Fish used in beauty treatments

The last 12 months has seen a dramatic increase in the number of establishments offering skin treatments, such as pedicures, using "Dr Fish". During 2011 the Health Protection Agency (HPA) investigated human health risks posed by this practice, finding a minimal but existing risk of infection transmission between clients. 

The problem was not whether anyone could be humanely dispatched but that it should have the most humane tools available to them to do the job. The RSPCA was successful in arguing its case and in April 2011 the RSPCA obtained a licence from the Home Office for its inspectors to carry and use PBS for wildlife casualties only.

Working for wildlife casualties

RSPCA inspectors are often the first party of the process of wildlife rehabilitation. They are called out to attend injured wild animals and make the initial decisions regarding their treatment. During 2011, our inspectors collected approximately 60,000 wild animals, while our four wildlife centres admitted nearly 16,700 sick or injured wild animals. Others were taken to independent wildlife rehabilitators.

Unfortunately, many more of the wildlife casualties found by our inspectors have to be put to sleep to prevent further suffering. This is normally done by using pentobarbitone sodium (PBS), but in September 2010, the RSPCA had to withdraw this drug from use by inspectors due to changes in the legislation regarding how the drug is stored and prescribed.

This created a major welfare problem for the inspectors, who now had to take many wildlife casualties to vets to be humanely dispatched. The RSPCA therefore applied for a group authority for its inspectors to use the PBS, arguing that all pieces of legislation relating to the protection or management of wildlife include defences that allow anyone to humanely dispatch a protected wild animal to prevent further suffering. Therefore the problem was not whether...

Wildlife

Despite growing public concern, the appreciation of the welfare needs of wild animals is often inadequate. The RSPCA wildlife department seeks to improve welfare provisions for captive and free-living wild animals. This is achieved through research, promoting an awareness of the requirements of animals, and an emphasis on a precautionary and humane approach to human interactions with wild animals.

The international trade in wild animals

Every year millions of wild animals are taken from the wild or bred in captivity for the pet, skin and meat trade. The welfare of the animals involved is rarely, if ever, taken into consideration and many animals suffer as a result. The RSPCA is opposed to the trade in wild-caught animals as well as to the trade in captive-bred wild animals if any animal suffers at any stage of the process.

Some species are afforded a level of protection by the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES) to which over 170 countries are signatories. CITES allows trade in listed species under certain circumstances. The RSPCA wildlife department engages with CITES in a number of ways, nationally and internationally. At the national level we work closely with other animal welfare and conservation non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to engage with the UK’s CITES authorities to advocate for a higher level of protection for CITES listed species.

At the international level, we are active members of Species Survival Network (SSN), a coalition of over eighty NGOs committed to the promotion, enhancement, and strict enforcement of CITES. Through scientific and legal research, education and advocacy, SSN is working to prevent over-exploitation of animals due to international trade which is worth billions of pounds each year.

Through attendance at CITES meetings (Animals Committee, Standing Committee and Conference of the Parties), we are attempting to ensure that listed species are not over exploited and that the core issues related to animal welfare within CITES are adhered to by member states and enforced by the CITES authorities.

Footnotes and references

1 A spring 2011 survey amongst environmental health practitioners identified 279 ‘fish spas’ in a third of the UK’s local authorities and at least 15 new companies established to import and supply fish spa equipment and materials. Public Health Issues on the Management of the Public Health Risks of Fish Pedicures | HPA (link below).


3 Guidance on the Management of the Public Health Risks of Fish Pedicures | HPA (link below).

4 Concerns have also been raised by the fish-keeping community (eg. www.practicalfishkeeping.co.uk) and the Ornamental Aquatic Trade Association (OATA) has stated that it will not accept beauty parlours as members despite being approached (pers. comm. August 2010).


6 Science group review of 2011

Public Health Risks of Fish Pedicures}

The RSPCA has received enquiries from members of the public, entrepreneurs and local authorities concerning the welfare of fish used in this way, and RSPCA inspectors have been called to visit and advise Dr. Fish establishments. We have initial concerns – including water quality and temperature, effect of cosmetic products on fish, housing conditions, handling, disposal, feeding regimes and training of staff – but at present there is no scientific evidence on which to base an RSPCA (or indeed any other) policy on the practice. Throughout 2011, the RSPCA wildlife department has been working to learn more about the practice and set-ups involved, gather expert opinion on the practice, and commission scientific welfare assessment of fish used in this way. This research is vital in order for the RSPCA to develop a science-based policy on the practice. We also responded to the Fish Spa working group’s consultation on draft ‘Guidance on the Management of the Public Health Risks of Fish Pedicures’ and produced, on request, a briefing for local authorities outlining our current knowledge on the practice, welfare concerns and advice.

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Mole damage and control

With an estimated population of about 31 million, moles are one of the commonest terrestrials in Britain yet their underground lifestyle means that they are seldom seen. The only visible signs of their presence in an area may be the mole hills they create with soil excavated from their system of tunnels. It is the tunnelling and mole hills that can be the cause of conflict and the perceived need for control in a range of situations.

