

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

Recruitment and use of volunteers in an urban wildlife response

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Introduction

In June 2008 several thousand gallons of non-PCB dielectric oil was released into the Muddy River in Brookline, MA. The waterfowl contaminated by the product were highly visible to citizens frequenting the parks on the river. The wildlife response to this incident involved cooperation between the qualified wildlife responder, the responsible party and local citizens. Volunteers were recruited from local animal care organizations and were already aware of the hazards involved in handling distressed animals. Selective recruitment allowed volunteer training to focus on safety issues specific to this response. This paper will discuss the recruitment, training and management of volunteers that created a safe and positive working environment for volunteers and staff.

Spill Scenario

The non-PCB dielectric oil had been used as a coolant for electrical lines within a pipe beneath Boston and its surrounding suburbs. The oil escaped from the pipe and was discovered only after it arrived via storm drains to the Muddy River. Although the cause of the release was unclear at the time, a responsible party did step forward to manage and fund the response.

The Muddy River winds through suburban Boston, flanked by multi-use paths and surrounded by residential areas. Since the oil spill occurred at the height of summer, a large number of people frequented the area each day. The high visibility of the spill site made capturing and rehabilitating the impacted animals a priority for the responsible party, which contracted Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research, Inc. (Tri-State) to manage the

wildlife portion of the response. Under Tri-State's guidance the responsible party opened an empty warehouse that it owned for use as a temporary oiled wildlife rehabilitation facility and began to establish infrastructure such as caging and hot water. The facility was located about 7 miles from the spill site.

During the course of the wildlife response about 50 oiled Canada geese and mallard ducks were captured and admitted for treatment. Each bird required medical examination and stabilization, care while oiled, cleaning and care during reconditioning. Medical care involved a complete physical examination, including weight, blood values and a thorough accounting of the extent of oiling. Following examination medical teams stabilized each bird with oral and intravenous fluids. Each medical team consisted of three people, and during the initial days of the spill two teams operated concurrently. Oiled birds in care were tube-fed three times a day, which required additional people to handle the animals, prepare the diet and wash the feeding tubes. Each medically stable bird was cleaned by a team of four people and rinsed by two people. Care of the washed birds required cleaning pens and pools, preparing animal food and washing dishes, among other tasks. (Frink and Miller, 1995) The responsible party and Tri-State agreed that volunteers could assist with the work within the oiled wildlife facility.

The use of volunteers benefits a wildlife response in many ways. The individuals who come forward to volunteer for a wildlife response bring with them energy for hard work, interest in doing that work well and compassion for the impacted animals. Volunteers' intense desire to help the animals drives them to donate hundreds of hours to even a small wildlife response. In addition, citizens who may have harbored negative feelings about the oil spill often appreciate the opportunity to help save wildlife,

generating positive community relations for the responsible party. When media coverage of the oil spill has provoked local citizens to seek out clean-up opportunities, a volunteer program within the wildlife facility can provide a safe outlet for community members to help.

RECRUITMENT: Types of volunteers

Historically, three types of volunteers have been utilized for oiled wildlife response: pre-trained volunteers, convergent volunteers and selectively recruited volunteers. Pre-trained volunteers have completed a practical oiled wildlife training presented by a qualified wildlife responder at some time prior to the current incident. Convergent volunteers are members of the general public who have responded to media publicity of the oil spill and seek volunteering opportunities at the time of the incident. Selectively recruited volunteers are individuals recruited specifically for their skill sets by the qualified responder at the time of the incident. Each type has benefits and drawbacks, and the use of one type or another may depend strongly on the spill situation. For example, heightened media attention of the incident may generate interest by convergent volunteers.

Tri-State's requirements are consistent for all types of volunteers. Each volunteer who wishes to work around the animals must be over the age of 18, be neither immunocompromised nor pregnant, have his or her own health insurance, have a current tetanus shot and sign a release of claims. During the Muddy River response the responsible party required volunteers to sign an additional release of claims. For spills of hazardous products Tri-State also mandates that all volunteers complete a four-hour hazardous communications training.

