

Reptiles, marsupials and other types of urban animals. What do we do about their management?

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ABSTRACT

Animal Management Officers (AMOs) face many issues surrounding dogs and cats everyday of their working lives. With the development of urban animal management, other animal issues have raised their heads. The subject of native wildlife in residential areas has been an issue that AMOs are becoming more prepared to deal with.

The objectives of most local laws made by Councils are to provide for peace and order with the reasonable use and enjoyment of private land. Native animals either owned or wild do not have a legal status under these local laws, therefore AMOs must be well versed in State legislation in this regard.

While researching this paper I found that I could take many roads regarding native wildlife issues, so I chose to concentrate on the two species I have had the most to deal with — snakes and possums in residential areas.

INTRODUCTION

The popularity and value of pets in society is well documented. The keeping of pets has shown to help relieve stress and anyone who has owned a dog or cat can quickly attest to the value of their companionship.

However, not all members of society like or want to conform to the norm. As AMOs well know, pet ownership is not confined to just cat and dogs. Today's pet owner may wish to own any number of unusual creatures. Considering Australia has some of the most bizarre and beautiful animals in the world, it's no wonder some Australians want to keep them as pets.

The Department of Natural Resources and Environment is responsible for native flora and fauna in Victoria on public and private land. This responsibility exists across terrestrial, marine, estuarine and freshwater environments. The key focus of the Department in this area is to ensure that flora and fauna can survive, flourish and maintain its potential for evolutionary development in the wild.

This leads me into the other issue raised by residents in suburbia. Urban sprawl is playing a major part in shaping the look of the urban fringe surrounding major capital cities across Australia. As humans have taken over land for farming and then reclaimed this land again for housing, native animals have seen humans come closer and closer to their homes.

In south east Melbourne, municipalities like Frankston City, Casey City (Cranbourne) and Mornington Peninsula Shire Council will see significant growth in population and housing over the next twenty years. Population forecasts for the region suggest that Frankston's population may increase by 16,000, Mornington by 7,000 and Casey by a staggering 86,000 people.

To accommodate this influx of residents, some 42,000 houses are expected to be built in Casey alone over the next 20 years. The land used to build these homes may include areas of redeveloped residential land, reclaimed farmland and native bushland areas.

Development of farm and bushland areas means residents will be living in the natural habitat of snakes and other wildlife, therefore close encounters between humans and wildlife is highly likely.

AMOs are the most likely sector to be called when these encounters occur and with Council making the decisions on some of these new subdivisions, maybe some of the responsibility lies with Council to provide resources to deal with human and native wildlife interactions.

Issues regarding venomous snakes and nuisance created by possums in residential areas are becoming hot topics for some outer metropolitan Councils. Even though the State Government legislates on these issues and the residents choose to live in these areas, AMOs are still one of the first points of call for complaints from residents.

If AMOs answer complaints from residents by telling them to contact the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, RSPCA or a professional wildlife handler, our profile of being animal management specialists will in some small way diminish.

The issue of native wildlife in residential areas is so wide ranging I could not cover them all in this paper. As I have had specific involvement with relocation of venomous snakes and complaints regarding possums as an AMO for the Frankston City Council, my intention is to concentrate on these issues for the purposes of this paper.

WILDLIFE AS PETS

The Wildlife Act 1975 and Wildlife Regulations 1992 allows for native wildlife to be kept by people as long as the person has been successful in applying for a licence.

The Department of Natural Resources and Environment is the body responsible for these licences and the Fisheries and Wildlife Unit is the authorised division who inspects applications, approves the issuing of a licence and after an offence, may revoke a licence.

In Victoria, some 7,800 licences have been issued for people to own native wildlife for personal reasons. The Department has also issued over 500 commercial licences to enable people to sell wildlife — these businesses also include pet shops.

With the introduction of the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994, in April 1996 Codes of Practice were introduced for Domestic Animal Businesses. The types of businesses covered by this legislation are dog training facilities, dog and cat shelters, boarding for cats and dogs, breeding operations and pet shops.

