

Improving outcomes for wildlife

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Historically, wildlife has not been a high priority in disaster management planning. With hundreds of species at risk of extinction and almost 3 billion native animals estimated to have been killed or displaced during the 2019–20 Australian summer, change is needed.

Australia has the worst mammal extinction rate in the world and was experiencing one of the most severe droughts before bushfires destroyed 18.6 million hectares over the 2019–20 summer season. Hundreds of species were pushed closer to extinction, with 119 identified by the Australian Government Bushfire Recovery Expert Panel as high priorities for urgent management intervention.

Traditionally, disaster events have been viewed from the human perspective with the aim of protecting human lives and property, including companion animals and livestock where possible. However, with climate change forecasts indicating longer summer seasons, higher temperatures and increased frequency and intensity of major events such as fires and floods, the long-term effects on wildlife and biodiversity could be catastrophic.

Globally, wildlife faces many threats, including extensive habitat loss associated with residential, industrial and agricultural development. When this is exacerbated by enormous losses of additional habitat, this may result in the deaths of high numbers of animals and potentially the extinction of local species populations. With frequent major events, there is also less time for the land to regenerate and species to recover. The accumulative effect on wildlife is likely to be exponential. If remaining critical refuge and wildlife corridors are lost, more species will become fragmented. With so few individuals left, extinction in the wild is inevitable.

There are critical actions that can and should be taken to improve outcomes for wildlife. To improve disaster risk reduction and mitigate the effects on native animals, it is imperative that emergency services organisations embrace wildlife emergency planning as part of their processes. Government agencies, wildlife and environmental

organisations can collaborate to safeguard critical areas of refuge. Endangered species populations can be identified early and proactively defended. Implementing other activities such as indigenous burning practices have also significantly improved outcomes for land and animals.

As part of improved emergency preparedness planning, WIRES is establishing robust emergency procedures and creating trained wildlife emergency response teams. WIRES also works with other agencies and organisations to clarify roles and responsibilities.

Major improvements needed for emergency response and outcomes for wildlife:

- Consistent protocols, policies, structured management systems and training related to wildlife response in the field, including search and rescue.
- Effective communication with emergency services personnel coordinating field efforts and advising on access to firegrounds.
- Effective processes to reduce risk and proactively protect wildlife, particularly threatened species and critical areas of refuge.
- Clear regulations and protocols for deploying veterinary teams and triage centres to improve outcomes for wildlife.
- Increased national wildlife rescue and rehabilitation capacity.
- Technologies that increase the efficiency and effectiveness of emergency response to permit the fastest possible rescues for animals.

WIRES is Australia's largest wildlife rescue organisation. Information about its programs is at: www.wires.org.au.