Pre-training volunteers has allowed Tri-State to develop a database of interested individuals who may be called in the event of an incident. Pre-trained volunteers have the necessary instruction to safely volunteer within an oiled wildlife facility under the management of a qualified wildlife responder. Tri-State has presented oiled wildlife rehabilitation training seminars to prospective volunteers across North America, including in the Boston area. At the Muddy River spill Tri-State communicated with a number of local, pre-trained volunteers immediately; several were able to assist during the first two days of the response, as a volunteer program was being established for this incident.

Relying solely on pre-trained volunteers may prove difficult during any moderate to large oiled wildlife response. A training seminar may be offered many years before an oil spill occurs in any particular region, and pre-trained volunteers may be unavailable, have moved or have lost interest. The wildlife response to the Muddy River oil spill required more volunteer labor than local pre-trained volunteers could provide. However, the size of the caseload did not justify a general call for volunteer help, and the relatively small amount of media attention had not generated significant public interest in volunteering. For these reasons Tri-State relied heavily on selectively recruited volunteers.

Selective recruitment from local animal care organizations (e.g. zoos, veterinary clinics) can provide the wildlife effort with volunteers experienced in working with domestic or wild animals. Zookeepers, veterinary technicians and other animal care professionals have developed skills that transfer directly to many aspects of oiled wildlife rehabilitation. They often instinctively understand the importance of seemingly

insignificant tasks to the success of the larger project. In general, these volunteers also understand the safety issues surrounding distressed or injured animals. They can be quickly trained to safely handle the animals impacted by the oil spill, even if they have not previously worked with those species. Selectively recruited volunteers do require safety training for the spilled product and other hazards within the facility.

TRAINING: Volunteer Safety

Although the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) does not regulate work conditions for uncompensated volunteers, Tri-State requires that volunteers be aware of all safety concerns within their work environment. All volunteers need a complete safety briefing prior to each shift. When the spilled product is considered hazardous, Tri-State requires all volunteers to complete additional hazardous communications training. (Welte et al. 1991) Because the non-PCB dielectric oil released to the Muddy River was determined to be the equivalent of mineral oil, a detailed safety briefing before each shift sufficed for all volunteers. Safety issues in the wildlife facility also included animal handling, slip and trip hazards and personal care.

The minimal health risks posed by the spilled product were addressed by providing volunteers with level D personal protective equipment. The responsible party furnished Tyvek suits and nitrile gloves for all personnel working with contaminated animals or supplies. Tri-State supervisors taught all volunteers how to properly don and doff the suits and gloves. Volunteers assisting with wash were additionally required to wear plastic aprons, gauntlet gloves and safety glasses in order to increase splash protection from the oily, soapy water.

Distressed animals can be aggressive, injuring the handler or themselves in their efforts to attack or get free. Volunteers recruited for animal handling experience could be easily trained to safely handle waterfowl. Zoonotic diseases can also be a concern. These bacterial, fungal or viral agents can be transmitted from animals to humans when proper precautions are not taken. (Daszak et al. 2001) Volunteers were required to wash their hands after working with the birds and before eating, drinking or smoking. Gloves and hand sanitizer were available for extra protection. A volunteer break area for eating and drinking was clearly delineated from the animal areas, where human eating or drinking was not allowed; staff strictly enforced food and drink policies.

The wildlife facility for any response is an active environment, and despite best efforts trip hazards are often present. Hoses must run from a water source to a pool or rinse station; tools may lie on the ground in active work areas. Soapy, oily water may make the wash area wet; and husbandry areas could be slippery with bird feces. As in all temporary wildlife facilities, running was prohibited, and supervisors advised volunteers to walk carefully in all areas.

The Muddy River response drew volunteers who worked hard and cared deeply about the condition of the animals. Most had never volunteered during an emergency and were energized by the pace and nature of the work. Supervisors reminded volunteers to care for themselves by taking breaks to rest, eat and drink. Even though a volunteer shift only lasted several hours, breaks were factored into each shift. Staff encouraged all volunteers to ask for a break if needed, and volunteers were free to decline work with which they were not comfortable (e.g. heavy lifting, emotional stress).

