

The Challenges Of Responsible Animal Rescue

Provided by [The Open Sanctuary Project](#)



For compassionate, open-hearted individuals and organizations, intervening to help and rescue animals might seem like a relatively straightforward act. When one or more animals are able to be removed from an exploitative or dangerous situation, very typically there may be an attitude of “save first, ask questions later” among the humans involved.

After animals are removed from concerning situations, a rescuing individual or organization might be asking themselves, “Now what?” If an animal is rescued **prior** to establishing a solid plan for their lifelong compassionate care, significant unexpected challenges can arise!

This resource is not intended to dissuade anyone from helping animals in need. Rather, we hope that individuals and organizations engaged in rescue work have a full picture of what responsible rescue entails so appropriate plans can be made if animals can be assisted.

The Challenges Of Rescuing Outside Of A Sanctuary Framework

For individuals or organizations involved in the rescue of animals who do not have an ongoing relationship with existing [animal sanctuaries](#) specialized in those species’ care, it is critical that they establish a dialogue with sanctuaries prior to participating in rescues. There have been numerous occasions worldwide where an unspoken assumption was made that a sanctuary would definitely take in animals without prior communication, or even that sanctuaries had a regulatory requirement to accept animals without question. These occasions have often resulted in negative outcomes

for all involved when the sanctuaries were then pressured into accepting residents they were unprepared or unable to take in.

Without a plan or a place to go, rescued animals can be stuck in an uncomfortable and unsafe limbo, lacking access to the resources and experience required for critical healthcare or an [appropriate environment](#) for their safety, with no clear path forward for a suitable lifelong home.

Establishing A Dialogue Between Rescuers And Animal Sanctuaries

For the reasons above, we strongly recommend that individuals and organizations interested in rescue establish friendly communications with the sanctuaries in their region, long before any rescue activities are considered. With open channels of dialogue, both rescuers and sanctuaries can be empowered to talk through the issues and [values](#) that are important to them and get a more concrete idea of the resources and abilities available to help animals in their region. This proactive spirit of collaboration has also resulted in sanctuaries reaching out to qualified rescuers in order to be a part of the sanctuary's "rescue team" in situations they've been contacted about.

For rescuers who would like to foster a strong relationship with the sanctuaries in their region, we suggest that they get involved with regular volunteering at sanctuaries (if the opportunity is presented), attending events, and offering assistance where welcomed. Learning about the daily operation of a sanctuary as well as the daily care given to residents can help rescuers become more knowledgeable of what a sanctuary is committing to the day after they accept a rescued resident, and every day following. These daily care skills can also be highly valuable when trying to help an animal in need!

The Challenges And Considerations Of Rescuing For Animal Sanctuaries

Even for organizations who are already engaged in sanctuary activities, and who may already have the apparent infrastructure and resources necessary, rescue is not a simple proposition by any means!

Sanctuaries must carefully think about [what rescue means](#) to them, and have a realistic idea of the impacts a rescue would have upon their existing capacity and resources. One helpful way to facilitate this kind of dialogue is through a team review of The Open Sanctuary Project's [25 Questions To Help Guide Responsible Intake Decisions](#). This list covers many of the concerns that a sanctuary might need to think about prior to coming to a final decision.

Capacity

Questions of capacity are typically a chief consideration when it comes to whether it's viable for a sanctuary to participate in a rescue activity or take in rescued individuals. The following are some of the many capacity considerations a sanctuary faces. To read much more on the subject, [check out the full resource here](#).

Zoning Laws & Regulations

Each region of the world (sometimes as localized as to be vastly different between two adjacent towns) typically has their own [zoning laws](#), which frequently govern the legality of certain species, breeds, and even sexes of animals living on a property. Some areas restrict animal populations by quantity of individuals; others restrict animal populations by their combined weight! If a sanctuary is trying to decide whether they can participate in a rescue, it's highly important that this rescue not come into conflict with zoning regulations. The consequences of being caught breaking zoning restrictions, depending on the governing body, can be quite dire, and could put the status of the organization and the safety of all of a sanctuary's residents at risk. In addition to zoning, a sanctuary's [insurance](#) policy may prohibit certain residents from being able to live on the property, either by species or number of individuals. Losing access to an insurance policy can be a significant concern for an organization, especially one tasked with providing responsible care for many individuals.

Quarantine Capability

When considering whether a rescue is viable, it's important for a sanctuary to have a realistic view of whether they can safely quarantine all incoming residents until they're deemed safe enough to join the rest of the sanctuary's population. This means having separate space, separate care, and often separate tools, for at least 30 days, or sometimes longer if certain conditions don't improve. Rescued populations often come with more substantial health concerns that must be addressed (even if they appear to be relatively healthy at first glance), and the consequences of forgoing responsible quarantine can mean spreading serious illnesses throughout a sanctuary's population (as well as the [biosecurity](#) risk of an animal with unknown illnesses spreading disease to humans, which could place an entire organization in jeopardy). Some sanctuaries simply lack the spatial or quarantine capacity to take on certain rescues in a responsible manner. [Read more about quarantine basics at animal sanctuaries here.](#)

Spatial Constraints

Even if a sanctuary can reliably provide quarantine for a rescue, do they have the [space](#) to house them in a way that honors the needs and comforts of existing residents while providing a comfortable life for the new intakes? Many sanctuaries may appear to have space, but could very well be dealing with complex social arrangements that would not be well-suited for an influx of newcomers at the present time.

Staff Ability And Bandwidth

Does the sanctuary have the trained personnel required to safely intake, evaluate, quarantine, treat, and separately care for newly rescued individuals [in addition to all the needs of existing residents](#) at the sanctuary? In many cases, organizations have had to ask for substantial volunteer assistance or hire additional caregivers to help manage

rescues and the necessary care through quarantine. Some treatments for rescued individuals can be significantly time consuming and stressful to caregivers, and could [lead to strains](#) in a staff's abilities and [morale](#).