The Domestic Animal Business legislation requires operators to comply with a number of minimum standards regarding welfare of animals while in their care or being held for sale. The Code of Practice for the operation of pet shops sets guidelines that AMOs are to inspect in regard to commercial premises.

Cats, dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs and aviary birds are not the only animals covered by this legislation. As long as the pet shop operator has the appropriate commercial licence, officers may be required to inspect for native birds and animals such as snakes, lizards and frogs.

AMOs did not have experience with native animals in the past, they are now required to understand many aspects of native wildlife issues with the introduction of this legislation.

Inspections include:

- minimum floor areas and heights for enclosures;
- ensuring temperature ranges are correct for reptiles;
- frogs and snakes require a shallow pool of water in their enclosure;
- reptiles require a photo period of eight hours a day while on site and lights for heat must be coloured red or blue.

Before these inspections took place the Bureau of Animal Welfare held training days and officers were required to research these animals to ensure that they could answer the questions posed to them by pet shop operators and also the public.

AMOs deal with many complaints regarding dogs and cats wandering at large, attacking animals, creating noise and smell nuisances. While completing inspections on some pet shops I realised that maybe some of the same issues could arise with native animals once they are sold into the community.

This thought was reinforced with the operational paper delivered by Peter Carrie at the Urban Animal Management conference in Perth 1998. His explanation of an incident whereby a cattle truck was involved in a collision with a 4-wheel drive was very interesting. The truck had lost all 45 cattle onto the road with three dying in the accident. This was an example of how a normal day can become very challenging very quickly. It also shows that planning for unusual situations can be very important for the safety of staff and the animals involved.

After attending the conference and receiving a copy of the booklet 'Companion Animals in the City' I started to think about strategic planning around native animals in residential areas. I was reminded of the phrase 'never put your body where your mind has not been before'.

Strategic planning is a useful tool to ensure that dealing with an unusual situation can run as smoothly as a day-to-day issue. All strategic plans should contain the following:

- identify strengths and weaknesses in existing resources;
- prioritise these issues and workout solutions;
- develop action plans to address certain situations;
- recognise other departments that play a key role in the issue;
- review training and legal requirements.

Case study — snake in a major shopping area

A situation I can recall where Council's strategic planning came into play was the day I was called to respond at a car park outside the 7-Eleven in Beach Street, Frankston. The call was to catch a python coiled on a rock in the car park.

After the 1998 Perth UAM Conference I spoke to management about the areas I believed we may be lacking in resources or training. One of the issues I raised was snakes found in residential areas. Management accepted this as an issue given approximately 50 calls a year are received regarding snakes.

As a consequence I attended a two-day TAFE course on how to handle venomous snakes. I have a snake controller's licence from the Department of Natural Resources and Environment.

Even though my licence did not cover pythons I knew that if the identification of the snake was incorrect and the snake turned out to be a venomous species, the public may have been in danger.

I collected my equipment and headed to the 7-Eleven. On entering the car park I could see the snake on the rock and knew straight away it was a python. This meant that the best action to take would be to contain the snake to the area and call the Fisheries and Wildlife Unit to come and collect the reptile.

I got out of the vehicle to ensure that the crowd which had formed, did not get too close as to scare the snake. On closer inspection of the python it appeared very lifeless and for some reason dripping wet.

I thought this to be strange and warily moved closer. I realised that the python was real but very dead. The reason for it being coiled on the rock was because someone had placed it there after taking it out of a jar of formaldehyde as a practical joke.

I removed the snake from the rock and contacted a local herpetologist. We inspected the snake to confirm the reptile did not have a microchip and buried it at the Council tip. Even though the outcome was a little comical, at the time I thought the training and preparation paid off.

WILDLIFE AS PESTS

Venomous snakes in residential areas

Australia has the dubious honour of being home to more venomous snakes than any other continent on the planet. Contrary to popular belief, snakes will not attack humans unless they are provoked and snakes are more often the victim rather than the aggressor. Snakes play an important role within Australia's ecosystems and are very efficient pest controllers.

