Wildlife Health and Conservation Centre

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A History of the Wildlife Health and Conservation Centre (WHCC)

A Centre that would focus on the role of veterinarians in all aspects of conservation biology was the dream of Anthony (Tony) English, Associate Professor, Veterinary Science, the University of Sydney. Tony has an extended history of research into various aspects of conservation biology. The WHCC became a reality when the Veterinary Science Foundation at the University of Sydney, under the direction of Jennie Churchill, secured a grant from the Sustainable Regions program of the Australian Government to build a veterinary hospital for wildlife. The University of Sydney has provided additional support to the formation of the WHCC by creating and filling an Associate Professor position who would direct the WHCC and by providing 5 years of support for an administrative assistant, veterinarian, and veterinary nurse, plus additional monies to cover the initial start up costs of the WHCC.

Resources of the WHCC

The most visible resource of the WHCC is the clinic. This building is located on the Camden campus of the University of Sydney adjacent to the Shute building. It is scheduled to be completed in September 2006. It will contain facilities that will allow top quality medical and surgical care for wildlife and client-owned exotic pets. The clinical service will be operated by a full time veterinarian, the Director, and a veterinary nurse. Students will begin rotating through the clinic by December 2007. It is hoped that an internship or residency program can be in place by early 2008. The clinic will also serve as the office for the Director and the veterinary and administrative staff and will provide office space for graduate students and veterinary students. A second building on Camden campus, formally known as the cat breeding facility, has also been provided to the WHCC. This large structure has the potential to be used to house research and teaching animals and wildlife species needing medical care. Research space for bench top research has been provided in the Shute building on the Camden campus of the University of Sydney.

The most important resources of the WHCC are the members of the faculty of the University of Sydney who have an interest in conservation biology and their contacts and affiliations with other organizations. Within the veterinary school faculty there are over 20 members who are involved in one aspect or another of veterinary conservation biology. The number increases dramatically with the other faculties of science. It is anticipated that the WHCC will play a major role in promoting already existing programs present at the University of Sydney and facilitating collaboration within between programs.

Another key strength of the wildlife programs and research at the University of Sydney is the connection of these programs to other dynamic organizations and programs. These include but are not limited to Australian Wildlife Health Registry, The Australian Wildlife Health Network, the Taronga and Western Plains Zoos, Australian Marine Mammal Research Centre, the Australian Museum, the Wildlife Information and Rescue Service, The New South Wales Department of Parks

and Wildlife Services, the Blue Mountain World Heritage Institute, the Schubot Exotic Bird Health Center, Texas A&M University, and the local veterinary community.

The Missions of the WHCC

I use the word missions, because it implies a sense of passion and a sense that the work that will be done by the WHCC is being done for the greater good of the environment, the animals within it, and the humans who share the environment with them. The missions of the WHCC are:

1. Provide referral and primary care to nontraditional pet species including birds, reptiles, ferrets, rabbits, rodents, fish and zoo animals.
2. Work with local rehabilitation organizations to provide primary and referral care to injured and diseased wildlife.
3. In combination with courses provided in the veterinary students' curriculum, use the clinical service to provide a foundation in wildlife and exotic animal medicine and conservation biology to the veterinary students at the University of Sydney.
4. Develop and facilitate a wide ranging set of research programs using the diverse talents of the Veterinary Science Faculty and other Faculties at the University of Sydney, in collaboration with other governmental and nongovernmental national and international institutions that identify and seek to reduce threats to biodiversity.
5. Continue ongoing research into health issues of exotic pets.
6. Through the above programs, provide postgraduate education at both the Masters and PhD level.
7. Actively engage and involve the community in the activities of the WHCC.

Activities of the WHCC

Since becoming Director the WHCC, I have sought to identify key individuals and organizations that have an interest in this program and establish or reaffirm linkages with them. Ultimately, the WHCC will have linkages with the State and National Government, local, regional, national and international conservation organizations, and national and international universities. In particular, efforts are being made to establish linkages to similar programs in New Zealand, Southeast Asia, the United States of America, South America, and Europe.

Members of the WHCC are teaching a 4 credit course on veterinary conservation biology to second semester veterinary students in their second year. Units relating to wildlife and exotic pets have also been included in anatomy and histology and medicine. Efforts are being made to increase the amount of exposure that veterinary students get to wildlife and exotic species in their first 4 years of the curriculum. Students in the Wildlife Society are also being engaged to further offer wildlife related material to them through their organization. With opportunities to train in the WHCC clinic, it is hoped that veterinary students at the University of Sydney will have available to them one of the premier programs in this field in this region.

A Master's degree in Wildlife Health and Population Management, pioneered by Tony English and Chris Dickman is now in its 6th year. This course, which is for veterinarians and others with diverse backgrounds but a common interest in wildlife health, has attracted more and more students each year from all over the world. Research projects done by these students have resulted in a number of important discoveries and publications.

There is a diverse array of projects relating to wildlife that are already underway within the Faculty of Veterinary Science and the Faculty of Biosciences. Topics of research range from molecular studies of the evolution of marsupials to studies of marine mammals in the Antarctic to the impact of invasive species on native fauna. I am continuing work begun at Texas A&M relating to mycobacterial diseases of birds, avian herpesviruses, and *Macrorhabdus ornithogaster*. I want to use my training to study the threat that diseases of captive birds that originated from outside of Australia may pose to native Australian species. I am also eager to identify problems that Australian exotic veterinarians are facing that need additional research.

From an education point of view, it is hoped that the WHCC will be able to be a conduit to the Australian veterinary community, aviculturists, and pet bird owners regarding avian influenza and other health related issues that may affect exotic pets. Efforts will soon begin to get local community involvement in the WHCC.

In the end, the WHCC will be what its members are. The WHCC will be a very inclusive organization whose fundamental belief is that resources are too limited for competition and that conservation and health issues can only be resolved with collaborative initiatives. If you have an interest in the WHCC programs, please contact the Director at dphalen@camden.usyd.edu.au.