

# Education Animals

Position Statement  
May 2020



Providing evidence-based education and resources on wildlife rehabilitation to move the field of wildlife rehabilitation forward; to promote wildlife conservation and welfare; and to mitigate human-wildlife conflicts worldwide, through the better understanding of wild animal ecology, behavior and welfare.

## Background

The IWRC mission statement is “We provide evidence-based education and resources on wildlife rehabilitation to move the field of wildlife rehabilitation forward; to promote wildlife conservation and welfare; and to mitigate human-wildlife conflicts worldwide, through the better understanding of wild animal ecology, behavior and welfare.”

- As such, the welfare of non-releasable wildlife kept for education falls within the scope of our mission.
- Within the wildlife rehabilitation community, opinions about the ethics of using live wild animals in wildlife educational programming vary widely.

## Policy

- The IWRC believes that all non-releasable wildlife casualties have the right to euthanasia as stated in the wildlife rehabilitator's code of ethics<sup>1</sup>.
- The IWRC supports the principle that educational programs using non-releasable wildlife need to be designed with care following a series of steps as defined by Buhl<sup>2</sup>.
- Choosing to keep a wild animal under permanent human guardianship for participation/inclusion in an educational program is a profound commitment and the scope and complexity of that decision on an individual animal's life should not be underestimated.
- The animal being considered for education should exhibit behaviors consistent with the following welfare criteria both in the present and over a consistently monitored period of time:
  - » exhibiting good physical, mental, and emotional health,
  - » existing in a comfortable, well-nourished, safe and resilient environment,
  - » expressing species-typical behaviors,
  - » living free from pain, fear and distress.
- Those in possession of or contemplating lifelong captivity for educational animals should regularly assess their individual welfare using tools such as the Five Domains model<sup>3</sup> to critically evaluate the animal's welfare while in captivity.
- The decision to retain an animal for educational purposes should not be taken lightly and consideration should be given to the following (these are discussed in greater detail below):
  - » Context - review alternatives to using live animals, using fewer animals, and taking all possible steps to ensure that the welfare of those animals is maintained to the highest standard.
  - » Finance and resources - financial planning must be done for long term resources to care for these animals, in terms of caregivers, funding, facilities, etc.
  - » Animal selection criteria - Ensure that the right animal is selected for the program.
  - » Lifelong commitment - the facility must be able to provide exceptional care for the lifetime of the animal
- Where education animals are used, proper presentation that protects the animal's welfare is paramount. Members must adhere to policy set forth by their wildlife rehabilitation governing agencies.

## 1. Context - Analyzing the Issue

The IWRC proposes applying “The Three Rs” concept as the guiding principles for the ethical considerations of the use of live wild animals in education. As such, the IWRC supports the need for structured protocols in designing educational programs as defined by Russell and Burch<sup>4</sup>.

**Replacement** – Assess the need for live animals. Educational programs should be carefully designed giving thoughtful consideration to the following questions:

- Establish the messaging goals of the educational program.
- Determine whether the educational program’s messaging goals be achieved without the use of live animal assistance for delivery of effective messaging. Confirm whether having/showing an animal in captivity counter-intuitive to demonstrate core messaging.
- Explore the potential of alternative means of audience engagement, such as; lecture/discussion, audio/visual/tactile supplementation, interactive teaching methodologies, use of technology, etc., to achieve the educational program’s goals.
- Discuss the desired outcome and the benefits of replacing the animal versus the challenges involved in properly caring for the animal for the rest of its life.

**Reduction** – Explore ways to reduce the need of live animals. If animals must be used, there is a need to define which and how many animals are required (see selection criteria) by answering the following:

- Design an educational program’s curriculum that requires the support/influence of fewer live animals.
- Explore the potential for partnering with another organization with shared educational messaging goals, sharing a common approach to the welfare of live animals in their care.

**Refinement** - Confirm the methods to be employed to alleviate or minimize the potential for pain and/or suffering, and to enhance the welfare of the animals used or under consideration for a life in an educational capacity.

## 2. Financial and Resource Criteria

The criteria for evaluating organizational resources and readiness to support the enriched life of an animal to be used for educational purposes includes the following:

- Give consideration to availability of financial resources to provide for safe, suitable, and appropriate housing, nutrition, medical care (preventative, specialty and emergency), biosecurity, and enrichment for the duration of the animal’s life.
- Give consideration to the amount of time/staffing resources to provide for safe, suitable, regular, appropriate attention, husbandry, training and handling delivered by skilled individuals who are knowledgeable in the fields of animal behavior, physiology, natural history and training methodologies based on trust and choice.

### 3. Animal Selection Criteria

- Educational program design must include an objective assessment process to evaluate an animal's individual potential for transitioning to a life in captivity, under human care, simultaneously achieving a high quality-of-life in education.
- Wild animals in a state of ongoing illness or injury care should not be evaluated for their potential as educators. Only once rehabilitative efforts have been exhausted, the animal has been deemed non-releasable and is no longer in an otherwise compromised state should an assessment process begin.
- In some species (e.g. owls<sup>5</sup>), animals that have been raised in captivity may be better candidates than animals that have known life in the wild<sup>1</sup>. This should be a consideration when evaluating a potential wild animal as an educational program participant.
- Animals with permanent injuries, like the loss of a limb/wing or major sensory system (blindness) are likely not suitable as an educational animal<sup>2</sup>. Consideration should be given to the nature of the disability, the animals ability to perform self-care and navigate its enclosure, as well as evaluating the potential for development of chronic/long-term pain and/or compensatory conditions<sup>6</sup>.
- Consideration needs to be given to animals that may be sociable and in need of the companionship of other animals to provide social interaction for optimal health.

### 4. Sustaining the Lifelong Commitment

- Of the utmost importance is a unified understanding of, and commitment to, the concept of a good quality of life for these animals.<sup>7</sup>
- Assessment of quality of life can be undertaken using a process such as that described by Mellor<sup>8</sup>, using the Five Domains model. This could be assessed using a team including, but not limited to: rehabilitators, veterinarians, behaviourists, biologists, regulatory agencies, and animal managers who have experience in the husbandry of the particular species.
- Those considering the use of educational animals, and those who already have educational wild animals, should stay in communication with regulatory agencies and well-advised of any and all local, district, state, and country and/or international laws that have jurisdiction over the welfare of the educational animal.
- Wildlife that are being kept in rehabilitation settings and captive wild educational animals have the right to optimal care in all facets of their lives. Wildlife rehabilitators should always strive to offer the safest, largest, most mentally stimulating enclosures and habitats possible.
- **Euthanasia:**
  - » An animal admitted to a rehabilitation facility with a condition making that animal non-releasable has the right to euthanasia. Rehabilitators should not seek to place animals in educational programs as a deferment to euthanasia.
  - » An animal that is used as part of an educational program must be regularly assessed by a vet, rehabilitator, and behaviorist to ensure that the quality of life is being maintained. Should it be felt that the animal's quality of life cannot be maintained, consideration should be given to euthanize the animal and prevent continued suffering.

## Conclusion:

In summary, the IWRC accepts that some wild animals can have a role in education, but only under the following criteria:

- The education program must be designed according to principles suggested by Buhl,
- The three Rs principle should be applied,
- Animals should not be placed in education programs to avoid euthanasia,
- Educational animals should be regularly assessed by a team of related professionals to assure the best possible quality of life for the animal.

## Literature Cited

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