



Rebecca Vassarotti MLA

Minister for the Environment, Parks and Land Management

Minister for Heritage

Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services

Minister for Sustainable Building and Construction

Member for Kurrajong

Our ref: 24/358

Mr Tom Duncan

Clerk

ACT Legislative Assembly

Tom.Duncan@parliament.act.gov.au

Dear Mr Duncan

Thank you for your letter about of 19 March 2024 about e-petition E-PET 005-24 that was lodged by Dr Marisa Paterson MLA with the Assembly on 19 March 2024. Pursuant to Standing Order No. 100 of the ACT Legislative Assembly.

I am pleased to provide you with this reply to address the subject of the petition.

In the ACT we have chosen to safeguard the ACT's unique biodiversity, protect public safety and adopt responsible practices that prioritise the wellbeing of both people and wildlife.

This includes supporting measures to conserve native venomous snakes in their natural environments, promoting public education about the importance of coexistence with wildlife, and implementing regulations to manage the keeping of native animals in captivity while minimising negative animal welfare impacts.

The ACT has some of the most progressive animal welfare legislation in Australia. For example, prohibiting greyhound racing, banning circuses that exhibit certain exotic animals and being the first to recognise sentience in animals. Codes of Practice under the Animal Welfare Act are endorsed by the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee, a statutory body under that Act. This committee includes

ACT Legislative Assembly London Circuit, GPO Box 1020, Canberra ACT 2601

+61 2 6207 8975

vassarotti@act.gov.au

[@RebeccaVassarot](https://twitter.com/RebeccaVassarot)

[RebeccaVassarottiACT](https://www.facebook.com/RebeccaVassarottiACT)

members independent of government who are involved in research and teaching in the field of animal sciences, part of a native wildlife organisation, and finally a veterinarian.

The ACT has several pieces of legislation that ensures the preservation of ACT's wildlife for future generations and aims to foster a sustainable and harmonious relationship with its native species, including snakes. This legislation includes the:

- a. *Nature Conservation Act 2014* (NC Act)
- b. *Animal Welfare Act 2005* (AW Act)
- c. Nature Conservation (Licensing of Non-Exempt Animals) Conservator Guidelines 2021
- d. Animal Welfare (Private Keeping of Native Reptiles) Mandatory Code of Practice 2023
- e. Animal Welfare (Welfare of Native Wildlife – Rescue, Rehabilitation and Release) Mandatory Code of Practice 2022.

The Nature Conservation Act is designed to protect and preserve the ACT's native wildlife and natural habitats. All native animals in the ACT are protected under this Act. Currently, it is an offence to kill, injure, endanger, or take from the wild, such animals without lawful approval. Non-exempt animals, including most native animals, must not be kept in captivity without lawful approval.

The policy that governs the keeping of snakes in the ACT is the *Nature Conservation (Licensing of Non-Exempt Animals) Conservator Guidelines 2021*. These guidelines provide information on keeping of native wildlife for the purposes of private keeping, rehabilitation, and public display. This document is a notifiable instrument under the *Nature Conservation Act 2014* and has been endorsed by an independent scientific committee. Any change to the licensing arrangements of snakes is a statutory matter for the Conservator under the Act.

The Conservator's guidelines stipulate that a licence must be obtained to keep non-exempt wildlife for public display, and such a licence will only be issued to an incorporated association which demonstrates they possess the appropriate facilities, skills, knowledge, and experience to provide care and safe handling of venomous snakes.

In addition, such an association is expected to monitor member compliance with standards, and the ongoing competency of their careers, thus helping to ensure high standards of animal welfare and best practice.

The government has engaged thoroughly with expert interest groups such as the ACT Herpetological Association, ACT Wildlife, RSPCA, Canberra Reptile Zoo, Canberra veterinary practices known to treat reptiles, the snake catcher/handler community and inter jurisdictional colleagues such as Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, Victorian Government and the Northern Territory Government.

The key outcomes of this engagement is:

- a) There is not a consensus view that snake catching/handling should be a government service and responses seem to indicate that it may not be an economical business model.
- b) There was strong support for licences to only be supplied (if at all) to competent and trained catchers/handlers, but also that no such accreditation system exists in the ACT of other jurisdictions.
- c) There was strong support for more education on learning to live with snakes.

