

A survey of wildlife rehabilitation in South Africa: is there a need for improved management?

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Abstract

The focus of wildlife rehabilitation is the survival of the individual animal, often leading to rehabilitators being in conflict with government wildlife officials, who regulate the industry and whose focus is on the security of entire wildlife communities. In South Africa, wildlife rehabilitation has been the focus of recent attention from the general public, government and academics, due mostly to the development and adoption of norms and standards for the management of primates. Our study was initiated to provide the first survey of rehabilitation centres in South Africa. Questionnaires were returned by 65% known rehabilitation centres in South Africa, including all nine Provinces, through which several thousand injured, diseased and orphaned animals pass each year. It is clear there is a need for rehabilitation centres in South Africa. However, due to a lack of scientific research on the efficacy of rehabilitation methods for care and release, and minimal post-release monitoring, wildlife rehabilitation techniques and protocols have been based on work experience and subjective intuition. In conjunction with a lack of funds, there may be negative impacts on individual animal welfare and survival, as well as on conservation efforts for wildlife communities. Similar issues have been documented in other regions of the world. In the authors' opinion, centralisation of wildlife rehabilitation to national or provincial government is a necessity. Furthermore, it is suggested that guidelines of minimum standards should be developed in consultation with experienced rehabilitators, veterinarians and conservation scientists; to be enforced by trained and dedicated conservation officials.

Keywords: animal welfare, conservation, government, minimum standards, South Africa, wildlife rehabilitation