



MEDIA RELEASE

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Recognition for wildlife volunteers' significant commitment

The first of its kind for Australia's wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, not for profit organisation, Wildlife Victoria has announced a \$1.14 million investment into volunteer services improvement with a key element being a mental health support framework for wildlife volunteers.

This announcement comes during National Volunteer Week (16 – 22 May), the largest annual celebration of volunteering across Australia that is this year encouraging us to be *better together*.

Wildlife Victoria's CEO, Ms Lisa Palma said that the organisation's state-wide network of volunteers was critical to providing the Victorian community with a dedicated 24/7 wildlife emergency response service to assist sick, injured, and orphaned wildlife.

"This step in Wildlife Victoria's commitment to volunteers recognises the significant contribution wildlife rescuers, transporters, carers and registered shelter operators make when it comes to helping wildlife in this state," Ms Palma said.

Wildlife Victoria has more than 1,000 registered volunteers throughout Victoria.

Much like emergency first responders such as fire and rescue, ambulance and SES, wildlife volunteers are regularly exposed to distressing and traumatic events in the field. It is common for rescuers to attend to wildlife emergencies where animals are suffering trauma, pain or abuse. Some animals are often so damaged, that euthanasia is the most compassionate outcome.

"Witnessing animals suffering is a regular experience for our volunteers. We need to do everything we can to support volunteers to remain mentally healthy," Ms Palma said.

Research led by La Trobe University Research Fellow, Dr Vanessa Rohlf, will identify factors that predict the mental health and wellbeing status of current Wildlife Victoria volunteers and recommend guidelines to develop a wildlife volunteer mental health support program.

Dr Rohlf said working as a wildlife carer can be rewarding but it can also mean frequent exposure to potentially traumatic events and much of this work is also done alone.

"This work can place many at risk of stress related conditions like traumatic stress and burnout. Wildlife Victoria are taking a leading role in recognising these inherent risks and taking steps to mitigate them through consultation with their volunteers which will inform the development of ongoing and tailored mental health and wellbeing programs."

"Mental health and wellbeing programs are not a one size fits all and they must involve consultation with those that do the work so that they consider the unique factors influencing mental health and wellbeing. By doing so, Wildlife Victoria can ensure they are allocating resources to where it is most needed," said Dr Rohlf.

Ms Palma said it is vitally important to have the right systems and programs in place to attract, retain and support wildlife volunteers given the increasing demand for Wildlife Victoria's emergency response service.

“We have seen an 80% growth in demand for our wildlife emergency response service over the last five years and expect demand will continue to escalate,” she said.

The organisation received more than 100,000 requests for help from the public and supported almost 90,000 native animals last year.

“In addition to investing in mental health support, the volunteer services improvement program will actively recruit and train new volunteers, engage and upskill existing volunteers and continue to provide financial support through our annual grants program,” said Ms Palma.

The organisation offers regular face to face training programs for new recruits. Existing volunteers have opportunities to learn from specialists who have deep knowledge regarding individual native species.

Wildlife Victoria introduced an annual grants program in 2020 after the devastating bushfires. Since then, thanks to the generosity of the public, the grants program has distributed more than \$2.5 million to Victorian wildlife volunteers spanning rescuers, transporters and rehabilitators (ie carers and shelter operators).

The grants program will open again later this year with a focus on distributing funds to offset the costs of wildlife related consumables, and equipment.

Ms Palma said volunteering creates a society that is better for everyone, humans and animals alike.

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About Wildlife Victoria

- Wildlife Victoria is a not for profit wildlife Emergency Response Service that has been operating for more than 35 years as an independent, not-for-profit organisation focussed on the welfare of Australia’s unique wildlife.
- In 2021, Wildlife Victoria’s Emergency Response Service received more than 100,000 requests for assistance and supported almost 90,000 sick, injured or orphaned animals.
- Wildlife Victoria educates the community about wildlife, and helps the community manage wildlife incidents.
- Wildlife Victoria advocates for wildlife whenever their welfare is under threat or compromised.