

Call a spade a spade....

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Once upon a time wildlife rehabilitation was primarily an individualistic endeavor, performed by caring and committed people but with only the knowledge and the tools available locally. The actual care provided was therefore highly variable; some was excellent, but some was less so. Clearly there was a need for both peer review of methods and techniques, and a means whereby the resultant information could be shared.

More than twenty-five years ago this situation was addressed by a collaboration of authors including the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council and the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association. The result of their work was titled *Minimum Standards for Wildlife Rehabilitation* (MSWR). First published in 1989, today's Third Edition 2000 continues to set benchmarks for state of the art practices in wildlife rehabilitation. Novice rehabilitators use it to develop their own systems and skills, while experienced rehabilitators and institutions refer to it when new or unusual species are first presented. Now undergoing review once again, preparatory to publication of a Fourth Edition, the input and commentary of all practicing rehabilitators is solicited (see elsewhere in this Journal).

Some sections, like guidelines for a thorough and comprehensive examination on presentation, are indeed the least a patient should expect. Other sections provide important background information. Species-specific housing requirements are also included. As valuable as this compendium truly is, now that US Fish & Wildlife Service and some state and local government regulators have adopted MSWR as a "standard" or a "guideline", one aspect has met with controversy and even some resistance in the rehabilitation community.

The focus of the trepidation revolves primarily around the specifics of cage and furnishings dimensions. The MSWR's Statement of Purpose declares, "This document is not intended to be an enforcement program... The wildlife rehabilitator is encouraged to alter techniques for housing... so long as basic natural history, comfort, and hygiene needs are met. Cage dimensions can be modified to accommodate special needs of the facility, animal or new advancements in the field." However, it then goes on to state, "The procedures and cage sizes described herein... are considered to be MINIMUM standards - i.e., more detailed procedures or larger cages are certainly acceptable and encouraged!". These contradictory statements have led a number of rehabilitators to worry that some regulators may abandon qualitative evaluation and rely upon cold, hard measurements instead. The choice of the term "minimum standards", while perfectly legitimate in proper context, seems unfortunate in hindsight.

In point of fact, it can be argued that these potentially problematic measurements are not really "minimum standards" at all. For instance, does crow rehabilitation require a cage 10'x30'x15' as an absolute minimum? What if it was "only" 28 feet long? Or "only" 13 or 14 feet high? Would crow rehab be impossible? Or even be badly impacted?

Or do brown pelicans actually require a pool 24 inches deep? Most recuperating pelicans cannot reach fish that sink to the bottom in 2 feet of water. Is 2 feet deep then really the absolute minimum pool depth?

That is the problem with the descriptor "minimum standards" when applied to hardware without reference to knowledge, skills, or techniques. In the first case someone could indeed choose to rehabilitate crows in a flight much larger than the 10'x30'x15' "minimum" specified by MSWR. As a standard that rehabilitators are encouraged to exceed (a "strive higher" intent), it's a laudable idea. But I strongly suspect that a crow cage built to any of the dimensions above would suffice for a skilled rehabilitator. So the given size isn't really a minimum after all. Almost any roughly equivalent dimensions should be equally acceptable. And in the case of pelicans, providing a pool 6 or 8 feet deep (the same "strive higher" philosophy) serves absolutely zero positive purpose, and may even be counterproductive. So 2 feet deep isn't really a minimum either, and perhaps rehabilitators should not be encouraged to exceed it.

We must come to some agreement on what we are actually offering here. Are all of the particulars in MSWR actually "minimum standards" as the title declares? I submit that in some areas, like examinations and information recording, indeed they are. But in many cases, like specific cage sizes, pond dimensions, choice of cleaning agents, vaccinations of staff, rodent control programs, et cetera, they are flexible elements of a comprehensive rehabilitation program. How then may we properly describe the wealth and full diversity of information provided in this document if not as minimum standards?

Today we have available another widely accepted and understood name for management systems that incorporate the best skills, the best processes, the best solutions, and the most appropriate resources into a comprehensive program. We call them Best Management Practices (BMPs). BMPs have been developed for everything from stormwater runoff to endangered species recovery, from crop rotation to forestry management, from dairy farming to critical habitat maintenance. As the name indicates, these are comprehensive tools that include minimum requirements where appropriate, plus consideration for special needs, flexibility of application, and current advances in knowledge and technique.

I submit that MSWR is misnamed. It is not simply a compendium of minimums; but it is in fact a Best Management Practices for Wildlife Rehabilitation, and should be renamed as such. “Best” in this context refers to the peer reviewed and agreed upon systems that will allow for proper maintenance of the animal and facilitate recovery to the point of release. “Best” for an emaciated, non-waterproofed pelican would not be an Olympic sized pool. And “best” crow care will still be governed more by local climatic conditions, experience, husbandry practices, and rehabilitator knowledge than simple linear dimensions. There need be no guilt associated with “meeting only the minimum”. No pressure to “exceed” some minimum, perhaps without beneficial effect. The application of that totality of skills, processes, solutions, and resources needed to provide the greatest possible chance for recovery and release is the ultimate goal of this volume, and the very essence of Best Management Practices.

Recognition of the scope, the intent, and the proper use of the document and the information it contains would resolve the present confusion. An understanding that the recommendations are offered as Best Management Practices with allowance for flexibility due to specific circumstances and/or special knowledge would encourage acceptance and participation. It would redirect wasteful argument over particulars of measurement into constructive discussion of substantive improvements in technique. The sole purpose of a BMP is to provide an agreed upon guideline of conditions and techniques that are “best” for the animals. That is exactly what the present volume actually intends. Nothing more– and certainly nothing less.

So please let us call a spade a spade– and rename the forthcoming edition, not Minimum Standards, but Best Management Practices for Wildlife Rehabilitation.

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