

Animal ethics



by Joanne Smith and Keith Morris



Opposite page Scientist Adrian Wayne releasing a ringtail possum in the forest near Manjimup.
Photo – Adrian Priest

Left Wildlife researcher Alan Danks radiotracking Gilbert's potoroo.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Below Fauna translocation officer Kathy Himbeck measuring a goanna in the Francois Peron National Park.
Photo – Andrew McCutcheon

Many of Western Australia's scientific organisations carry out research involving animals. At the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), this work includes biological surveys, threatened fauna research, research on effective means of controlling introduced predators, and marine studies. Until recently, institutions have been following the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals legislation that was introduced in 1920. It was clearly time for a change.

In December 2002, the new *Animal Welfare Act* was established to replace the outdated *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1920*. General and Scientific Purposes Regulations quickly followed the new legislation. Western Australia has now caught up to other Australian states, which had all revised their animal welfare laws previously.

The humane and compassionate treatment of animals has long been a priority at CALM. In 1990, the department set up an Animal Ethics Committee (AEC), before there was any legislative requirement to do so. The AEC followed guidelines from the National Health and Medical Research Council's Code of Practice for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes. In 1991, this process became an Administrative Instruction endorsed by CALM's Corporate Executive. The updated legislation now enforces organisations to follow the Code of Practice and obtain a Scientific Establishment Licence.

The AEC's role is to ensure that animals studied for scientific purposes are treated humanely and in

accordance with the Code of Practice. The term 'animals' in the code refers to any vertebrate other than fish and humans. Invertebrates can be covered by the *Animal Welfare Act* once specifically listed. 'Scientific purposes' is defined as 'the use of an animal to demonstrate a product or technique', which includes common CALM activities such as animal research and education. It is important to note that introduced animals must be handled in the same ethical manner as native animals. The operational control of pest animals does not need AEC assessment so long as approved techniques (distributed by the Department of Agriculture WA) are followed.

Who's who?

Animal Ethics Committees must contain: a veterinary scientist; someone with current and substantial experience using animals in scientific activities; a person with proven long-term commitment to animal welfare, who is not associated with the institution; and someone who has never been involved with scientific animal use or the institution. CALM's AEC also has a wildlife carer and representatives of the Wildlife Branch and Science Division. CALM began reviewing the WA



Museum's animal ethics applications in October last year and, since then, a museum staff member has also been part of the department's AEC.

The committee meets six times a year. Researchers in charge of projects under review may be invited to attend to discuss their application. The 'three Rs' principle (reduction, refinement and replacement) is followed when assessing proposals. This leads to a number of questions. For example, can fewer animals be used in the study? Can the investigation be better designed to minimise animal use and maximise the information learned? Could a non-animal experiment answer the questions the research addresses? The answers help the committee to ensure all work is performed in the most ethical manner.

The value of proposed work is questioned, especially if pain or suffering of animals is likely to occur. Applicants must address any queries or concerns raised during the review



process, and applications need to be supported by references and clear explanations so that the committee can make an informed decision—members grant AEC approval only after unanimous agreement. Standard Operating Procedures have been developed to assist the preparation of applications and their efficient assessment by the committee.

CALM's AEC has looked at an average of 18 applications each year for the last 12 years. Many of these related to Project Eden and Western Shield: ensuring that the translocation of animals was carried out under the least distressing conditions (see 'Moving Mala', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 1999). Recent proposals have also included a study into lizards in the Gibson Desert; DNA sampling of humpback whales; fitting satellite transmitters to whale sharks and great white sharks (even though fish are not covered by the new legislation); a Pilbara biological survey; trapping animals for educational demonstrations; and the Barna Mia animal viewing enclosure at Dryandra.

The department must be able to supply information at any time about projects involving animals, and demonstrate that all staff working with animals have appropriate training, experience and supervision.

A comprehensive database has been developed to manage all the necessary documentation. Previous animal ethics applications can be found quickly, and reports provided to bodies such as the Department of Local Government and Regional Development (which administers the new Act) and CALM's Corporate Executive.

CALM is also seeking the assistance of veterinary surgeons to provide training in techniques such as DNA sampling, transponder implantation, using regulation-restricted drugs and drawing blood. All staff who handle animals without close supervision will be required to register under the CALM scientific licence and attend a Fauna Management Course.

Obtaining animal ethics approval is now an important part of planning to undertake work on animals in CALM. While the department has been working with animals in an ethical manner for many years, the new legislation and the AEC will continue to ensure that staff are vigilant about these issues, are aware of their legal obligations and that 'best practice' will apply to all programs involving animals.

Joanne Smith is based at CALM's Woodvale Research Centre and is the Executive Officer for the department's Animal Ethics Committee. Keith Morris is Group Manager of the Biodiversity Conservation Group at CALM's Woodvale Research Centre and is Chairman of the committee. Both Joanne and Keith can be contacted on (08) 9405 5143, or by email (joannes@calm.wa.gov.au or keithm@calm.wa.gov.au).

Above Zoology student Harriet Mills in the dibbler breeding precinct at Perth Zoo.

Photo – Marie Lochman

Left Technical officer Colin Ward weighs a small mammal during a *LANDSCOPE* Expedition to Peron Peninsula, Shark Bay.

Photo – Keith Morris/CALM



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Publishing credits

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Verna Costello.

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Design and production Tiffany Aberin,
Maria Duthie, Natalie Jolajoski,
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Cartography Promaco Geodraft

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Phone (08) 9334 0481 or (08) 9334 0437.

Prepress Colourbox Digital.

Printing Advance Press, Western Australia

© ISSN 0815-4465

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Published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management,
17 Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington,
Western Australia

