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Snakes in the garden: an analysis of reptiles â€œrescuedâ€ by community-based wildlife carers

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Abstract

Stimulated by animal-welfare concerns, community programs to â€œrescueâ€ urban wildlife generate many interactions between humans and wildlife. Such rescue activities (1) may have direct ecological effects (by modifying mortality patterns of wildlife, or geographic distributions at the local level), and (2) may provide valuable information on local abundance and distribution of taxa, the nature of threats to urban wildlife, and biological attributes of poorly-known species. We examine these issues for reptiles rescued by community-based animal-welfare groups in south-eastern Australia. Records gathered by the Wildlife Information and Rescue Service over a 10-year period (1989â€“1998) in New South Wales quantify rates, determinants and outcomes of reptile rescues. Despite their scarcity in urban habitats, snakes (11,067 records) were represented almost as often as lizards (11,108). Typically, rescued lizards were large in size or snake-like in appearance. Most reptiles (especially snakes) were rescued not

because of injury, but because the local residents wanted them removed. Thus, very large numbers of these animals were translocated to release sites. Of the injured animals, small-bodied reptile species (and juveniles of larger species) were frequent victims of attacks by domestic cats and dogs. Larger reptiles were more often injured by motor vehicles. Capture rates for all species were highest in warmer months, and especially on days with dry, warm weather. These temporal patterns seem to be due to reptile biology not human behaviour. The rapid increase in animal-rescue activities indicates that potential ecological effects (especially, arising from translocation of â€œproblemâ€ wildlife) deserve further study. At the same time, such community groups can provide valuable information for ecologists.

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Keywords

Lizard; Mortality; New South Wales; Relocation; Snake; Sydney

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