The cruel poison strychnine was one of the main methods used to kill moles until it was withdrawn in 2006. The RSPCA therefore decided that this was an opportune time to commission research to establish the need for mole control and to determine the efficacy and welfare implications of the remaining mole control methods. This work was undertaken by the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit at Oxford University and consisted of a large-scale national questionnaire covering farmers, amenity managers and gardeners; visiting a sample of respondents to ground-truth replies and to conduct high resolution mapping of mole activity; and an examination of control methods.

The study included post-mortem examination of a large sample of moles killed by traps. Subsequently it was agreed to extend the work to include measurement of the impact and clamp forces exerted by different mole traps. The research has now been completed and reports submitted to the RSPCA. The researchers are preparing papers for scientific journals and some aspects of the work will be presented at the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) conference in June 2012 on advances in animal welfare science.

RSPCA wildlife centres review

The wildlife centres continue to strive for a better understanding of the casualties in their care. Numerous research projects are undertaken to investigate post-release survival in rehabilitated species. Techniques such as radio tracking are used, as well as simpler methods such as marking, e.g. ringing birds and relying on re-sightings for information on how long these animals survive and how far they have travelled.

Some of this work is carried out in conjunction with the wildlife department and has been promoted widely at various conferences and symposia. In addition, the wildlife department and centres continue to develop species rehabilitation protocols, based on best practice and sound science.

RSPCA EAST WINCH WILDLIFE CENTRE

Post-release dive activity in rehabilitated harbour (common) seals (Phoca vitulina)

The rehabilitated seals were tracked for a mean of 123 days (shortest: 100; longest: 175). There was no significant difference between rehabilitated and wild seals in this regard, suggesting that the rehabilitated group survived as well as the wild group. Dive duration varied between individuals, but there were significant differences between individuals. There were no significant differences between the wild and rehabilitated seals. These results indicate that our rehabilitation of harbour seals is successful; this work has now been published.

RSPCA MALLYDAMS WOOD WILDLIFE CENTRE

Winter retention of rehabilitated hedgehogs (Erinaceus europaeus)

The hedgehog Erinaceus europaeus is the casualty most frequently brought into UK wildlife centres, most commonly when too small to hibernate (TSIH), with insufficient resources to survive hibernation. Traditional rehabilitation methods suggest retaining hedgehogs for four to five months in suitable indoor enclosures, while feeding daily to maintain weight in preparation for release in April/May. By mid-December/January the increasing number of animals retained creates the issue of providing adequate space for housing.

Observations at RSPCA Mallydams Wood Wildlife Centre concluded that keeping more than one hedgehog in a pen caused unrelated individuals to fight or dominate food and it was not possible to increase the number of pens. In 2006 the centre altered their protocol to encourage hedgehogs to hibernate in care. The animals were individually housed with decreasing ambient temperature, then placed in an unheated building in individual pens and provided with materials to encourage nesting behaviour.

Although successful, there still limited numbers on the number of animals that could be comfortably held for several months, prompting the next phase – to release hedgehogs once they had entered hibernation. Hibernating animals were selected by torpidity and stable weight (above 550g – see Table 1) and taken to release sites during mild weather between December and March 2006-2011. The question remained whether the individuals would sustain hibernation or stay active during periods of depleted food sources and subsequently perish?

In 2010 Mallydams approached the University of Reading to engage in a joint project for three consecutive years, radio-tracking hedgehogs released during the winter months. The results will be used to further develop the RSPCA’s hedgehog rehabilitation protocol.

RSPCA WEST HATCH WILDLIFE CENTRE

Tetrameres species parasites in tawny owls (Strix aluco)

Tawny owls have a very varied diet, which includes small mammals, birds, amphibians, earthworms and beetles. They are at risk of consuming the intermediate hosts for Tetrameres species.

Adult female Tetrameres worms are deep red in colour and are typically found embedded in the gastric glands. The central part of the body is globular, having a diameter of approximately 5mm. The parasites can be seen on the ventral (outer) surface of the proventriculus, appearing like tiny grapes (as shown).

The parasite generally appears to be present in low numbers in tawny owls. One individual examined at post-mortem had a high burden, and was emaciated. However, this owl also had an extensive necrotic lesion of the oral cavity. and so it is not possible to comment on the significance of a heavy infection.

**FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES**


**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Average monthly hedgehog release weights: 2006-2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>Jul</td>
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<td>Aug</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Average monthly hedgehog releases: 2006-2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of hedgehogs released</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
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<td>May</td>
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<td>Jun</td>
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<td>Oct</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ultimate aim of our wildlife centres is to release casualties into the wild in a fit and competitive state and to avoid unnecessary holding of animals at the hospital if their chances of survival are minimal. Currently, based on existing scientific knowledge, the RSPCA’s bat rehabilitation protocol recommends that bats with complete wing tears be euthanized. The ‘heal to fly’ project is looking at whether an alternative method of care could result in some of these bats being successfully rehabilitated and released.

