

HEDGEHOGS AT SHOWS AND TALKS

A CODE OF CONDUCT FOR EVENT MANAGERS & WILDLIFE REHABILITATORS



**British Hedgehog
Preservation Society**

www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk

Charity number 1164542



The British Veterinary Zoological Society

www.bvzs.co.uk

Charity number 1000452



www.bwrc.org.uk

Charity number 1157841

people's
trust for
endangered
species

www.ptes.org

Charity number: 274206



www.rspca.org.uk

Charity number 219099



**Secret World
Wildlife Rescue**

www.secretworld.org

Charity number 1097119



www.swccharity.org

Charity number 1145477



www.valewildlife.org.uk

Charity number 702888

Introduction

European hedgehogs are our nation's favourite wild animal. Understandably people want to learn more about them and on the surface of it, the draw of actually seeing one at an event or talk is very attractive.

The request for speakers to bring hedgehogs along to shows, talks and school visits often leads to disappointment when organisers discover that the British Hedgehog Preservation

Society (BHPS) and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) advise that hedgehogs are not taken to such events. This is not just the policy of the BHPS & RSPCA, but of responsible wildlife rehabilitation organisations across the country.

This Code of Conduct seeks to explain the reasons why the use of hedgehogs at events and shows raises serious welfare concerns.

We hope that this will benefit both event organisers and wildlife rehabilitators to ensure the full impact of taking part has been considered. Nobody wants to cause hedgehogs unnecessary stress and suffering. Hedgehogs are the UK's only spiny mammal, and thanks to this protective coat, have lost their 'fight or flight' reaction to threat. Most animals will either bite you or run away; the hedgehog will first 'frown' to protect its face/head and then roll up and wait for danger to pass. The significance of this behaviour is that it allows sick or injured hedgehogs to be captured with relative ease - and makes their care in captivity easier too. While we know that hedgehogs can be successfully rehabilitated into the wild, recent research from the University of Oxford's Dr Sophie Lund-Rasmussen has shown that when in care, they do suffer from elevated stress, as measured by changes in cortisol levels.

Keeping a hedgehog captive with the intention of using it for 'show' causes unjustifiable stress, stress which is 'invisible' due to the behaviour of the animal as described above. Permanent captives that are deemed un-releasable are often used for events and talks, but this relies on keeping permanently disabled wild animals captive, which is at odds with the whole rehabilitation process.

Hedgehogs are also nocturnal. This is important when it comes to putting them in the public eye. One of the key identifiers of a hedgehog in distress is seeing it out in daytime. Showing a hedgehog in daylight, without adequate explanation of why, (for example, it being shown/seen while in a rehabilitation centre), can lead members of the public to not recognise the potential problems. In addition, the unnatural surroundings will create extra stress for the animal. The hedgehog's welfare is the important thing here, not the popularity of a talk or stand at an event. A good speaker or stall can be entertaining without the need for causing hedgehogs distress.

The advice we give is to only handle hedgehogs as part of a recognised research programme or to provide essential care to sick, injured or orphaned hedgehogs, and then only with caution, always keeping handling to a minimum for the sake of the hedgehog and also to reduce chance of zoonotic infections. Seeing them handled unnecessarily at shows and talks risks encouraging the public to have a go at handling hedgehogs themselves - or to try and get one as a pet (there is already evidence we have gathered from various online sales pages of wild European hedgehogs being offered for sale to meet the demand for exotic pets created by the popularity of African pygmy hedgehogs).

A hedgehog expresses stress through stillness, so it may not be immediately apparent that the animal is suffering. Their distress is not as obvious as many other species, but equally as harmful.

Alternative options

There are approaches which can help create entertaining and informative events and talks without distressing hedgehogs!

Hedgehogs should be studied in their natural habitats in preference to the classroom. We encourage the setting-up of wildlife areas within secure school grounds for the benefit of animals and to enhance and encourage educational study while being careful to not disturb wild hedgehogs.

Role play and drama where the audience act curling up as a hedgehog, looking for food, etc can be a way of making a talk more interesting and engaging. The RSPCA also has resources for schools on their website.

The Hedgehog Street campaign (run by BHPS & People's Trust for Endangered Species) has an archive of interesting and entertaining video clips of hedgehogs behaving naturally in people's gardens. These are available for use on request. Most of these are taken remotely by 'trail cameras' that are triggered by the movement of the hedgehog and therefore do not cause the animal any disturbance and can easily be cut into talks or run on a screen at events. The Hedgehog Street campaign and the British Hedgehog Preservation Society also has numerous free resources including, leaflets, posters, games etc that can be used to engage with the public at shows and events.

Some speakers use props such as hedgehog glove puppets or a taxidermy hedgehog to engage the audience.

The organisations who have signed this Code request that event organisers and hedgehog rehabilitators recognise that hedgehogs are not suitable for taking to shows or talks, and that to do so causes unnecessary suffering.