On the other hand, some caregivers have expressed that rescue is an important aspect of their desire to continue working in a sanctuary environment, and that the reward of helping new residents is worth the challenges. For this reason, we recommend that a sanctuary's administration has [discussions with their caregiving team](#) about potential rescues and listen to their feedback before making firm decisions.

Budgetary Commitments

The rescue of an individual or a group of animals is often just the start of a lifelong commitment. A sanctuary weighing whether to participate in a rescue must carefully look at their finances and determine whether they can responsibly provide lifelong sanctuary, including a commitment to whatever veterinary care may be required (which, for animals coming from certain situations, may be substantial, complicated, and ongoing for an indefinite period of time)- for rescues consisting of many individuals who are all in distressed or dire states of well-being, this can quickly become an overwhelming source of stress for an organization, especially given the other financial requirements a sanctuary must meet for existing residents, food, water, utilities, sanctuary upkeep, insurance, and more. To help sanctuaries get a better idea of their costs for caring for their residents, we've developed a [tool for estimating lifetime care costs](#).

If a sanctuary does not currently have a budgetary surplus on hand, they must determine whether they have the support to [fundraise](#) to offset rescue costs. If an outside organization is conducting the rescue, they should strongly consider committing to help fundraise for the rescue, or provide some sort of financial contribution for a rescue's lifelong care.

Conducting Safe Transportation

The [transportation](#) of animals is a common challenge when conducting a rescue, especially when taking in larger animals or a high volume of animals. Failing to think through all questions of transportation needs can result in significant issues, ranging from logistical problems to legal concerns (especially if transporting animals between distinct regions, like interstate travel). And if planning to move animals who have significant health concerns or potential communicable diseases, the challenges of transportation only multiply. None of these issues can be waved away with the excuse of a lack of timing or resources, because the consequences remain just as significant regardless of how much an organization prepared for them.

Veterinary Access

For individuals of a species the sanctuary does not have experience with, or for those who have complicated medical issues, is the sanctuary confident that they can [find a suitable veterinarian or clinic](#) to evaluate and treat them? Finding veterinary care can be a significant challenge in some regions, so a sanctuary may not be well-suited to certain rescues if they cannot guarantee that a resident will receive adequate medical treatment. This is compounded by the extra health concerns a resident might be facing following a rescue, or in some cases, a high volume of unwell residents in need of treatment. Veterinary care is a minimum need for residents in sanctuary, and can very often be the deciding factor whether a sanctuary can help out in a rescue scenario.

Adoption Solutions

Sanctuaries who have been involved with the rescue of individuals who they cannot provide a lifelong home for have often found a solution by temporarily housing the individuals and [facilitating adoptions](#) to suitable individuals or organizations willing to provide a good forever home. Rescuing individuals or organizations can offer to help with the adoption process or transporting individuals to their new homes.

What Are The Potential Legal Consequences Of A Rescue?

Depending on the circumstances that have led to a question of whether to remove animals from their current living situation, there may be concerns as to the legality of such actions (especially if law enforcement or legal counsel is not consulted). There have been multiple instances of sanctuaries being threatened with legal action for taking in residents that the organization was unaware had been relocated without the express permission of their previous “owner” (for this reason, we highly recommend the use of [intake documentation](#) wherever possible). In some of these situations, the rescuers have been held legally liable, in others, the sanctuary was also implicated in legal trouble. And in some resolutions, courts have required that animals be returned to their previous living situation. Historically, some sanctuaries have also lost a number of their supporters, and even [access to certain veterinary providers](#), as a result of unwanted attention after such legal consequences. Regardless of one’s perspective of the ethics of individual rescue scenarios, a responsible rescue entails entering into situations with clear eyes and a full understanding of the legal risks involved with each event. To learn more about different laws as they apply to animals (at least in the United States), check out [Michigan State University’s Animal Law](#) resources.

When In Doubt, Ask A Legal Professional

If your organization is wondering how your region’s laws might affect the decision to get involved in a rescue, we highly recommend contacting a local attorney and asking. Each region of the world will have its own laws and regulations regarding this issue, and The Open Sanctuary Project does not provide legal counsel suitable for any specific scenarios. As always, please refer to our [disclaimer](#).

The Legalities Of Rescuing Or Rehabilitating A Non-Domestic Animal

For individuals interested in the rescue or rehabilitation of wild animals in need, it's important to know that, depending on your region of the world and the species in question, it may not be legal for individuals to conduct these operations without wildlife rehabilitation licensing and other legal permissions, including facilities requirements and restrictions on access from other humans. For individuals interested in this kind of work, we recommend doing thorough localized research to know what is legally required!

Be Empowered With Knowledge

Although there are many elements that go into whether a sanctuary can responsibly rescue in certain circumstances, there are also many solutions to these issues. With careful planning and discussion, sanctuaries around the world conduct responsible rescues every year. There are countless animals living comfortable lives in sanctuary to account for this. We hope that this introductory resource helps you have a fuller picture into what should be considered prior to rescue, and that if you are engaged in rescue outside of a sanctuary framework, you can be empowered to work collaboratively with sanctuaries towards a kinder future for animals!

About The Open Sanctuary Project

The Open Sanctuary Project is a freely accessible, always growing digital guide for any resources or information you need in order to responsibly create and successfully manage an animal sanctuary or to provide the best possible care to farmed animals in order to help them live long, healthy, happy lives free of exploitation.

All of our resources are researched and responsibly crafted with the intention of maximizing compassionate ongoing care for animals in need of help and sanctuary, without any promotion or advocacy for their use.

