

WIRES Submission

South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review

2025

About WIRES

WIRES is Australia's largest wildlife rescue organisation, and operates a dedicated Wildlife Rescue Office assisting wildlife and the community across Australia 24-hours a day, 365 days a year, providing rescue advice and assistance for over 160,000 animals annually. We have around 4,000 dedicated volunteers as well as a fleet of Wildlife Ambulances operated by full-time, professional Emergency Responders.

WIRES provides support for other organisations and individual carers Australia-wide, across major projects, food support, disaster relief funding, training, rescue communications systems, and the National Grants Program (NGP). WIRES NGP provides up to $1 million per year for wildlife rescue and rehabilitation projects across throughout Australia, commencing in 2021.

WIRES has developed partnerships and programs and provides forward-thinking national support to hundreds of projects which aim to see listed species' populations increase though protection efforts. Since the 2019-2020 summer bushfires, we have had an increasing focus on supporting projects that protect and restore threatened habitats and provide for the long-term recovery of wildlife habitat and the preservation of native species in the wild.

In addition, WIRES trains hundreds of rescuers and carers annually, are dedicated to the ongoing recruitment of new volunteers and the continued training of existing volunteers. This growing network is critical for the rescue and rehabilitation of our unique native wildlife.

Cover image: Zora Brown

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Executive Summary

NSW Wildlife Information and Rescue Service Inc (WIRES) welcomes the opportunity to provide a brief submission on the *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review*, and contribute to regulatory changes to ensure effective outcomes for wildlife and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector.

The volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector provides an invaluable service, largely at an avoided cost to government, and reflects community expectations that the protection and care for our unique and precious wildlife is a priority.

Government engagement with the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector affords significant potential for a genuine consultation process and positive change. Changes include allowing for the release of rehabilitated macropods, possums and wombats. A sustainable funding future is the cornerstone of effective volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, and government meeting community expectations.

The review has the potential to directly benefit our unique and precious wildlife, the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, and the broader community.

Reccomendations

Recommendation 1

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review* draw on the experiences on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector in South Australia.

Recommendation 2

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review* acknowledge the significant impacts that current polices restricting the release of macropods (kangaroos, wallabies), brushtail possums and wombats on the welfare outcomes for these animals.

Recommendation 3

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review* acknowledge the impacts that current polices restricting the release of macropods (kangaroos, wallabies), brushtail possums and wombats on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector in South Australia.

Recommendation 4

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review* commits to addressing the significant impacts that current polices restricting the release of macropods (kangaroos, wallabies), brushtail possums and wombats on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector in South Australia.

Recommendation 5

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review* updates the current rescue and release policy for macropods (kangaroos, wallabies), brushtail possums and wombats to allow their release.

Recommendation 6

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review* draw on existing Codes of Practice in other states and territories.

Recommendation 7

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review* improve on current policies and welfare implications in other states, including specifying that the reporting and handing over of a rescued animal to a licensed wildlife rehabilitation provider or a registered veterinary practitioner must occur within 24 hours — if not immediately, unless there are significant extenuating circumstances.

Recommendation 8

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review* specify develop a similar model to that which comes under section 13 of the *Code of Practice — Care of Sick, Injured or Orphaned*

Protected Animals in Queensland to allow select specialist wildlife carers to provide pain relief and euthanasia for critically injured wildlife, under the supervision of with a wildlife veterinarian.

Recommendation 9

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review* propose a model to ensure a sustainable funding future for the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, and effective outcomes for wildlife.

Introduction

NSW Wildlife Information and Rescue Service Inc (WIRES) welcomes the opportunity to provide a brief submission on the *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review*. The volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector provides an invaluable service, largely at an avoided cost to government, and reflects community expectations that the protection and care for our unique and precious wildlife is a priority.

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review* seeks to consider potential policy change and support the release of macropods, wombats, and male brushtail possums, presenting an opportunity to address some of the significant challenges experienced by the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector in South Australia (SA). The review also presents an opportunity to draw on practices and experiences in other states and territories, improve SA policies to ensure effective welfare outcomes for our unique and precious wildlife, and provide more effective support for the volunteers who rescue and care for them.

