

The ethics of wildlife health interventions during and following disasters

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The increasing frequency and scale of disasters globally and shifting attitudes regarding wildlife present significant challenges for wildlife welfare, biodiversity conservation, emergency management personnel and the broader community. In 2024, the ANZCVS Zoo and Wildlife Chapter published a position statement¹ advocating for the integration of wildlife veterinarians into emergency management frameworks to help address some of these challenges. The statement was the culmination of a two-year project by a working group of chapter members. The project evaluated a range of wildlife health interventions in disasters, especially in Australia and New Zealand. Five key themes emerged from this research: 1. scope, drivers of emergencies and time scales; 2. wildlife welfare; 3. expertise required for decision-making; 4. legal considerations; and, 5. mental health; each revealing a suite of ethical complexities that practitioners must navigate.

This presentation draws on these themes and considers a couple of case examples. It will examine competing values such as animal welfare, responsible use of limited resources, ecological integrity, responder wellbeing and public expectations. The discussion will contemplate the preservation of 'wildness', the risks of unintended ecological consequences and the disproportionate focus on charismatic species. An argument for interdisciplinary collaboration, enhanced training and systemic, proactive reforms will be made.

The goal is to build future response capabilities that are ethically sound, welfare-focused, and ecologically responsible. Can emergency responses be all these things at once? The audience will be invited to critically reflect on the tensions and trade-offs inherent in wildlife disaster response and consider some pathways toward more integrated and principled decision-making.

References

1. Campbell-Ward M, Spielman D, Tobias G, *et al.* 2025. ANZCVS position statement: integration of wildlife veterinarians into emergency management. Australian and New Zealand College of Veterinary Scientists, Brisbane, Australia. Available at: <https://www.anzcv.org.au/anzcv-dev-media/46961/zoo-and-wildlife-chapter-led-position-statement-updated-2025.pdf>. Accessed 10th July 2025.