

Animal Management Officers Association of Tasmania

Steve Rigby

Ever since I commenced employment in the profession of animal management six years ago, I have heard and participated in discussions about the merits of a professional organisation representing State Animal Management Officers (AMOs). I have no doubt that regions and states around the nation have been doing likewise for many years.

An association simply put, is an organisation of people with a common purpose or goal. This may range from a professional body of people to a sporting, cultural or social body, for example the Medical Association, Parents & Friends Association etc.

In urban animal management, what is the common goal? I would suggest it is to ensure *a caring and safe environment, where any conflict with animals and humans is minimised, and the rights of animal owners and non-animal owners is equally respected.*

So for years the topic was discussed and tossed about, but why would you want or need an association, what are the benefits?

THE BENEFITS

One of the major benefits that I can see for having a professional organisation is that if deserved, they should command respect and as such the opinions and policies of the organisation are relied upon. Tasmania, like several other states, has undergone major reviews in legislation over recent times, our Association even though not fully established at the time, put together a substantial submission to the Government on proposed changes to the Dog Control Act.

We were consulted, made many recommendations, the majority of which were adopted. I believe it was the combined voice of the workers at the coal face advising the Government what will work and what cannot work when enforcing legislation, that made the submission so successful. Even though there was some initial resistance from the Local Government Office to give us no more than lip service we soon made it aware that we are a significant stakeholder with the experience and necessary wisdom required. An individual's submission would not carry the same weighting as ours.

The political lobbying power of a respected association cannot be underestimated, especially when dealing with improving work place standards and legislation.

An association can develop local policies, promoting consistency and uniformity at a statewide level. This in turn can be transposed to a national level ie the microchip issue, classifying of dangerous dogs and a national register, the issue of tail docking and use of circus animals, to ban or not ban particular breeds (as can be seen in Qld) etc.

An association can promote specific learning and development for the profession. Training seminars and conferences, such as this one or the annual Western Australia Rangers Association Conference.

Training by the members for the members should guarantee appropriate learning and development.

An association brings together members from other Councils giving the opportunity to canvass regional or broader issues, thus providing a chance to network and resource valuable experience, this in itself promotes inter-Council co-operation and again consistency and uniformity across municipal boundaries.

An association can provide an excellent support and mentoring program for those new to the profession. So often we hear of new recruits starting on a Monday, given the keys to the vehicle and told go forward and do a good job. Most Councils either don't care or cannot provide mentoring, particularly smaller rural Councils. And how can we expect them to, after years of budget trimming they don't have the resources and in fact they have no idea themselves what the job entails.

A successful mentoring program is fundamental to reducing stress, reducing the risk of injury and reducing burnout.

An association could also collate data from Councils on a regional, statewide or even national level and provide benchmarking services. By disseminating this information to all levels through an association newsletter, strategies that have been put into place elsewhere and proven to work can be implemented if desirable.

These are a few of the benefits an organisation of professional people can provide, but there are many more, and not to forget the social aspect of a brotherhood.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Like many difficult tasks the hardest part is getting started, and once started the momentum must be kept going. What is required is a few like-minded and motivated individuals to get the ball rolling

As previously stated in Tasmania's case, AMOs had been tossing the idea around for years at rare training sessions, or when they met at the local pound or over a beer at a social event etc. The scenario is no different to what is happening all over the country.

Most everyone agreed that an association had merit and in fact most saw it as critical for the state and the future of progressive animal management within the state. But there was no driving force to 'get it started'. That was until Kester Nolder of Hobart City Council convened a meeting for the sole purpose of discussing the establishment of an association and how it should be structured and progressed.

The meeting was convened at a location as central as possible to all Councils, and it was held on a weekday during normal working hours. Therefore it is essential to have the support of your management, to allow for your attendance. We had 25 attendees and the verbal support of those who could not attend. Tasmania has 29 Councils and we had about 98% response to this first meeting.

In a state the size of Tasmania it is achievable to convene a meeting for the whole state, and I dare say the only state that can do so without involving huge costs. Larger states may require several regional meetings and further correspondence by mail or electronics.

Many issues were discussed and thrashed out and an agenda or work plan was established. The meeting endorsed two people to act as representatives to progress the work plan and get things moving. In essence a small committee was formed and charged with the responsibility of building the association up to the voting stage.

One of the first and major tasks was to develop a Constitution and incorporate the association with the Business Affairs Office. This would appear to be the time when things can bog down and little progress is achieved. Time certainly got away from us.

So to summarise on how to get started — it's going to need a few motivated people who believe in the merits of an organised body. Firstly, ascertain if there is sufficient interest out there to form an association. This can be done by mail-out of an expression of interest to join and advising of meetings to be held. If there is sufficient interest move ahead and conduct meetings.

Meetings should be structured and coordinated, set an agenda and go in with pre-conceived goals. The meeting should create a work plan and time-table, this will assist greatly in keeping things on track. And the meeting should also nominate a working group or organising committee to ensure the work plan is achieved.

Important issue to discuss at these initial meetings would be:

- an organising Committee;
- development of a constitution;
- the makeup of an executive and other committees;
- nominations and voting;
- membership;
- fees;
- legal representation;
- establishing a mailing list; and
- mission statements and objectives

The constitution forms the rules and guidelines of the organisation and is critical for the sustainability of the organisation and protection of the membership.

