

Section 1

ANIMAL ETHICS AND AUSTRALIAN WILDLIFE RESEARCH

Introduction

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Australia is renowned for its diverse and unique wildlife. The importance of wildlife research to conservation, natural resource management, animal health and scientific knowledge is unquestionable. In particular, investigations on animal species, and the ecosystems that support them, are vital for the management and conservation of global biodiversity and ecosystem function. In other words, wildlife research yields important benefits. However, research also incurs costs. These costs may be economic, or impacts on people, ecosystems or the welfare of individual animals. Attempts to weigh and prioritise these costs and benefits shape how, where and why research is conducted. Questions relating to what research should be conducted and what shouldn't are outside of the reach of science; these questions are the realm of ethics. At its most basic level, ethics deals with questions about what we ought to do; ideas about what's right and wrong, or good and bad. Animal ethics is an involved field, and readers wanting to dig deeper are encouraged to explore dedicated contemporary texts such as Fischer (2019). To provide some ethical guidelines for research, an elaborate set of rules has been established to regulate how animals are studied. Researchers cannot study live animals, including wildlife, without formal approval from an animal ethics committee (AEC). This process ensures that animal-based research is constantly scrutinised to a degree that is matched by few other pursuits or activities in Australia.

In conducting contemporary wildlife research, researchers are expected to consider the welfare of any free-living, undomesticated non-human animals impacted. This includes animals they study or other wild animals inadvertently affected by their activities. 'Animals' as defined by the Australian Code for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes (hereafter 'the Code') (NHMRC 2013) include 'all live non-human vertebrates (fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds

and mammals), including domestic and purpose-bred animals, livestock and wildlife) and cephalopods' (p. 3). However, current standards exclude the vast majority of invertebrates from moral consideration. Definitions of what constitutes animal welfare are not straightforward, but current definitions converge on consideration of what animals experience and the balance between negative and positive impacts on these experiences (NHMRC 2013; Fischer 2019). Animals cannot consent to their involvement in research, and human values and attitudes around acceptable use of animals are diverse, so checks and balances have been created to structure contemporary human–animal interactions in research.

The three chapters within this section focus on the use of free-living, undomesticated native or introduced animals ('wildlife'), including those that are housed in captivity after capture from free-living populations (NHMRC 2013), for research and education purposes. 'Use' is a key concept in this discussion, and it ranges from simple observation of animals in the wild to invasive, perhaps lethal, interventions. It is the extent of the use of each individual animal, and the resulting impact on its welfare, that is pivotal in both the AEC approval process and subsequent reporting.

This section is intended for anyone undertaking wildlife research in Australia (or where Australian investigators conduct wildlife research in other countries) that requires animal ethics approval. The readers likely to gain most from this text are early career researchers and new AEC members. However, it is also intended to assist experienced individuals, to guide new recruits, and to recognise that the welfare of each animal is of central interest to the AEC. As stated in the Code, the use of animals for scientific purposes must have scientific or educational merit, and must aim to benefit humans, animals or the environment. This requirement creates a balancing

act for researchers and AEC members. Researchers do not have complete freedom in conducting research, just as AECs do not have free rein over enforcing interpretations of the Code.

Throughout the section (and indeed the book), ‘ethics’ is used to encompass the process of obtaining approval to conduct research from an accredited AEC, operating under the Code and associated legislation. It is not the intention of this book to discuss the different ethical theories and their implications for animal use. For this perspective, see Fischer (2019). This section is based on the mainstream view that society has an imperative to conserve wildlife, but also to maximise the welfare of affected animals in every research project. The AEC is the key decision-maker in this process. Consequently, the following chapters focus on the process of seeking AEC approval as a researcher, facilitating research to

proceed using best practice approaches, or developing and trialling new and improved research methods. This section provides guidance on navigating legislation, including a review of key concepts relating to animal ethics in Australia (Chapter 1); understanding the purpose and function of AECs, including the art of application writing and review (Chapter 2); and further considerations around contemporary wildlife research (Chapter 3).

REFERENCES

- Fischer B (Ed.) (2019) *The Routledge Handbook of Animal Ethics*. Routledge, New York, NY.
- NHMRC (National Health and Medical Research Council) (2013) *Australian Code for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes*. 8th edn. National Health and Medical Research Council, Canberra.