans, it would not need to be tested. However, a bat that has been found in a bedroom must be captured and tested due to the possibility that it had contact with a sleeping person.

Persuade the public to surrender the animal to rehabilitation

While some wildlife rescuers are looking for a rehabilitation facility to care for the animal, others want to care for the animal themselves. Rehabilitators explain to the rescuer it is in the best interest of the animal and the person for the wild creature to be taken to a rehabilitator with the special knowledge, experience, facilities

and licenses to effectively rehabilitate the animal and prepare it for healthy release to the wild. It can be difficult to convince some rescuers who have watched television shows or read articles on the internet about helping animals that there is more involved in caring for wildlife and avoiding health risks than they realize, so rehabilitators must be skilled communicators who are able to elicit the trust and cooperation of a rescuer

Explain or arrange carcass disposal

Rehabilitators explain about carcass disposal. They also have knowledge if or when a health agency wants a certain dead wild animal tested for a disease. In the last few years, thousands of wild animals, especially birds, have died of West Nile Virus. In some areas, state and local public health agencies have asked for public help in collecting bird carcasses for testing during early months of an outbreak. Later, the public is told to just dispose of the bodies, but many still are unsure of the procedure. Rehabilitators also send carcasses of animals that died or were euthanized in rehabilitation for disease testing.

Refer to physician or public health agency

In some cases, a rescuer will admit to the rehabilitator that there has been a bite, injury, or other contact with a wild animal that places people at risk. Rehabilitators strongly recommend that the person immediately contact his or her physician or public health agency if there is any chance that the rescuer or other member of the public has been exposed to a wildlife disease. Such prompt referrals have been extremely helpful for people who may not have appreciated the seriousness of the risks they had taken and might otherwise have developed problems that could have been serious or even fatal.

Stay alert for and report wildlife health problems to public health agencies

Wild animals presented to rehabilitators often have health problems. In some cases, conditions may be common and easy to identify, such as shock, dehydration, and wounds. In other cases, the problems may be less obvious and or more complex. Rehabilitators take such patients to their veterinarians for more advanced diagnostics and treatment. Rehabilitators and veterinarians are especially trained and alert to zoonotic diseases, toxins and other conditions that could harm people.

Such conditions are reported to public health agencies. Wildlife rehabilitators have been on the frontlines of identifying and tracking various disease outbreaks, such as West Nile Virus, Rabies, Tularemia and more. Disease surveillance is essential, whether it focuses on known or emerging diseases, naturally occurring diseases, or diseases that might be intentionally introduced (e.g., environmental security). Wildlife rehabilitators can play a highly important role in helping identify possible outbreaks affecting individual wild animals or larger populations – both of which can infect people.

In one case, a caller was concerned when she found a dead squirrel in her yard. She believed that it was the lactating squirrel that formerly had a nest and raised baby squirrels in her attic. The caller thought a car might have hit the squirrel, even though there were no nearby roads or signs of trauma. Further questioning revealed that the caller had found two other adult squirrels in her yard in the previous two days and buried them. Knowing that Bubonic plague was a possibility for the area, the rehabilitator arranged for an animal control officer to collect the carcass and check the attic, which contained the bodies of four juvenile squirrels. The carcasses were taken to the public health department for testing.

The same day, a person mentioned to the rehabilitator that a nearby prairie dog town was inactive. Several of the prairie dog carcasses were retrieved and also tested. Both the squirrels and prairie dogs had died of plague. The public health agency issued a warning to the community that there had been several plague cases, to avoid areas with wild rodents (and their fleas), and to initiate or continue flea-control treatments for their pets.

Educate the public

Many people have limited contact with nature and wildlife, which can result in both a sense of 'disconnection' and discomfort or anxiety about wild animals. A number of rehabilitators therefore offer education and outreach programs about wildlife to schools, community groups, and others. These programs focus on a wide range of topics, including the role of wildlife in the ecosystem, information about a specific species (e.g., owls, bats, bears) and protecting wildlife habitat. Audience questions about rehabilitation also provide an opportunity for rehabilitators to educate the public about what to do if they believe a wild animal needs help and how to avoid the risk of injury and disease.

In addition, rehabilitators know that educational programs may encourage people to become more active in the outdoors and develop more connections with nature and wildlife. Such increased outdoor activity and learning about wildlife and nature has been shown to help decrease stress, assist children to become more focused, enhance self-esteem, and improve health and decrease obesity.

Help reduce antibiotic resistance

Antibiotic resistance is considered one of the most serious public health problems in the world. Many factors have contributed to this problem, including improper use of antibiotics. As mentioned above, members of the public who find an injured animal occasionally try to care for it by themselves. In some cases, the person decides the animal has an infection that needs treatment and either administers an antibiotic they have on hand from previous use with a pet or family member, or a product that they purchase at a feed store. Antibiotic resistance can occur if the antibiotic is not appropriate for the condition, or if the animal is given the wrong dose or for too short a duration.

In one case, a rescuer gave the rehabilitator a box containing a mallard duckling and a bottle of antibiotics. She had purchased the antibiotics at a local feed store for use with her chickens several months before and administered them to the duck with the belief that they would 'help whatever ails him.' Although the duckling was a healthy orphan and did not have any condition requiring an antibiotic, antibiotic resistance could have developed if the antibiotic was stopped too early. The rehabilitator and veterinarian decided that the duckling had to continue receiving the antibiotic for the full duration.

Just as when antibiotics are used inappropriately with humans, improper use of antibiotics with animals can result in the medication's decreased effectiveness. Rehabilitators work with their veterinarians to ensure that the animals are appropriately diagnosed and treated in order to prevent or reduce risks of problems such as antibiotic resistance.

Monitor personal health, and that of volunteers and/or staff

Rehabilitators also know the importance staying alert to the symptoms of diseases or other problems resulting from their close proximity to wild animals. Since many zoonotic diseases have 'flu-like symptoms,' this means

not discounting aches, headaches, mild fevers, rashes and so forth. If a rehabilitator or other wildlife volunteer develops these symptoms, the rehabilitator can remind that person about potential health risks and encourage consultation with a physician who is alerted that the patient works with wildlife.

Remove animals from the wild that are sick, injured, or posing a risk to humans

Occasionally rehabilitators may assist in capturing wild animals with health problems that are of potential concern to humans. The rehabilitator's intent in these situations is to determine what the problem is and, if possible, rehabilitate the animal. While some of these animals, such as a woodchuck turning in circles or a goose that is unable to fly, may benefit from treatment and eventually recover for release, others may require euthanasia.

Rehabilitators are not involved with capture and/or removal of wild animals from their natural habitat with the intention of managing wildlife populations or addressing human health issues. However, there are cases where the removal of the animal from the wild may reduce health risks to humans, such as a skunk with mobility problems that was later determined to have Rabies.

Conclusion

As the population of the United States grows, the frequency of human-wildlife interaction also increases. Trained, informed and conscientious wildlife rehabilitators can certainly provide a host of daily services which support and maintain public health and safety. Their contributions help to protect both wild animals and the people who come in contact with them, as well as adding to overall knowledge and understanding of the natural environment and our wild neighbors.

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