200 bats were admitted in 2011 to RSPCA Stapleypool Grange Wildlife Centre, including 144 pipistrellus; of these, nine were admitted with severe wing membrane injuries, largely thought to be caused by cats. The usual veterinary technique of stitching or gluing has been problematic with bats removing stitches or glue when grooming. Stapley has looked to simplify the process by keeping bats in a warm and confined box, providing antibiotics and supplementing feeds with vitamins and minerals. This method has restricted their flight, giving them time to rest and heal. Out of the nine bats that were admitted and eligible for this project over the past 15 months, five were returned to the wild, two were put to sleep and one died from other injuries not associated with wing tears. The remaining individual is being over-wintered in care. On average it has taken 49 days to reach an outcome.

Before being released, the bats were all flight tested extensively in both indoor and outdoor flight aviaries at Stapleypool, a practice that has been proven to be important for their post-release survival.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bat name</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Length of rehabilitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</td>
<td>10/09/11</td>
<td>Juvenile</td>
<td>Amputation of left wing</td>
<td>Released</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</td>
<td>13/06/11</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Catted, extensive left arm/ wing tear</td>
<td>Released</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</td>
<td>29/07/11</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Catted, large left arm/wing tear and missing 1/2 fifth finger bone</td>
<td>Euthanized</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</td>
<td>22/10/11</td>
<td>Juvenile</td>
<td>Catted, large right arm/wing tear</td>
<td>Released</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For a full list of papers produced by or in conjunction with the RSPCA wildlife centres, please go to: www.rspca.org.uk/sciencegroup/wildlife/currentresearch

Meetings and events

- Meeting at New Forest otter and owl park to discuss protocol for otter rehabilitation with the Environment Agency and wildlife trusts.
- Dormouse conference, University of Greenwich. Presentation on the dormouse monitoring programme at RSPCA Malmyd Wood Wildlife Centre.
- Whaling welfare and ethics workshop: meeting of welfare experts to discuss welfare in terms of whaling and the International Whaling Convention (IWC).
- Mammal Society conference: presentation on post-release survival of rehabilitated badger cubs and juvenile pipistrelle bats.
- Invasive species meeting, Defra: to discuss development of the EU strategy and the work being undertaken in three working groups set up by the Commission.
- Deer Initiative partnership meeting and field visit to examine deer-related issues in East Anglia.
- British Veterinary Association (BVA) Animal Welfare Discussion Forum: presentation and panel discussion on the trade and welfare implications of keeping reptiles as pets.
- Meetings with experts to arrange regular health checks of Anne the elephant in order to monitor her progress in her new home at Longleat.
- BVA/RSPCA meeting to discuss Memorandum of Understanding and issues related to wildlife rehabilitation.
- Meeting with Marine Mammal Society (MMS) UK, Born Free Foundation (BFF) and Care for the Wild (CWW) on the issue of wild animals in circuses in England.
- Bat isyntus meeting, Defra: an update on Defra’s work on this topic.
- Irish wildlife rehabilitation conference. Presentation by head of department on the importance of post-release studies for determining success in wildlife rehabilitation.
- International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (IWRC) training at RSPCA Malmyd Wood Wildlife Centre. President of IWRC presented Basic Skills class to an invited group from the BSAVA, and IWRC. This course is used to demonstrate ability when applying for a permit to rehabilitate wildlife in the US.
- BPSG meeting on oiled wildlife response to discuss co-operative working in the event of a major incident.
- First national bat carers’ workshop. Presentation on the ethics of rehabilitating bats.
- American Bats Network meeting for Wales. Discussion about finalising report on animal welfare establishments (sanctuaries) for presentation to the Welsh Government.
- SSN Board meeting, Washington DC.
- IWRC symposium 2011. Presentation on the RSPCA’s work on rehabilitating oiled guillemots.
- 50th anniversary conference of the British Veterinary Zoological Society (BVZS).
- Attended Monchey, Dover: an exercise simulating a collision between a tanker and ferry in the English Channel, which included an RSPCA representation to describe response for oiled wildlife.
- Meeting with Defra, Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), HSE UK and FWAW to discuss animal welfare provisions under CITES.

External funding

- Research into the effect of tags on rehabilitated and released seabirds, Swansea University. Jointly funded by the RSPCA and Oiled Wildlife Care Network. Ongoing from 2010.
- Research into the survival of hedgehogs during hibernation, Reading University. The RSPCA has contributed radio transmitters for this project for tracking the hedgehogs. Ongoing from 2010.
- Review of the humaneness of rat, mouse and mole traps, Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (WILCRAU), University of Oxford. Reports being written up in 2011.
- Research into welfare and ethical aspects of wildlife reintroductions as a method of wildlife conservation, WildCRU.
- Research into rehabilitated badgers. Through Knowledge, Ecology Skills Scholarship (KESS) with Swansea University.
- Research into the welfare implications for Gara raia fish of being used to provide beauty treatments such as pedicures.
- Enabled representative from Burhina Faso to attend the 6th Standing Committee of CITES in Geneva, Switzerland.
- Practical workshop, organised by the Deer Initiative with the Police and East Sussex County Council, on dealing with deer vehicle collisions for volunteer deer warden in East Sussex.

Scientific publications