

BETRAYING TRUST WITH OUR WILDLIFE

DOW sending rescued, rehabilitated deer fawns into the maw of chronic wasting research labs

By Sharon Greenleaf LaPierre

The public needs to be aware that it is being misled regarding deer fawn rehabilitation practices implemented by the Colorado Division of Wildlife.

The DOW issued a directive to its licensed rehabilitators (volunteer animal caregivers) that fawns must be rehabilitated in the same "game unit" where they are found, then released into that same unit. However, the records show that last year a licensed rehabilitator from Fort Collins accepted fawns for rehabilitation from Boulder. In direct conflict with the DOW directive, Boulder wildlife officers are transporting fawns to this rehabilitator with the permission of the DOW because Boulder no longer has a fully-licensed rehabilitator. Seventeen of the animals in the care of the Fort Collins facility were turned over to the Foothills Research Laboratory associated with Colorado State University to be used in chronic wasting disease research by DOW veterinarians and university researchers.

One rescued fawn from Boulder was given to the Fort Collins rehabilitator and after it was weaned (but not old enough to be returned to the wild), was transported to the Foothills Research lab in October 2002. This animal was even named "Boulder" after a citizen who lovingly tried to rescue it.

It is deceptive to the public who call the DOW for help with orphaned or injured fawns when the DOW knowingly uses rehabilitators to supply research subjects. At a time when these animals are most defenseless, human intervention to ensure their survival and healthy return to the wild is the only ethical thing to do.

There is another rehabilitator on the Western Slope who raised six fawns last year, and they were transported to the University of Wyoming research labs for CWD projects, having been moved across state lines. It is debatable if this is even legal. Asking rehabilitators to do this is a direct conflict of interest for those dedicated to the humane welfare of

an animal in their care and certainly dishonest to the citizens who expect wildlife to be released back into native habitat. Many rehabilitators have refused to send animals in their care to the DOW research labs, but others are afraid of losing their licenses if they do not cooperate. Why can fawns be moved for research purposes, but not for rescue or rehabilitation?

Before fawns can live on their own, they are transferred to the research labs and the public is told that "releasable" animals are not used for research. Fawns can be released as early as 14-16 weeks if they have learned to recognize their natural food source and are not encouraged to be handled by humans. If fawns are imprinted or turned over before they are capable of being released, they are indeed not "releasable."

In a letter I received from a former Boulder County rehabilitator, she indicated that DOW veterinarians asked her to imprint fawns in her care (making them easier to handle in captivity), then send them to a research program which she was told would allow them to live their lives out without any harm. She sent approximately 12 animals over the years, believing she was doing the right thing. To her dismay, all were euthanized at the research facility and used for CWD research.

Colorado is divided into various game units. Most of the city of Boulder is in Game Unit #29, and north of Colo. 52 in Niwot and Longmont is Game Unit #20. Each area within the state has its own rehabilitators and sanctuaries that are licensed by the DOW, but not all are licensed for "big game," a designation that includes fawns. There are no fully licensed deer rehabilitators in Game Units #29 and #20. Many other game units within Colorado also do not have licensed rehabilitators. If there is no licensed fawn rehabilitator in a particular unit, then abandoned or injured fawns must be euthanized or taken to Fort Collins under the direction of the DOW to be raised for the research pens and the chronic wasting disease project.

Fawns are prized for research be-

cause they do not have CWD at birth and can be imprinted. DOW veterinarian Dr. Mike Miller and Dr. Elizabeth Williams (University of Wyoming) recently promoted a published paper which confirmed that "maternal transmission made little, if any, contribution to the occurrence of CWD." (Nature, Sept. 4, 2003.) Also, there is no evidence that when a particular fawn grows up it will get CWD, and a human cannot get CWD from just touching an animal. It is assumed that the disease "might be" transferred by bodily fluids, but at this time and after much research no evidence can be cited as to how CWD infects healthy animals. Several British researchers dispute the findings and assumptions of the DOW in regard to how this disease is spread.

The DOW claims the main reason for stopping transport of fawns is the fear of "spreading" CWD from one area to another. According to Marcia Barber, CWD Working Group chair, the latest statistics obtained from a Boulder County official indicate that an adult deer radio collared on Heil Ranch open space recently was found in Grand County, many miles away in another game unit. Wildlife is on the move naturally for many reasons (stress of culling, drought, need for food, fires), and not allowing fawns to be rehabilitated or moved from one game unit to another is inconsequential to the spread of the disease because of its minimal impact.

People should be outraged at this practice of using fawns for undefined research. Where is the accountability for this process of taking wildlife from the wild? Any research finding in a contrived, artificial setting cannot be generalized to a wild environment.

To protest using innocent fawns for research rather than rehabilitating them, contact Russell George, DOW executive director, by calling (303) 297-1192 and/or Gov. Bill Owens at (303) 866-2003 (governor-owens@state.co.us) to make your opposition known.

Sharon Greenleaf LaPierre is the founding chair of the Wildlife Legacy Trust. She lives in Niwot.