The review is clear on the contributions made by wildlife carers:

> *The South Australian wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector provides a valuable volunteer service on behalf of the community, responding to and caring for sick, injured, or orphaned wildlife across the state.*

This description reflects the findings of a 2019 review of the NSW wildlife rehabilitation sector, which noted that the sector 'should be better appreciated, coordinated and supported to ensure it can meet future demands and expectations.' A survey by Englefield *et al* of volunteer wildlife carers in Australia determined a very high average workload — directly illustrating their contributions to the community, and a need for further direct and indirect support.[1]

Dedicated volunteers place the welfare of individual animals at the forefront of decision making. Undertaking critically important recue and rehabilitation, tasks which are mentally, emotionally and physically challenging.

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review*, drawing directly on the experiences of carers across the state, also presents an opportunity to reflect on the 'the broad-

[1] Englefield, B., Candy, S., Starling, M. & McGreevy, P. (2019). The Demography and Practice of Australians Caring for Native Wildlife and the Psychological, Physical and Financial Effects of Rescue, Rehabilitation and Release of Wildlife on the Welfare of Carers, *Animals* 9(12): 1127. https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9121127.

scale retention of animals unfit for release,' welfare outcomes for these animals, and increased government support for their care.

Wildlife rescue and rehabilitation

Wildlife rescue and rehabilitation is undertaken by dedicated people, the vast majority volunteering their time. Englefield *et al* (2019) note that "wildlife rescue and rehabilitation in Australia can be regarded as a major industry… albeit mostly volunteers."[2] Barratt & Medvecky (2022) cite the Victorian Code of Practice, which refers to wildlife rehabilitation as "generally viewed by the community as an ethical obligation to assist wild animals found in pain or distress, particularly as a result of human interference."[3] Haering *et al* (2018), a NSW focussed survey, "found that the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector… provides a significant public good that is of high value to the environment, community and government in terms of avoided costs and benefits to wildlife."[4]

> *Awareness of the public good and importance of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector provides directly contrasts with the sector being largely unfunded by government. Similarly, public knowledge of how these services are organised or funded is low.*[5]

Research by Barrat and Medvecky (2022) refers to the 2019 review of NSW Sector volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector which cites a figure of more than 180,000 calls per annum.[6] The

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[2] Englefield, B., Candy, S., Starling, M. & McGreevy, P. (2019). The Demography and Practice of Australians Caring for Native Wildlife and the Psychological, Physical and Financial Effects of Rescue, Rehabilitation and Release of Wildlife on the Welfare of Carers, *Animals* 9(12): 1127. https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9121127.

[3] Agriculture Victoria (2000). *Code of Practice for the Welfare of Wildlife During Rehabilitation*. https://agriculture.vic.gov.au/livestock-and-animals/animal-welfare-victoria/pocta-act-1986/victorian-codes-of-practice-for-animal-welfare/code-of-practice-for-the-welfare-of-wildlife-during-rehabilitation

[4] Haering, R., Wilson, V. Zhuo, A. &Stathis, P. (2018). *Towards a more effective model of local wildlife care with the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector — A survey of volunteers in New South Wales, Australia*, Australian Wildlife Rehabilitation Conference proceedings.

[5] Barratt, V., & Medvecky, F. (2022). Knowledge and attitudes towards Australian wildlife rescue services. *Australian Zoologist* 42(3): 702–718. http://www.doi.org/10.7882/AZ.2021.050.

[6] Office of Environment and Heritage (2019). *Review of the NSW volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector – an evidence base for guiding reform*. NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, Sydney NSW.

underestimate of this government figure — WIRES alone receives more than 230,000 calls per annum — is indicative and reflective of limited public awareness. Requests for assistance continue to increase, with an unpublished government discussion paper listing a five year average rise of 30%.[7]

A survey by Old et al, focussing on wombats, found that time spent caring for joeys was great than 10 hours per week. Joeys can require feeding every 2-4 hours and can remain in care for up to two years.[8] These time requirements are indicative of volunteer hours in the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector being several orders of magnitude higher than the national volunteer averages.[9]

The social and emotional wellbeing impacts on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector are also starkly different. The Volunteering Australia (VA) 2022 report — noting the impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic — identified that volunteers in general develop a greater life satisfaction.[10] The VA 2015 analysis reported that 96% of volunteers said it improved their well-being and made them feel happier. A survey of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector by Haering et al (2018) found that 17% of respondents also said wildlife rehabilitation had a negative effect on both their social and emotional wellbeing.

