

## **THE WILDLIFE EUTHANASIA DILEMMA**

Our first reaction, as an animal lover, to any animal that is ill or distressed is to try and help make them better. For us humans, if we are sick or ill, there is no question that we should just seek medical attention and someone will do everything they possibly can to make us better. We may be subjected to lots of tests and procedures, given lots of drugs and possibly even have major surgery, but this is where there are some very significant differences between human and wildlife treatments.

Firstly, humans can make an informed decision to accept or decline treatment once that treatment has been explained to them. Animals do not have that choice. For pet animals - their owners can make that choice. For wildlife - it is their wildlife carers that make that choice.

Secondly, there is an NHS for humans to cover the often considerable cost of treatment. For pets - there may be insurance to help pay for treatments, although frequently finances do become limiting for pet owners. For wildlife - there is nothing, other than the goodwill of wildlife carers and vets working on terribly limited budgets who have to decide where their time, money and efforts are best spent. Simply because something might be technically possible, or even financially possible, it does not mean that it is automatically the right thing to do for that animal - ethically or morally.

The primary aim of all wildlife work has to be to return those wild animals back to the wild. It is a legal requirement that wildlife can only be released back to the wild if it is in a fit state to be able to survive. If an animal cannot be returned to the wild - for example if a wing on a bird is so damaged as to require amputation - is it fair to keep that animal in captivity for the rest of its life? Even if was, then what do we do about the financial and care resources that have to be diverted to looking after that animal in captivity which would otherwise be used to treat another wildlife casualty that could be returned to the wild?

The ethics and legal issues of keeping a previously wild animal in captivity is a whole dilemma in itself. Different species appear to tolerate captivity better than others. However, it must always be remembered that all wild animals are exactly that – wild! They may tolerate captivity but they will not be as happy as they would have been in the wild. How can we measure stress in wild animals that have evolved to hide signs of weakness from predators? If we have a captive wild animal used to living in a social group, think how it might feel if it was incarcerated in what is effectively solitary confinement in an alien world? Is that fair or right? How do you decide?

Of course, the alternative to all of this is euthanasia. Statistically, less than 35% of all wildlife presented to vets and wildlife organisations is suitable for release and either dies or is euthanased. That is 65% of all wildlife presented dies! Shocking? Possibly, but when you consider that a vet's primary and over-riding obligation is to prevent unnecessary suffering it may not be quite so surprising.

Wildlife presented to AlphaPet and wildlife hospitals such as Brent Lodge have to have something seriously wrong to have ended up in captivity in the first place. It is incredibly difficult to catch any form of wildlife when they are fit and healthy. The only time we get sufficiently close to them to capture them is when they are sick. This could be due to natural factors (such as disease or natural predators) or could be due to human impact (for example road traffic collisions, pollution, traps, strimmer injuries etc).

There is clearly a strong argument to intervene as far as possible in animals that have been made sick, directly or indirectly, by human actions. However, there can also be a question as to whether we should intervene for wildlife that has been subject to natural processes. Take a pigeon that is brought in with so-called "canker" – this is a common protozoan parasite called *Trichomonas* - that affects their mouths and will eventually kill them. We can cure that infection with a cheap drug called metronidazole. However, the metronidazole does not

confer any longer term resistance to that bird, so once it is released, it can pick up the infection all over again and go on to die a slow, lingering death from starvation if it is not lucky enough to be found and brought in for another session of treatment. So the question is, in such cases, would it be better to euthanase these canker susceptible birds when they are first presented to prevent almost inevitable (but out of human sight) suffering later on?

These are the sort of dilemmas we face daily. Decisions about wildlife are not simple and lots of factors need to be taken into account during the decision-making process as to whether to treat or not to treat.

Understandably, many people have great difficulty coming to terms with decisions to euthanase wildlife. It is sometimes very hard to see beyond the cute, cuddly bundle of fluff, fur or feathers to accept that subjecting them to significant treatment regimes and procedures may not be in their best long term interests and may in fact cause them unnecessary suffering.

Good as we may be, vets cannot cure everything! Even doctors with their huge NHS resources cannot cure every human! Humans do not have a choice to avoid suffering sometimes. With animals, however, euthanasia is that option, but any such decision to euthanase carries a huge responsibility to make sure it is the right thing to do having taken into account ALL of the circumstances surrounding that specific case.

No one wants to have to end the life of an animal but at AlphaPet we call euthanasia a "last service" because that is exactly what it is. It is the last service we can perform for an animal (pet or wildlife) to prevent it from having to endure unnecessary suffering. We too need to be able to sleep at night knowing we have done the right thing.

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