

INJURED WILDLIFE AT YOUR DOOR: KNOWING WHEN TO EUTHANIZE

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LEGAL CONCERNS

More and more veterinarians are being asked to assess and treat wildlife for licensed rehabilitation facilities, state natural resource biologists, or private citizens. Be aware that the treatment of wildlife is governed by State and Federal laws and it is your responsibility to know those laws. Specifically, veterinarians should check with their State natural resource agency to determine State guidelines for working with and euthanizing wildlife and check with the Federal agencies that manage wildlife. Furthermore, veterinarians should understand additional laws that pertain to specific species, including the US Endangered Species Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Wild Bird Conservation Act, and the Eagle Protection Act. Knowing the laws and obtaining the necessary permits ahead of time will enable you to take rapid action when it is needed.

WILDLIFE MORBIDITY, MORTALITY, AND EUTHANASIA

Just as with domestic animals, morbidity and mortality in wildlife can be caused by multiple pathologic processes, including degenerative, anomalous or congenital, metabolic, nutritional, neoplastic, inflammatory, infectious, immune-mediated, traumatic, toxic, and vascular. Establishing a diagnosis or tentative diagnosis is a good goal, but often the animal's condition or the stress and time associated with making a definitive diagnosis precludes the benefit of doing so.

Understanding the natural history of the species with which you are working is critical for assessing when to euthanize wildlife. Unless a long-term educational facility is available and willing to take an animal, the goal of wildlife rehabilitation is to release an animal that has the full potential to survive in the wild. Saving an animal's life is of little merit if it is physically impaired and unable to hunt, avoid predation or otherwise survive on its own. As evidenced by submissions to wildlife disease diagnostic centers, some species can survive with injuries or disease processes that would render other species incapable of survival.

Once you have a clear understanding of the natural history of the species in question factors to consider regarding euthanasia include:

1. Extent of injuries
2. Condition of animal in question
3. Availability of adequate short and long-term rehabilitation facilities

OPTIONS FOR EUTHANASIA

Although often unpalatable, euthanasia is better option than releasing a less than fit animal back into the wild, even when it is facing injuries that would be easy to repair in a domestic animal. If euthanasia is determined to be the best option, be sure to utilize appropriate euthanasia and disposal methods. In 2001, the AVMA released its *2000 Report of the AVMA Panel on Euthanasia*, which among other things, provides guidelines for the euthanasia of wildlife and diseased, injured, or live-captured wildlife or feral species.¹ Efforts for revision of this document are underway but pending revision, this document did a fair job of recognizing that for wildlife, many recommended means of euthanasia for captive animals are not feasible. Also available for purchase is the 2006 American Association of Zoo Veterinarians *Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Nondomestic Animals*.² In addition to sections covering the aspects of euthanasia and a summary of euthanasia methods, there are taxon-specific recommendations for: invertebrates, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, monotremes, marsupials, bats, nonhuman primates, rodents and small mammals, marine mammals, sea otters, carnivores, hoofstock, swine, and megavertebrates. These guidelines have been endorsed by the American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians, the American College of Zoological Medicine, the American Board of Veterinary Toxicologists, the Association of Avian Veterinarians, the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians, the Canadian Association of Zoo and Wildlife Veterinarians, and the Wildlife Disease Association.

REFERENCES

1. 2000 Report of the AVMA Panel on Euthanasia. JAVMA. 2001;218:669-696.
2. Guidelines for the euthanasia of Nondomestic Species. American Association of Zoo Veterinarians, 2006.
<http://www.aazv.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=441>