



State of New Jersey

Department of Environmental Protection
Division of Fish and Wildlife
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POLICY ON THE RELOCATION OF WILDLIFE

BACKGROUND

As the administering agency for the wildlife resource in New Jersey, the Division of Fish and Wildlife has a responsibility to ensure that human activities relating to the movement and release of wildlife do not negatively affect human health and safety, agriculture and local wildlife populations. Authority to control releases is found in N.J.S.A. 23:4-63.3 and 64.4, and the N.J.A.C. 7:25 sub-chapters 4 and 10 which regulate the captivity of non-game and exotics and game birds and mammals, respectively.

This policy on the release of wildlife supersedes the prior translocation policy, which stressed rabies vector species and was necessary to prevent an unnatural spread of the disease across New Jersey. Under the prior policy, release of rehabilitated or nuisance animals was only allowed at, or immediately adjacent to, the site of capture. Rehabilitators, animal and pest control operators, as well as the general public, generally found this policy inflexible considering the varied circumstances involved with the capture and subsequent release of wildlife. The euthanasia alternative was unacceptable for many constituents.

This policy is a result of several meetings with representatives of affected constituency groups and includes input from wildlife rehabilitators, animal control officers and pest control operators. This policy sets standards for release of all species and considers both biological and social issues, which affect the selection of a release site.

Ideally, all terrestrial animals should be released as close to the initial site of capture as possible. Normal home ranges and dispersal distances for a species should be considered to prevent unnatural spread of disease and unnatural gene flow. This will minimize possible spread of diseases, minimize interfering with population dynamics, including survival of individuals, and the genetics of a particular population; and for adult animals, allow release in already established territory.

Social considerations including public perceptions of what is ethically and morally appropriate for wildlife may be tempered when the situation involves themselves. The public perceives that whenever possible, orphaned and injured animals should be given treatment and a second chance for survival. At the same time, past experience has demonstrated that the public may not wish to have these "saved" animals returned to their own back yards. This "not in my backyard" syndrome is more prevalent when it comes to the release of a nuisance animal which has just caused a problem on a homeowner's property. Constituents most often wish to live trap an offending animal and move it elsewhere, rather than learn to live with the animal or have it euthanized.

GENERAL RELEASE CRITERIA

In order to be considered for release, wildlife must be capable of recognizing, obtaining and processing natural foods, evading and/or defending against predators, acquiring shelter, acquiring and/or defending territories, perform normal seasonal movement and dispersals, exhibit normal socialization with conspecifics, be free of visibly obvious disease and parasites, and be free of exposure to exotic diseases/parasites. The appropriate season and/or current weather conditions must also be considered when determining if/when an animal is releasable.

If an animal is determined to be releasable, the animal should be released as close as possible to the site of capture. With few exceptions, the fact that the animal was found at a particular location indicates that suitable habitat exists for that species. Release site selection is more critical for terrestrial and sedentary species such as amphibians, reptiles and small mammals than for avian species. Human interpretation of what is better habitat and what, therefore, is a better release site is an academic exercise, which is often difficult even for experts.

When considering release on site, or elsewhere, the concept of "carrying capacity" must be remembered. Carrying capacity is defined as the number of individual animals a particular habitat can support because of the food, water, cover and living space it provides for a particular species. The number of animals that a particular location supports is, therefore, finite. Release of wildlife in a location other than the site of capture exacerbates competition for limited resources at a given location and should therefore, be avoided whenever possible.

Release locations must vary so that many rehabilitated or nuisance animals are not released at the same location. This practice known as "dumping" will likely result in decreased survival probability for the released animals and is therefore unacceptable for either rehabilitated or nuisance wildlife. An unusually high density of wildlife that cannot be supported at a particular location will invariably lead to increased stress, disease, parasites, and ultimately death of many animals. Spill over of wildlife into adjacent properties often leads to nuisance wildlife situations.

Nuisance Wildlife

Relocation of nuisance wildlife must be evaluated on a case by case basis. Whenever possible, habitat alteration (i.e., capping chimney) and education of the homeowner in order to allow release on site is encouraged. Failure to remedy the situation by using exclusionary devices or removing the attractant (i.e., garbage) will guarantee that the problem will continue even if the offending animal is removed. If release on site is not practical, relocation must follow the guidelines below.

Before relocating any adult wildlife during the spring and summer, a search for their newborn animals should be conducted. If found, these young must be relocated with the adults. Any trapped nuisance wildlife that appears to be injured or sick should be placed with a licensed wildlife rehabilitator for evaluation prior to release.

If release on site or relocation of a nuisance animal will create a new problem, euthanasia of the problem animals should be considered. Property owners and occupants of dwellings, or their agents in writing, may control property damage by lawful means when suffering such damage from squirrel, raccoon, opossum, skunk, weasel and woodchucks (N.J.A.C. 7:25-5.21). If euthanasia is found to be the only viable method of control, the above species may be euthanized according to the methods declared as acceptable or conditionally acceptable in the most recent report of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Guidelines on Euthanasia. The AVMA report states drowning is not an acceptable method of euthanasia. Other municipal and state laws apply.

