

INVITED COMMENTARY

Cost of Rehabilitation - Why Save One Seagull?

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Every year the Oceanographic Environmental Research Society (OERS) receives numerous calls for help from desperate individuals who have found an injured animal and have no one to assist them. The OERS Response Log book is filled with phone calls from caring people who have found an animal that is injured and needs some care. They report that they have called several groups for assistance most of which have refused assistance for a variety of reasons. The most common ones being that they consider the species to be a 'nuisance' or 'common' animal or that they have no money or that there are no volunteers available at the moment to respond. No matter what the species or the number of animals involved, OERS offers assistance. In fact OERS will even respond to calls concerning injured seagulls! But is saving a common animal like a seagull that important? Is it worth pouring time, money and effort into treating and rehabilitating any animal no matter how much it costs? Must an animal be placed on the endangered or threatened list before it becomes 'valuable' so that money or effort can be spent on saving it? Should we save species like snails, frogs, seagulls or coyotes? Not only does it depend on how we evaluate the 'worth' of an animal but also the moral values of society.

Wildlife rehabilitation invokes controversy as there are several points of view, numerous scientific theories and strong emotional reactions when it comes to the care and release back into the wild of injured animals. However, when discussing species that seem to be more intelligent or who create strong emotional feelings within humans, it becomes very controversial and very personal. One species that always creates strong and wide points of view are marine mammals. Some individuals or groups consider them to be intelligent animals who should be saved at all costs while others consider them to be nuisance animals that should be killed or commercially used. The scientific literature is unclear whether marine mammals should be rescued, rehabilitated and released as many factors must be taken into consideration.(1) A fellow OERS director and I were having breakfast with a well known wildlife illustrator and we posed him the following question. If he was faced with the choice of rescuing a pod of Common Bottlenose dolphins, would he do it? His immediate response was that since it was a species that was not endangered or threatened, he would not save any as it would be a waste of money and that it was Nature's way of culling the weak. But if it was an endangered species he would spend as much money as he could to save them. He remained adamant until we pointed out how 'valuable' even a Common Bottlenose could be. We pointed out how much physiological and medical knowledge could be learned working with non-endangered species that could then be transferred to an endangered species. Treatment proce-



Picture 1. Injured seagull on the mend — 2008. Reproduced with permission from OERS.

dures could be taught or developed using a Common Bottlenose dolphin that could then be applied towards a more threatened species. Veterinarians, animal health technicians, emergency response team members and volunteers could gain 'hands-on' experience handling the Bottlenose dolphin that would become invaluable in the rescue and treatment of a more endangered species. Potential mistakes could be eliminated and learning curves would be lowered using a more 'common' species thereby increasing the odds of success towards a more 'valuable' species. Research could be conducted on a more 'common' species which could then be used to preserve a more endangered species. By the time the pancakes were served, the logic behind our argument had won.

Mankind's lack of concern about the outcome of our actions is a major factor behind the rapidly changing environments and loss of natural habitats. This results in larger numbers of incidents where animals are injured or the spiraling number of species being placed on the threatened/endangered list every year. Financial cost is often used to justify spending or not spending money saving 'nuisance' wildlife versus threatened/endangered species. Looking at wildlife rehabilitation where animals (small birds and mammals such as squirrels, raccoons, etc) are found abandoned or injured, the costs range from \$40 for a Dove to \$200 to take care of a raccoon per year in 2007 US dollars.(2) In 1988, 3 Gray whales became trapped in the Arctic ice near Point Barrow, Alaska with the total cost of the media coverage and rescue efforts added up to \$5.8 million dollars (1988 US dollars).(3) For a catastrophic event such as

an oil spill, the costs of caring for oiled marine animals alone is often more intensive, drastic and complicated. Capturing oiled animals, giving them medical treatment, running diagnostic tests and performing intensive rehabilitation care alone can cost thousands of dollars per animal depending on the species. The Exxon Valdez oil spill created numbers that were staggering with reports that the rehabilitation of a single Sea otter cost an estimated \$80,000 and that of an oiled sea bird \$15,000 in 1989 US dollars!(4) These figures included every possible item spent on oiled wildlife rehabilitation including building 3 operating centers, 1 rehabilitation center for oiled birds, boats, helicopters, wages, etc.

Lets now compare the money spent on some recovery programs for saving endangered/threatened species. Since the early 1930's, the United States and Canada have spent over \$200 million (US) trying to preserve the Whooping crane.(5) It has been estimated that between 1999-2004, Canada spent \$29 million (CAN) in salaries & expenses alone on the recovery of various threatened/endangered species.(5) However, that may not be the true amounts spent on saving threatened/endangered species. A paper published in 2007 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers showed that the actual costs for the conservation of certain threatened/endangered species can be twice the amounts that are actually reported. (6) It is therefore obvious that the rehabilitation of animals or attempting to preserve threatened/endangered species is a huge financial undertaking with no little or no success.

Apart from the financial burden that any animal places on wildlife centers or on conservation programs, there is a moral obligation to protect and preserve those species that are af-

ected by our actions. So is it worth saving one animal? One seagull? OERS believes it is. Just ask any of our staff or volunteers who have helped rescue an animal in the middle of a cold damp night or who spent long exhausting days cleaning, feeding and scrubbing floors and cages if it is worth it. To have a seagull take flight from your hands or watch a squirrel scamper up a tree or see a seal making its way through the surf to return back to its natural habitat after spending days, weeks or months caring for it is indescribable. If you were to ask me I would have to argue that yes it is all worthwhile. And more importantly, it is the right thing to do, no matter what the cost.

References

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