Despite the social and emotional wellbeing impacts experienced by the volunteer wildlife carers — linked to limited support from government — 80% stressed they would continue to rescue and rehabilitate our unique and precious wildlife.[11]

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[7] Office of Environment and Heritage (2018). Review of the NSW volunteer fauna rehabilitation sector, unpublished draft discussion paper, NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, Sydney NSW. Cited in Haering, R., Wilson, V. Zhuo, A. &Stathis, P. (2018). *Towards a more effective model of local wildlife care with the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector — A survey of volunteers in New South Wales, Australia*, Australian Wildlife Rehabilitation Conference proceedings.

[8] Old, J.M., Lago, I., Will, J. & Stannard, H.J. (2024). How much time, effort and money is spent caring for wombats?. *Australian Mammalogy* 46: AM24025. https://doi.org/10.1071/AM24025.

[9] Haering, R., Wilson, V. Zhuo, A. &Stathis, P. (2018). *Towards a more effective model of local wildlife care with the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector — A survey of volunteers in New South Wales, Australia*, Australian Wildlife Rehabilitation Conference proceedings.

[10] Biddle, N., Boyer, C., Gray, M., & Jahromi, M. (2022). *Volunteering in Australia: The Volunteer Perspective*, Volunteering Australia, https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf

[11] Haering, R., Wilson, V. Zhuo, A. &Stathis, P. (2018). *Towards a more effective model of local wildlife care with the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector — A survey of volunteers in New South Wales, Australia*, Australian Wildlife Rehabilitation Conference proceedings.

Rescue and rehabilitation in South Australia

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review Discussion paper* identifies specific and ongoing challenges of current policies on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector and the broader community.

A key challenge of the current policy are restrictions on the release of macropods (kangaroos and wallabies), wombats and male brushtail possums. WIRES welcomes the Department for Environment and Water (DEW) considering changes to enable the release of these species. Allowing macropods, wombats and male brushtail possums to be released will reduce the burden on volunteers, have significant benefits for their social and emotional wellbeing, and contribute to wildlife welfare. In other words, recognising that 'the welfare of individual animals (is) at the forefront of decision making' for volunteers.

Explicitly identifying engagement with the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector in the discussion paper indicates a genuine approach to consultation process and a willingness of government working toward effective change.

Genuine consultation and co-design of an updated policy with the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector will also contribute to addressing feelings of neglect and underappreciation by government, identified by more then 65% of respondents to the survey by Englefield *et al*. [12]

Direct engagement with the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector also signpost recognition of the critical role that the sector can and does play in informing government policy, planning and processes.[13]

[12] Englefield, B., Candy, S., Starling, M. & McGreevy, P. (2019). The Demography and Practice of Australians Caring for Native Wildlife and the Psychological, Physical and Financial Effects of Rescue, Rehabilitation and Release of Wildlife on the Welfare of Carers, *Animals* 9(12): 1127. https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9121127.

[13] Camprasse, E. C. M., Klapperstueck, M., & Cardilini, A. P. A. (2023). Wildlife Emergency Response Services Data Provide Insights into Human and Non-Human Threats to Wildlife and the Response to Those Threats, *Diversity*, 15(5): 683. https://doi.org/10.3390/d15050683. The value and importance of wildlife rescue data was also a finding of a recent British study: Mullineaux, E., & Pawson, C. (2024). Trends in Admissions and Outcomes at a British Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre over a Ten-Year Period (2012–2022). *Animals*, 14(1): 86. https://doi.org/10.3390/ani14010086.