The work group should now be of a size and structure, which facilitates regular meetings and progress. Regular feedback to the proposed membership on progress is essential.

TASMANIA'S MODEL

AMOAT (Animal Management Officers' Association, Tasmania) membership is open to all those who are currently employed in the profession within a local government regime, including those in a middle management position relating to animal management. Associate membership is also offered to those working in an allied profession ie. veterinarians, veterinary nurses, shelter/pound staff, RSPCA etc.

Any association is only as strong as its' membership, the greater the membership the stronger the organisation.

However there are positives and negatives pertaining to the size of Tasmania. Its' land-mass and the number of Councils within the state will inhibit membership and this may pose a major threat to AMOAT's long-term existence.

I estimate there are less than 35 full time AMOs operating in the state. To put this into context this is a third of the number employed by Brisbane City Council alone. However, the small size does make it a lot more manageable for administrative purposes and will lessen the burden on office bearers. AMOAT will have to ensure that its' capabilities and objectives are kept in check.

Because of its' relative size and the number of Councils the State has been divided into three districts, the South/South-East, the North/North-East and the West/Northwest.

The Executive Committee will comprise a President, a Vice President, a Treasurer, a Secretary/Public Officer and three District Delegates. The intent is to ensure fair representation of the whole state. Positions of office are restricted to time periods which will enable a turn over of fresh faces at the helm.

Executive Committee meetings will be held at a minimum every three months, and sub-committees can be convened if required.

WHERE ARE WE AND WHERE TO FROM HERE?

At our first meeting of AMOs it was decided that priority be given to developing a constitution, even before inaugural nominations of the Executive Committee.

We started with a copy of the Constitution of the Western Australia Rangers Association (not being one for re-inventing the wheel). We were soon to realise that the document would not suit Tasmania in its present form. However it did provide a good guide for our first draft and we collectively spent a lot of time in creating a draft Constitution.

The Organising Committee engaged a solicitor to tidy up the draft and look at the legalities of it all. We were fortunate to be able to use a solicitor that has acted for a local Council and had an excellent understanding of the relevant legislation and requirements of the job. This also provided an additional spin off in that no account would be sent until the Association becomes financial, which is a consideration all prospective organisers should keep in mind.

If you have someone prepared to act gratis or at a reduced fee, then use him or her, because until you have a set of rules in place membership fees cannot be charged and the Association is not viable. However I am sure this can be worked around provided that consensus is reached.

Our Constitution has been finalised and lodged with the Business Affairs Office and notification mailed to all AMOs in the State. Included in this mail out was a nomination to join as a member and an expression of interest to nominate for a position on the Executive Committee. The first polling should be complete by the end of November.

Once the Committee has been established it is anticipated that regular meetings will occur to establish policies and a code of conduct. We are hoping to establish a position not dissimilar to that of South Australia's Dog & Cat Management Board, but obviously because of our size, this will not be on as grand a level.

Some of the major issues to work on and hopefully achieve within the first few years are:

- lobbying local, state and federal governments for funding. It is recognised that due to our size we will need financial funding to promote responsible pet ownership;
- develop educational material on responsible pet ownership in the form of brochures, which may be used across the state;
- provide a medium for learning and development for AMOAT's membership;
- develop and implement policies in relation to micro-chipping, dangerous dogs, minimum standards on childproof enclosures, welfare issues, animal experiments etc;
- establish a regular newsletter for AMOAT's membership;
- develop and implement professional standards for AMOs;
- develop and implement a program for mentoring and exchange for Councils;
- lobby Councils to raise the standard of position descriptions, selection criteria and comparable salary structures; and
- strengthen links with associated organisations around the country and eventually overseas. Hopefully consolidating a national and international association of AMOs.

A lot of work has gone into getting to where we are at the present time, and a lot, lot more work ahead to achieve the outcomes we desire. Although progress has been slower than anticipated and we are not where we expected to be at this point of time, AMOAT will fulfill its' goals and objectives.

Apart from the Western Australian Rangers Association, and the possibility of an association being established in Northern Queensland, I am ignorant of what other established organisations exist, or whether there are movements to form a professional organisation underway.

I would be pleased to hear from such groups and develop a professional relationship and communication line with them. I urge those States that don't have an association established to work towards doing so and with good management, we will have a national association of AMOs in the not too distant future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Rigby
Glenorcy City council
PO Box 103
Glenorchy Tasmania 7010
Ph. 03 6274 0775
Fx 03 4373 1056
Email. srigby@glenorchycc.tas.gov.au

Steve is the City Inspector at Glenorchy City Council and as such is responsible for animal management within the City. He supervises a team of three. Two AMOs and an Education Officer. Other duties include fire hazard abatement and noxious weed control. Steve has been in the profession for six years and started as an AMO for Glenorchy Council. He was a member of the team, which won the inaugural Urban Animal Management Team of the year award in 1997. Steve was a member of the Local Arrangements Committee for the Urban Animal Management Conference held in Hobart in 2000 and is currently co-organiser along with Kester Nolder (HCC) in establishing the Animal Management Officers Association of Tasmania.

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