

Setting Free - issues relating to wildlife rescue and rehabilitation

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One early morning we found a gunnysack on our doorstep that contained a baby toddy-cat. Its eyes were barely open and it lay asleep in blissful slumber. I fed it some milk with a small-animal feeding bottle left over from the days when I was rearing a litter of mongooses. As he grew and became more active by the day, I felt less energetic. He was nocturnal and I had to stay awake and play with him as I took my role as mummy seriously. I had read Joy Adamson's books and was completely carried away by the romance of rearing baby animals.

When he was half-grown, we decided it was time to move him out of the house and introduce him to his future home. We propped a large cage – 5 feet x 5 feet x 7 feet – under the banyan tree behind the house and gave him a branch and a small sleeping box. A month later we opened the small door at the top of the cage so he could easily climb onto the banyan tree. He was frisky. He ran up to the top of the tree and came running towards us and ran up again. He wanted us to climb up and play with him! A couple of days later, he disappeared. The crown of the banyan tree was contiguous with a long hedgerow of palmyra trees. During the hot summer nights, scores of palm fruits drop to the ground with their husks torn apart. I like to think that our toddy-cat is one of the nocturnal feeders.

Over the years I wondered if I did right. I fed the toddy-cat bananas and other fruits and he loved to clamber up when I had a cup of yogurt. Where would he find bananas and yogurt in the wild? I also hand fed him; would he know where to find food now that he was on his own? Having interacted only with a couple of humans, would he know how to behave with another toddy-cat would he know when and how to display submissiveness? Would he recognize and avoid predators like Great Horned Owls and pythons? I reprimanded him when he used his teeth too hard or when he jumped on me suddenly. Had I unwittingly altered his natural behaviour without thinking about the far-reaching effects it would have in his life out in the real world? Before the toddy-cat's cage was opened, I didn't get him screened for diseases. He could have harbored any infection and spread that to the wild toddy-cat population. After spending growing years secure in a well-bedded sleeping box, would he go through the trees looking for similar beds? I also do not have a clue what I had done to the local wildlife by releasing a series of small carnivores into the same habitat. It was time to reconsider why I went through the effort of rearing these wild creatures when everything seemed set against their survival. The unavoidable truth was that it made me feel good. There are hundreds of people like me around the country who rescue birds, mammals, and reptiles. Most rehabilitators rear such animals in their homes and one fine day decide to release

them in the jungle "where they belong." On the other hand, most wildlife biologists and managers stay clear of such animal welfare concerns and as a result the rehabilitators are left to their own devices. Handicapped by the lack of guidelines that prescribe how to rear, where to rehabilitate these animals and with little scientific background and usually nil post-rehab monitoring, it is difficult for rehabilitators to judge if their methods work and what percentage of released animals survive.

The few studies that have occurred show that the overwhelming majority of such rehabilitated animals die of a variety of causes. Listed here are some of common mistakes:

- (a) Imprinting the young animals on humans
- (b) Acclimatizing the animal to food that it is unlikely to find in the wild
- (c) Inappropriate cage size, design and location
- (d) Inadequate response to predators
- (e) Behavioural alteration
- (f) Choice of habitat for release
- (g) Kind of release - soft or hard
- (h) Non-assessment of the impact of release on resident population of the species at the site

If all this makes wildlife rescue seem like an expensive and difficult enterprise, that's because it is. In most cases rescuing animals interferes with the cycle of nature. Orphaned and injured animals if left alone will become prey to predators thus ensuring the continuance of natural law. We are interfering when we 'rescue' these animals and bring them home. Often animals are rescued on the mistaken belief that they need rescuing - every year several leopard cubs stashed by their mothers in the security of tea bushes are "rescued" forever making these large carnivores unsuitable in wild.

Ideally wildlife rescue is recommended when every single individual animal's life counts for the future survival of the species. In almost every other case the amount of money, time and effort needed to rear the animals may be better utilized in protecting the habitat. Perhaps the only exception to this rule is rescuing of animals who endanger the lives of humans, (venomous snakes), animals affected by a natural or artificial calamity (oil slick, development).

If, after reading these words of deterrence, you find yourself in a position where rescuing an animal is necessary then help is at hand. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) has requested Mike Jordan, Chair of the Reintroduction Specialist Group (Europe and North Asia), to frame the necessary guidelines. A preliminary round of consultation with the South Asian members took place in Coimbatore in late Nov 2005 and a manual is expected to fill the long-felt lacuna.

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