Releasing macropods, brushtail possums and wombats

As noted in the *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review Discussion paper*, South Australia is the only Australian jurisdiction that imposes restrictions on the release of certain species. The discussion paper refers to current policy being guided by factors including

DEW's current policy on rescue and rehabilitation is guided by animal welfare and conservation implications. Categorised as an environmental factor, 'over-population and habitat degradation' are listed as one criteria. A study by Paterson et al (2021) includes: "Release of rehabilitated individuals back to their population of origin are unlikely to have population-level effects in large populations, but in small, threatened populations even small increases in mortality rate can lead to extinction."[14]

> *The release of rehabilitated wildlife contributes to "a small reduction in mortality" and "might reduce the probability of extinction." Any impacts on habitat (i.e. habitat degradation) are negligible.*

Habitat destruction, degradation and fragmentation are directly linked to anthropocentric factors (urban expansion, agricultural uses), rather than grazing by — for example — macropods.[15]

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review Discussion paper* includes a table listing suitability for release criteria across other states and territories, criteria important important for wildlife welfare.[16]

- The physical health of the animal (including fitness, freedom from injury, disease and parasites, correct weight for age) is obtained.
- The animal can recognise, find, and consume naturally available food (foraging behaviour).
- The animal can recognise and avoid predators (including pets).
- The animal is not humanised or imprinted.
- The animal is being released at a suitable time of year.

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[14] Paterson, J.E., Carstairs, S. & Davy, C.M. (2021.) Population-level effects of wildlife rehabilitation and release vary with life-history strategy, Journal for Nature *Conservation* 61: 125983. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnc.2021.125983

[15] Varvaro, K. (2025) *Kangaroos in the Australian Capital Territory — An institutional ethnography of human conflicts over wildlife management* [Doctoral thesis, University of Wollongong]

[16] See, for example, Old, J.M., Lago, I., Will, J. & Stannard, H.J. (2024). How much time, effort and money is spent caring for wombats?. *Australian Mammalogy* 46: AM24025. https://doi.org/10.1071/AM24025.

- No animal is released under circumstances which may cause additional stress, such as during extreme weather or wrong time of day (e.g. nocturnal animals during daylight).
- The animal can recognise and interact normally with other members of the same species (social species only).
- The animal can navigate effectively through its natural environment.

These criteria are referred to as providing a reference point for the South Australia government in considering any change in policy. Underpinning each of these criteria are important considerations of the future welfare of individual animals, and any (anthropocentric) risks impacting their ability to survive post-release.

An important consideration of post-release survivability for rehabilitated animals is that there is require somewhere safe for them to be released to.

The safety of released wildlife

It is imperative that the South Australian government ensure that macropods, brushtail possums and wombats — alongside all other species — have safe locations for their release. Locations which do not present significant (anthropocentric) threats, threats which have a significant likelihood that an animal may be injured (and returned to care) or killed.[17]

Rescue and rehabilitation is widely acknowledged to impact the social and emotional wellbeing of wildlife carers.[18] If government policies facilitate situations where release sites can be present significant (anthropocentric) risks of harm to rehabilitated animals — including wildlife permits

[17] Cope, H.R., McArthur C., Dickman, C.R., Newsome, T.M., Gray, R., & Herbert, C.A. (2022). A systematic review of factors affecting wildlife survival during rehabilitation and release. *PLoS ONE* 17(3): e0265514. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0265514; Old, J.M., Lago, I., Will, J. & Stannard, H.J. (2024). How much time, effort and money is spent caring for wombats?. *Australian Mammalogy* 46: AM24025. https://doi.org/10.1071/AM24025.

[18] Massie, G.M., Kuskoff, B., Paterson, M.B.A, & Fuller, R.A. (2025) To the rescue? A nationwide survey of the who, what, and why of wildlife rescue in Australia, Biological Conservation 309: 111275, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2025.111275; Englefield, B., Candy, S., Starling, M. & McGreevy, P. (2019). The Demography and Practice of Australians Caring for Native Wildlife and the Psychological, Physical and Financial Effects of Rescue, Rehabilitation and Release of Wildlife on the Welfare of Carers, *Animals* 9(12): 1127. https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9121127; Englefield, B., Starling, M. and McGreevy, P. (2018). A review of roadkill rescue: who cares for the mental, physical and financial welfare of Australian Wildlife Carers, *Wildlife Research* 45: 103–118. https://doi.org/10.1071/WR17099.

(*licences to harm)*,[19] the potential for additional social and emotional wellbeing impacts on wildlife carers necessitate a broader policy review.

