

Wildlife Crashes – An Epidemic?

Eric Chalmers

Chair, ACT Chapter, Australasian College of Road Safety

Abstract

This paper summarizes a Workshop held by the ACT Chapter of the Australasian College of Road Safety in July 2019 on the rising level of injuries involving wildlife in the ACT and Region. The workshop brought together a wide range of stakeholders to better understand the growing risk from these crashes; to identify the likely interventions to best reduce the risks; and to connect the people involved so that future work will be better integrated. The workshop was an eye-opener for participants. The issue is growing in complexity and impact; effective interventions are not obvious or easy; and there are many stakeholders involved.

Background, Method, Results and Conclusions

The paper will share the outcomes of a Seminar conducted in Canberra by the ACT Region Chapter of the Australasian College of Road Safety on 24th July.

The issue has some hallmarks of an epidemic – rising injuries and deaths; growing scope of causes (more animals and more types of animals involved); greater exposure of humans, especially vulnerable road users (growing numbers of cyclists and motor bike riders on country roads); reduced awareness (greater distraction for drivers); disjointed research and activity; and limited proven interventions.

The issue was originally raised with the College by the Canberra Hospital Trauma unit who have been observing an increasing number of very serious injuries that are the direct result of animal crashes (almost doubling in 2018). These include injuries from vehicle, motorcycle and cycling crashes in the ACT and nearby NSW region.

Crashes involve Kangaroos and Wombats, but also increasingly Deer and Brumbies, as well as many smaller animals.

The region around the ACT is particularly prone to the danger, as the number of kangaroos in the region is growing quickly, the impact of drought continues; and feral Deer, Brumbies and pigs are an emerging risk. Canberra itself has over 40 nature reserves within the city and a kangaroo population now believed to be greater than the human population.

The issue is complex and dissipated.

- It affects all road users, from drivers, riders to pedestrians, with the more vulnerable users most at risk of serious injury;
- Under-reporting is significant, but its extent is uncertain;
- There are many perspectives and sources of data, from police, to parks and wildlife, RMS, riders, animal rights supporters, and of course the health system;
- Reporting is variable and we do not know the extent to which other crashes might have involved wildlife as an unreported cause (e.g. by a driver or rider swerving). This also applies to animals already dead on the side of the road as a risk to cyclists and motor bike riders.

The potential solutions are also complex and include treating the cause at source (the animals); changing infrastructure; and affecting driver / rider behaviour. The Seminar concluded with an effective summary of ideas and suggested actions discussed by the participants.

The aim of the Seminar and this presentation is to start the dialogue and to encourage us all to work together. We need to improve data coordination dramatically; talk through the issues, causes and potential interventions; and plan long-term interventions. This in turn will allow Governments and providers to invest in changes that will reduce the risks and mounting injury toll.

The issue also illustrates the importance of looking at road safety as a Systems issue. In this case it is a road issue and driver issue, as well as Health, Environment, animal safety, wellbeing, Police, Emergency Services, etc.