At the Muddy River oil spill Tri-State did not use volunteers in the field due to increased safety concerns. Field personnel needed to take care around slippery rocks and bodies of water with unknown depth and current. The Muddy River spill, like many other inland spills, occurred in an urban setting where additional hazards included unknown people and hazardous trash (e.g. needles, broken glass). (Evans and Akers, 2006) For efficient survey and capture efforts, small teams were spread out in the field, which would have made effective supervision of volunteers' safety difficult.

MANAGEMENT

Coordinating Volunteers

A strong volunteer effort starts with capable coordination. For this incident the responsible party provided one staff person to work as a volunteer coordinator. Since the needs of an oiled wildlife rehabilitation effort develop and change constantly, the volunteer coordinator worked closely with the facility manager to understand and meet those needs. She took charge of recruiting and scheduling such that an appropriate number of volunteers arrived at the beginning of each shift. Tri-State also coached the volunteer coordinator to help new volunteers understand the types of tasks they might be asked to do. Clear communication beforehand about all work involved in the wildlife response can set up volunteers for a positive experience.

The coordinator ensured that volunteers had access to parking and a restroom; and she provided snacks, drinks and meals for volunteers on behalf of the responsible party. Having a representative of the responsible party fill the volunteer coordinator position was an unusual, but positive situation. It granted an opportunity for the responsible party

to better understand and be more involved in the wildlife response. It also provided an opportunity for direct, positive community outreach.

If the responsible party chooses not to designate a volunteer coordinator, the qualified wildlife responder may appoint a staff member to the role. Alternatively, the wildlife responder may build a relationship with a local non-governmental organization (NGO) willing to take on the job. NGOs often have the resources and the experience to do this work well with some coaching on specific needs of an oiled wildlife response. Recruiting an NGO to coordinate volunteers offers an additional sense of ownership and pride in the response for an organization whose members may also be volunteering in the wildlife facility.

Supervision of Volunteers

Supervision of volunteers begins with a shift meeting. At the Muddy River response, as at all wildlife responses, Tri-State strongly encouraged volunteers to arrive a few minutes early so that shift meetings could start on time and did not need to be repeated for latecomers. The facility manager led the shift meetings, which included a safety briefing, an update of the spill situation and assignments for the shift. Tri-State tracks volunteer hours for each incident, so volunteers were asked to sign in at this time and sign out when they finished working.

Volunteers were assigned to all functional areas of the oiled wildlife facility. Functional areas included medical, husbandry, wash and facilities, which operated concurrently as long as the function remained necessary for the response. Each area was managed by a Tri-State staff member who communicated her needs for volunteer support to the facility manager prior to each shift.

Supervisors might ask volunteers to build pens, hold an animal for a medical procedure, or prepare animal food, among other tasks. Volunteers returning for a second shift were often given the opportunity to work in a different area. All volunteers required detailed instruction and supervision, especially when introduced to a new task. Each volunteer might only work one or two shifts through the course of the spill, so supervisors continued to coach volunteers on all important information throughout the response.

Volunteer needs

Tri-State worked with the responsible party to establish the logistical elements needed to provide a positive experience for volunteers participating in the wildlife response. The volunteer coordinator was prepared to give good directions to the oiled wildlife facility. Each volunteer knew the phone number of the volunteer coordinator in case s/he would be late or absent for a shift, and the coordinator was available to take these calls and relay the up-to-date information to the wildlife facility manager. The volunteer coordinator organized access to adequate, legal parking, which can be difficult in an urban area. Oiled wildlife work can be strenuous, so the responsible party provided volunteers with drinking water, snacks and a break area.

Finally, volunteers needed appreciation for their hard work! Supervisors helped volunteers understand that every task, no matter how small or how dirty, is important to the overall response. When volunteers are offered a positive experience, and when they know their help is needed and appreciated, most volunteers are enthusiastic about returning for another shift. At the Muddy River oil spill Tri-State and the responsible party also mailed thank-you letters to each volunteer after the response concluded.

Conclusion

Selective recruitment of volunteers for animal care experience contributed greatly to the Muddy River oiled wildlife response. Effective coordination, training and supervision of volunteers reinforced the volunteer program and strengthened the wildlife response as a whole. The energy and compassion of volunteers added to the quality of their work, benefiting the animals in care.

References

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