> *As Englefield et al have noted, "wildlife carers are a strategic national asset, and they need to be acknowledged and supported if their health and the public service they provide is not to be compromised."*[20]

Wildlife in permanent care

In comparing polices with other states, the *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review* Discussion paper notes that South Australia is the only Australian jurisdiction that allows the broad-scale retention of animals unfit for release. Other states require these animals to be euthanised.

A review of outcomes, drawing directly on the experiences of carers, presents an opportunity to reflect on the welfare outcomes for these animals. There is also significant scope to reflect on the challenges faced by the sector and carers in providing permeant care, and what supports the government can provide.

A sustainable funding future

Whereas the *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review* and *Discussion paper* directly consider changes to enable the release of macropods, brushtail possums and wombats, now is an opportune time for the SA government to lay foundations for a sustainable funding future for the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector in the state.

Limited and uncertain financial support from government is a contributing factor to social and emotional wellbeing impacts on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, directly

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[19] Old, J.M., Lago, I., Will, J. & Stannard, H.J. (2024). How much time, effort and money is spent caring for wombats?. *Australian Mammalogy* 46: AM24025. https://doi.org/10.1071/AM24025.

[20] Englefield, B., Starling, M. and McGreevy, P. (2018). A review of roadkill rescue: who cares for the mental, physical and financial welfare of Australian Wildlife Carers, *Wildlife Research* 45: 103–118. https://doi.org/10.1071/WR17099

impacting retention and burnout.[21] A recently completed study, focussed on the New England area of North America has similarly found that "funding and resources were the primary limitations", and that government must do more to support the sector to both ensure its viability and ongoing effective outcomes for wildlife.[22]

Specific recognition of the impacts of limited and precarious-insecure funding on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector was raised in the NSW Parliament in October 2025. Adjunct Professor Tamara Smith, MP for Ballina, provided the following motion[23]

> That this House:
>
> > (1) Recognises the critical role that wildlife organisations and volunteers who rehabilitate and conserve Australia's native species play in mitigating the impacts of climate change and habitat loss.
> >
> > (2) Acknowledges that the current model of short term, project-based and emergency funding is unsustainable, and that despite repeated appeals the Government has failed to provide recurrent funding to support these essential operations.
> >
> > (3) Commits to urgently establishing a permanent, recurrent funding stream and a transparent review of wildlife rescue support structures.

These are explicit and longstanding challenges for the sector, challenges which the review is well placed to consider. A sustainable funding future will ensure effective outcomes for our unique and precious wildlife in South Australia, and the communities who care about and for them. Secure funding will reduce the burden on volunteers and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, leading the better outcomes and improving their social and emotional wellbeing.

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[21] Cushing, N., Meehan, C. & Norris, K. (2022). Resilience in animal care professions: does the stress shield model fit? *Australian Veterinary Journal* 100: 513–525. https://doi.org/10.1111/avj.13193.

[22] Sarmiento, Shaylee M. (2024). *Unsung Heroes in Conservation: Evaluating the Limitations Faced by New England Wildlife Rehabilitation Centers and Proposing Solutions for their Support and Recognition*. Honors Theses and Capstones: 787. https://scholars.unh.edu/honors/787

[23] Smith, T. (2025). 3973 — Native Species Conservation, Notice given 21 October, NSW Legislative Assembly. https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/la/papers/pages/notice-tracking-details.aspx?pk=20147

The review is an opportunity

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review* present an opportunity to ensure effective outcomes for wildlife and to better support the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector. A sector broadly valued by the community and requiring more support from government.

Whereas the discussion paper is focussed on policy changes to allow for the release of macropods, brushtail possums and wombats, and aligning with other states on the animals kept in permanent care ('the broad-scale retention of animals unfit for release'), there is specific scope to do more.

A change in policy to allow the release of macropods, brushtail possums and wombats is welcome, will ensure more-effective outcomes for our unique and precious wildlife, and will reduce some of the burdens experienced by the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector.

In addition, rather than seeking to directly align with other states, the review presents an opportunity to identify current challenges and opportunities to support the permanent care of wildlife unsuitable for release. To draw on the experiences of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector directly, and develop a co-design process.

The *South Australian Wildlife Rescue and Release Policy Review Discussion paper* explicitly identifying engagement with the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector indicates significant potential for a genuine consultation process, and a willingness of government to work towards effective change. Such an approach will directly benefit our unique and precious wildlife and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector.

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