As mentioned earlier human beings are taking over more and more of Australia's native wildlife's habitat. For this reason many Councils have AMOs specially trained to perform the role of snake controller within their municipality.

The formulation of a strategic plan for AMOs to catch venomous snakes is very important. AMOs use techniques and equipment to ensure the risk of being bitten by a dog or cats is minimised.

In the case of snakes, AMOs can decide the best way to reduce the risk is not to handle to the reptile at all. For those AMOs who want to take the responsibility for relocating snakes the following plan may be of some benefit:

- identify if a problem exists in your municipality by confirming the numbers of complaints per year, the risk to the community and if a resident snake handler is not already well established in the area;
- identify the species of snakes in the your area and their potential hazard to the community;
- call your local hospital to ensure that it has the appropriate anti-venom to deal with each species of snake in your local area;
- regularly attend first aid courses and make sure the course has first aid techniques for snake bites on the agenda;
- ensure management updates your position description to include snake relocation is part of your duties;
- obtain a Wildlife Controller (type 2) Licence from the Game and Wildlife Licensing Unit (Department Natural Resources and Environment);
- attend a course in snake handling or reptile management, in some cases the Licensing Unit will accept relevant experience;
- once management has approved the change of duties and your application has been approved you will need to purchase the following equipment:
 - catch pole and hook
 - catch bag with handle
 - properly signed holding container
 - hammer for euthanasia
 - shovel to bury euthanased snakes
 - gum boots for extra protection
 - overalls for extra protection against a bite over the gum boots
 - clear glasses to guard against spray of venom;
- establish links with your regional Fisheries and Wildlife Unit, local herpetology groups and other snake controllers; and
- use your knowledge to educate the community on how best to deal with snakes and stop panic in the event of a snake bite incident.

If you have identified that an issue exists regarding snakes in residential areas a great reason to fulfil the role of snake catcher is that it raises the profile of AMOs within the community. This type of service can reassure residents and give them the confidence to enter their backyards again. Even if you attend the property and the snake cannot be found the resident appreciates your effort and can resume their normal day.

Possoms in residential areas

The Brushtail and Ringtail Possoms are well suited to living in suburbia. Trees and shrubs grown in our gardens provide a natural habitat for them to thrive. If we were to ask some residents about possums in residential areas, the comments would not be very flattering with suggestions that these furry native Australians are noisy, smelly, garden destroying pests.

Like other native animals, possums are protected and cannot be harmed in any way or kept without a licence. Council can play a role in the protection of urban possums by educating the public on their rights and responsibilities as it relates to possums on their properties.

Under the Living with Possums Legislation, possums found in roofs or walls can be trapped and must be released on the property within 50 metres of the capture point. The release should be completed at sunset to reduce the risk of attack. If release is not practical, the possum can be taken to a local veterinarian for euthanasia, at cost to the resident.

If a possum is in a garden and eating the plants but does not enter the house, it is against the law to handle or trap the possum. Relocation of the possum is illegal and inhumane as most relocated possums die within days due to stress, attack by diurnal animals or attack by other possums protecting their territory. Breaching these regulations carries a penalty of up to \$5,000 in court.

The service offered by the Council should include:

- hire of possum traps;
- lists of nesting box suppliers;
- lists of tree collar suppliers; and
- lists of reputable professional trappers.

This would be another way of raising AMOs' profiles in the community. Obviously offering to pay to euthanase the possum by the resident, would not be in the best interests of the possum.

CONCLUSION

Strategic planning can ensure that an AMO can face any issue well prepared. The safety of AMOs is just as important as the welfare of the animal. Therefore thinking an issue through before 'putting your body' on the line is great advice.

To help show AMOs in a proactive light and give the community a position perception, we may have to take on extra challenges like native wildlife issues to achieve this goal.

I would urge all AMOs to become proactive in native wildlife education and offer services to residents to include protection against venomous snakes and handling nuisance possums in residential areas.

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