Most other wildlife species are controlled by state and/or federal regulations and lethal control measures are regulated by the Division of Fish and Wildlife and in some cases, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Rehabilitated Wildlife

Established policy prohibits the release of animals that are unlikely to survive because of physical or behavioral problems. You may place nonreleaseable live wildlife that are suitable for use in educational programs, foster parenting, research projects, or other permitted activities with persons permitted or otherwise authorized to possess such wildlife with prior approval from the Division of Fish and Wildlife - Wildlife Permitting Unit and/or the US Fish and Wildlife - Migratory Bird Permitting Office. Use of physically deformed animals for educational purposes is discouraged. Animals that cannot be released or placed are to be euthanized.

Releasable wildlife can be grouped into two distinct categories injured or orphaned juveniles and injured adults. For many species, orphans or young-of-the-year have not yet established home ranges and may naturally disperse considerable distances from their natal home range. Adults already have established home ranges and would benefit greatly by release into familiar territory.

SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

Amphibians and Reptiles

Home ranges for amphibians and reptiles are not well known but are less than an acre for some species. Survival depends on close proximity to important habitat components such as traditional hibernacula (denning sites) or breeding sites. Diseases and genetic flow over geographic distance are certainly slower for these sedentary species. Relocation of captured animals over relatively short distances may be highly detrimental to the individual animals, as well as, pose great risk to local populations. Research and experience has shown that snakes may be released within 200 meters (slightly more than two football fields) from a capture location in a nuisance situation and not present future problems. Movements greater than 200 meters may be too far to ensure their survival. Therefore, the maximum relocation distance the state permits from the site of capture is 200 meters. For relocation of turtles or salamanders throughout the state, contact the ENSP's office in Clinton at (908) 638-4127

Birds

Current rehabilitation practice usually involves releasing passerines at the rehabilitation center where supplemental feeding situations are available while birds gain flight experience. Larger birds are often released off site in suitable habitat and at the appropriate time of year. Since migratory bird species are widely dispersed, there is no need to change current practices. Birds found during the nesting season may be territorial to an area, and should be released during the nesting season close (within one mile) to the location of their initial discovery, unless to do so would risk additional injury or put them in otherwise unsuitable habitat.

Mammals

Ideally, all mammals should be released at the site of capture if it is known, and if permission of the landowner is obtained. From a biological perspective, release of adult mammals outside of their home range will lead to a decrease in survival and possible spread of disease. This policy recognizes this and

encourages all releases to be conducted within two miles of the initial capture. However, because of social situations which may prevent this, release distances specified below will be allowed.

Rehabilitation of juvenile mammals often includes on-site "soft releases", which improve survival probability, but preclude release at the original site of capture. Soft releases are, therefore, allowed according to acceptable rehabilitation standards.

Deer

Release of rehabilitated deer at the initial site of capture is usually impractical considering the current method of rehabilitation. Rehabilitators licensed for deer have facilities that allow orphans to be turned out in a rural setting with a bottle-feeding and as little human contact as possible. Orphans gradually assimilate into the local population. It is rare that adult injured deer are rehabilitated, but when this occurs, release at the facility is generally the least traumatic for the animal. Transportation of deer to a remote release site is discouraged because of possible further stress and injury to the animal.

Bears, Wild Canines, Bobcats, Beaver and Otter

Handling and rehabilitation of these animals is limited to a few licensed rehabilitators and is conducted in close consultation with the Division. Prior approval of the release site is required. Relocation or lethal nuisance control of these species outside of specific hunting and trapping seasons without a permit from the Division is prohibited. Nuisance situations should be reported to the wildlife control office by calling 908-735-8793. All bobcat releases must be coordinated with the Division of Fish and Wildlife's Endangered and Nongame Species Program.

Rabies Vector Species

Nuisance bats are protected under the Endangered and Nongame Species Conservation Act and therefore may not be controlled by lethal means. Evictions and exclusions of bats should only be conducted prior to mid-May and after mid-September to prevent injury and death to young bats.

Raccoons, skunks, fox and woodchucks are currently classified as rabies vector species for the raccoon rabies strain currently endemic in New Jersey. Due to the rare occurrence of rabies in opossums, this species is no longer classified as a rabies vector species. As mentioned above, release locations for foxes must be approved by the Division. If release at the site of capture for the rehabilitated and nuisance raccoons, skunks and woodchucks is impossible the following restrictions apply.

Rehabilitated Juvenile Rabies Vector Species

All young of the year must be released within the county of origin in suitable habitat and with permission of the landowner. No releases are allowed on federal, state, county or municipal land. If no private land is available for release, the Division may approve a release on the closest state Wildlife Management Area on a case by case basis. Juveniles may not be translocated to a township that is currently involved in a rabies prevention program using the oral rabies vaccine.

Adult Rabies Vector Species

Releases of adult rabies vector species must take place within the township of origin in suitable habitat and with permission from the landowner. No releases within the township may be greater than a 10-mile distance from the capture site for raccoons and 5 miles for skunks and woodchucks. No releases are allowed on federal, state, county or municipal land. If no private

land is available for release, the Division may approve a release on the closest state Wildlife Management Area on a case by case basis. Persons wishing to release a nuisance or rehabilitated adult rabies vector species must first contact the Wildlife Permitting Unit at 609-292-2966.

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NOTE: Control of nuisance wildlife revised by code in August 1996

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