Annual intake trends of a large urban animal rehabilitation centre in South Africa: a case study

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Abstract

Each year, worldwide, large numbers of wild animals are taken to rehabilitation centres for treatment, care and release. Although analysis of intake records may provide valuable insight into the threats and impacts to wildlife, there are few such published reports. Four years of intake records from a large urban rehabilitation centre in South Africa were examined for trends. Animal intake rate was high (2,701 ± 94 per annum). Most of the intake (90%) was birds, with few mammals (8%) and reptiles (2%), and most of these were of locally common species (eg doves, pigeons). This reflects the findings of other studies, namely that species living in close association with humans are the most frequently admitted to rehabilitation centres. In total, most of the animals admitted (43%) were juveniles, which were assumed to be abandoned or orphaned. The implications of then rehabilitating these juveniles, which were largely uninjured, are three-fold: should humans be interfering with nature if the cause was not human-related, can each juvenile (especially in these large numbers) be adequately prepared to survive and thrive when released into the wild, and is there space in the environment for them, without causing harm to others already in the environment. This study suggests that the large numbers of animals currently being admitted to the centre may be reduced, possibly through increased public education; in particular to leave uninjured juveniles in the wild. Furthermore, improvements in the centre’s recording system may allow for use in funding requests and various research opportunities.

Keywords: animal welfare, intake records, rehabilitation, South Africa, trends, urban

Introduction

Worldwide, there are thousands of wild animal rehabilitation centres; for instance, there are 5,000 registered rehabilitation centres in the USA (Jacobs 1998), 650–800 in the UK (Kelly & Bland 2006; Leighton et al 2008), and 63 in South Africa (SA) (Wimberger 2009). Some are specialised, such as the 65 bird of prey centres in Spain (Fajardo et al 2000), and approximately 100 centres in 16 countries dealing only with marine mammals (Measures 2004). Rehabilitation centres provide temporary care, with the goal of releasing them back into their natural habitat once recovered or treated (Anon 2008). Analyses of the intake records at these rehabilitation centres may provide a valuable insight into the threats to wildlife (Fix & Barrows 1990; Hartup 1996; Atiken 2004). For instance, birds and mammals appear to be more vulnerable as juveniles, being orphaned or abandoned (Dubois 2003), while reptiles and amphibians are mainly brought in because of vehicle collisions (Hartup 1996). Furthermore, intake records provide an insight into the variety of species and the number of individuals that are vulnerable in the local area or region (Harden et al 2006), and whether this trend has a seasonal component (Hartup 1996; Kelly & Bland 2006) or is occurring as a result of other factors, such as human population growth (Neese et al 2008). Knowledge about such factors affecting wildlife would allow for preventative measures to be implemented (Harden et al 2006; Drake & Fraser 2008). Rehabilitation centres could benefit from analysing their own records; by determining whether changes made to their rehabilitation methods had an improvement on decreased intake (Hartup 1996) and increased release rates (Parsons & Underhill 2005; Kelly et al 2008).

The few published inventories of intake trends, across species and time, have been for rehabilitation centres in developed countries of temperate zones (UK: Molony et al 2007; USA: Hartup 1996; Harden et al 2006; Neese et al 2008; Canada: Dubois 2003), while studies in Africa have been carried out in Uganda (Kampala: Azikuru & Angubo 2007), and in South Africa (Nama Karoo: Visagie 2008; Cape Town: Parsons & Underhill 2005). Kampala and Nama Karoo are both rural areas, and the rehabilitation centres admit only birds (Azikuru & Angubo 2007) and raptors (Visagie 2008), respectively. The rehabilitation centre in Cape Town is in an urban context, but only admits marine birds (Parsons & Underhill 2005). No comprehensive studies have been conducted in the developed African urban context. We, therefore, investigated animal