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## **POLICY ON THE RELOCATION OF WILDLIFE**

As the administering agency for the wildlife resource in New Jersey, the Division of Fish and Wildlife (NJDFW) 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 original translocation policy, which stressed rabies vector species and was necessary to prevent an unnatural spread of the disease across New Jersey. Various changes to the Relocation Policy have been made over the years. 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. In the event of a known endemic disease or emerging wildlife disease of concern, additional restrictions may be imposed by NJDFW depending on the nature of the disease and the species involved.

Under normal circumstances, releasing animals close to the capture site will improve survival of individuals by minimizing competition for food, den/nest sites and mates, and preserve the genetics of a particular population; and for adult animals, allow a return to an already established territory.

## **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, and performing normal seasonal movement and dispersals. Wildlife being considered for release must also exhibit normal socialization with con-specifics, be free of visibly obvious disease and parasites, be suitably waterproof for that species, be in good body condition, be fully recovered from the presenting injuries, and be free of exposure to exotic diseases/parasites. The appropriate season and/or current weather conditions must 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, 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 may exacerbate 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. In most cases, nuisance wildlife need not be brought to wildlife rehabilitators. Whenever possible, habitat alteration (e.g., 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 (e.g., 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 newborns 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, coyote, fox and woodchuck (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, such as those relating to the discharge of firearms apply. Most other common wildlife species are controlled through hunting and trapping seasons, established by state and/or federal regulations.

### **Releasable Wildlife**

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. Young-of-the-year wildlife may be released at any appropriate habitat within the county of origin. Frequently, young

birds and mammals may be healthy enough to be returned to their own nest/den (if location is known) or placed into a suitable nest/den/family of adults other than their parents (“fostering”). Young mammals may be fostered into appropriate families within their county of origin; due to their larger natural dispersal area, young birds may be fostered into suitable nests and/or families within the state. In instances where placement of young birds will occur more than 50 miles from site of origin, such placement should be done only in consultation with NJDFW. Most adults (one year or older) already have established home ranges and would benefit greatly by release into familiar territory.

When release at the site of initial capture is not possible for adult mammals, euthanasia or permanent placement should be considered. Studies have shown that chances for survival are minimal for adults relocated outside of original home range and habitat preference (i.e., urban to rural).

### **Non-Releasable Wildlife**

Animals that are unlikely to survive because of physical or behavioral problems should not be considered for release. Non-releasable wildlife that are suitable for use in educational programs, foster parenting, research projects, or other permitted activities may be placed by NJDFW staff with persons permitted or otherwise authorized to possess such wildlife. Use of physically deformed animals for educational purposes is discouraged. Animals that cannot be released by the rehabilitator or placed by NJDFW are to be euthanized.

## **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. Disease spread 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. Aquatic turtles should be returned to the watershed from which they were taken; other turtles should be returned to within 200 meters of the site of capture.

For additional assistance with relocation of turtles or salamanders throughout the state, contact the Endangered and Non-Game Species Program (ENSP) office in Clinton at (908) 638-4127.

### **Birds**

Current rehabilitation practice usually involves releasing hatching-year passerines at the rehabilitation center where supplemental feeding is available while birds gain flight experience. Adult birds are often released off site in suitable habitat and at the appropriate time of year (e.g., returned to point of capture during breeding/nesting season, and released at an appropriate point in

their migration corridor during migration season). Since migratory bird species are widely dispersed, there is no need to return them to point of capture during migration season. Adult birds found during the nesting season may be territorial to an area and should be released close (within one mile) to the location of their initial discovery, unless doing so would risk additional injury or put them in otherwise unsuitable habitat (e.g., birds were captured during an oil spill and that area is still contaminated).

## **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 could lead to a decrease in survival and possible spread of disease. This policy encourages all releases to be conducted within two miles of the initial capture. However, if potential human conflicts prevent return to the area of capture, release distances specified in this policy will be allowed. See **General Guidelines** and **Releasable Wildlife** on page 2.

## **Deer**

Release of rehabilitated deer at the initial site of capture is usually impractical due to the difficulties of transporting deer. Rehabilitators licensed for deer should have facilities that allow orphans to be raised with as little human contact as possible. Fawns may be released on site gradually to allow for assimilation into the local population. It is rare that adult injured deer can be rehabilitated, but release at the facility is generally the least traumatic for the animal. Transportation of deer to a distant release site is discouraged because of possible further stress and injury to the animal.

## **Bears and Bobcats**

Handling and rehabilitation of these animals is limited to a few licensed rehabilitators and is conducted in close consultation with NJDFW. All bobcat and black bear releases must be coordinated with NJDFW.

## **Fox, Coyote, Beaver and Otter**

Handling and rehabilitation of these animals is limited to a few licensed rehabilitators and is conducted in close consultation with NJDFW.

## **Rabies Vector Species**

Handling and rehabilitation of bats is limited to a few licensed rehabilitators and is conducted in close consultation with NJDFW. 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 not be conducted between May 1 and July 30 (unless there is an imminent public health threat determined by the Dept. of Health) 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. If release at site of capture for raccoons, skunks, foxes 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.

### ***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 foxes, and 5 miles for skunks and woodchucks.

### **Landowner Permission**

No release of animals is permitted on federal, state, county or municipal land without prior permission. Release of animals is not allowed on private properties without the permission of the landowner. If no private land is available for release or release according to this policy is not possible, NJDFW may approve a release on the closest or most appropriate state Wildlife Management Area on a case by case basis.