

GUIDELINES FOR FIELD RESEARCH: WHAT DO WE HAVE AND WHAT IS MISSING?

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Wild animal use in field research has its own specific ethical and welfare issues, besides those usually associated with animal research and testing. For example, wild animals are generally not habituated to handling by humans, less may be known about behaviours that indicate pain or distress, and capturing wild animals can have adverse effects on the remaining population as well as the removed individuals. Practical constraints may make it difficult to monitor animals following release and to intervene if there are veterinary or welfare problems.

It is essential that field researchers can work to guidelines that address issues such as these, thereby facilitating studies that are humane, scientifically valid and respectful of public concerns about wild animals and their welfare. “Ideal” guidelines would help to minimise harms to wild animals throughout their experience of research, from capture through to final release and beyond, or to euthanasia. They would also minimise the direct and indirect impact on conspecifics, other species and the environment, and ensure that all of these potential harms are effectively identified and included in ethical reviews of proposals for field projects.

There are many different sources of guidance on the conduct of field research, including brief paragraphs in national legislation, broader guidance from learned societies and species-group-specific guidelines, e.g. on wild birds or mammals. These vary in their approaches, levels of detail and prescriptiveness. The presentation will include an overview of the currently available guidelines, with reference to the “ideal” outlined above, and provide examples of good practice.