The keeping of venomous snakes is currently prohibited in the ACT, except by zoos that hold existing licences. These establishments may be permitted to keep such snakes for the purposes of public display if they provide evidence that the snakes have been sourced from captive-bred populations and they have the appropriate facilities to store these animals humanely.

The Conservator is finalising amendments to the Licensing Guidelines which will allow the Conservator to consider agreeing on a case by case basis for snake catchers to provide care beyond the existing 48 hours provisions based on veterinarian advice, the snake catcher having safe and suitable enclosures to manage and house the injured snake for the prescribed time; and the snake being returned to the wild as soon as the care is completed.

The amendments to the Guidelines are also proposing to remove the current restriction on interstate licence holders being able to bring venomous snakes into the ACT for the purpose of training and educational displays.

The Conservator will also be considering the ongoing appropriateness of permitting licenced snake catchers to apply for a licence import venomous snakes for training purposes. There may be other more suitable and humane options available.

ACT Parks and Conservation Services used to remove snakes from public and private premises. This service was greatly reduced when several businesses obtained licences to take and release venomous snakes and indicated they wished to offer this service to the community (presumably as a fee for service option). The ACT Parks and Conservation Service still remove high risk native animals from public land if they demonstrate a risk to public safety. This service was undertaken by rangers who were performing other duties when not engaged in snake catching.

There are currently 5 licences issued to businesses to take and release venomous snakes under the *Nature Conservation Act 2014*, which cover 15 people. The intent of these licences is to allow the licensee to provide a service to people when there is a snake on private or public land that poses a risk to the occupants or public safety.

The licensees operate on a fee for service basis and set their own prices. This is not dissimilar to other instances where licences are also issued to businesses for the purpose of taking and releasing

possums, typically when they have entered the roof space of a premises and need to be removed for hygiene or personal amenity purposes. Similarly, those licensees operate on a fee for service basis, and set their own prices. These services are provided throughout the year.

The need for snake removal services is very seasonal in the ACT, and there is no evidence to support an increased demand for the service. There is no evidence of increased interactions between people and snakes, or that there have been occasions when a resident has been unable to obtain the service to remove a snake which was causing them concern.

The petition also cites the current Northern Territory (NT) arrangements of using a contractor or public servants to provide snake removals and public education in the Katherine, Tennant Creek and Darwin areas.

Consultation with the NT has revealed that their government previously used contractors in the Katherine area from 2005-2020, and in the Darwin area from 2015-2023. However, following a procurement process undertaken in Darwin in 2023, all offers were declined by the NT Government, as it was considered to not be cost effective.

In the ACT, records submitted by the current licenced snake catchers indicate the work is sporadic, with frequent troughs of many days with no callouts, or days where several callouts may be received.

The combined total of callouts from all snake catchers is typically less than 300 calls per year. To meet demand on the days when multiple calls are received, it may be necessary to have several contractors available, however this then increases the numbers of contractors who are not doing anything on the days when no calls are received.

With the seasonal work limitations associated with snake catching in the ACT, and the limited number of interactions between snakes and members of the public, there does not appear to be a justified need for the government to resume a snake catching service in anything other than emergency situations.

However, the Conservator is open to extending opportunities to other parties who are offering similar services, such as possum trapping, to undertake snake handling work should they decide to seek an extension to their licencing arrangements.

The government is cognisant of the need to work with community and industry representatives to build community literacy on matters such as the very important role that snakes play in the environment, their habitats and the way that they move through the landscape.

The ACT Government will continue to proactively promote snake awareness to our broader community, particularly those who visit our parks and reserves or who live close to green space in our urban areas where snakes may co-exist. The ACT Government already have a program of signage to alert people in our urban areas that snakes routinely use.

The ACT Government is also pleased to support education programs about snakes in the ACT. In addition to information made available on the environment.act.gov.au website, the government has provided a \$35,000 grant through the ACT Environmental Grants Program to facilitate research and develop “living with snakes” information products to help Canberrans become familiar with snakes, and to normalise the presence of snakes in the urban environment.

Whilst the Conservator and the government does not see a need for changes to current licence conditions of current snake handlers, or the need for the government to resume snake handling work, there does appear to be consensus on the need for nuanced education programs.

In this respect I have requested the Conservator and officials to further explore with relevant stakeholders, opportunities for more targeted education programs about how to live with snakes. This is a more effective and harmonious solution than removing snakes from the natural environment.

Yours sincerely



Rebecca Vassarotti MLA

18/6/2024