
December 21, 2009



Where Aspen Valley Wildlife Sanctuary is headed A Good News Story

First and foremost, we must repeat what has been the mantra of this facility since its founding, and will continue to be the driving goal into the future – It's all about the animals.

We had a tumultuous year in 2009, and some of the drama played itself out in the media. While we saw reportage that was balanced and even-handed, there were also stories published that seemed as though they were written to be sensationalist. Those latter articles often told only parts of stories, which left the reader to reach unwarranted conclusions. In our view, this was not accidental.

The problems first arose in late 2008 when the General Manager (GM) of the facility requested permission from the Board of Directors to terminate a captive animal specialist. It was the GM's view that the specialist was not performing appropriately, and not providing good animal care. The Board denied the GM's request. Since he believed this to mean that he did not enjoy the confidence of the Board, the GM asked to be relieved of his own duties. This was accepted, although he subsequently took on a new and very valuable role with the Sanctuary. The specialist in question, along with two other employees, were designated as Managers of their own programs.

Around about the same time, the founder of the Sanctuary, Audrey Tournay, became alarmed by what she felt was a dysfunctional and ineffective Board and a number of employees with less than adequate competence. She sought legal advice and, on the basis of that advice, dismissed the entire Board of Directors in the spring. A new Board was quickly formed, which included Audrey and two other individuals.

Eventually, a new GM was located and hired, but was dismissed within a short period for not meeting the job expectations.

Several employees, specifically including the new Managers, raised concerns about wages and benefits. Rather than allow the Board an opportunity to address the concerns, the employees took their complaint to the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB). The Sanctuary agrees the OLRB is the proper venue for resolving such matters, but only if the Board had failed first to satisfy the employees' concerns. Then, rather than waiting for the OLRB to do its job, the employees tendered resignations. They all left prior to their notice periods, perhaps sensing their ability to remain at the Sanctuary was compromised as they had, by this time, already approached the media.

Several news articles have been critical of the Sanctuary without obtaining details beyond the complaints of the former employees. In one instance, an unsubstantiated personal attack on one of our employees raised a complaint about a particularly vile act. The authorities recognized the mendacious nature of the complaint and did not pursue it. These actions have not been fair to us and, frankly, have not been helpful for those former employees either. Most important, it made our job to care for wildlife more difficult than it needed to be.

So here is some food for thought.

When the employees suddenly abandoned us in September 2009, we quickly rallied our resources. As you would expect, our first goal was the protection of the animals.

As it turned out, some of the animals were not in good shape – and that is directly the result of substandard care provided by some of those departed employees. Their comments to the media highlighted that some animals were not in the best of shape, without acknowledging that it was they themselves who had been responsible for providing care.

In order to save one animal in particular, the new staff of the Sanctuary turned to the Ministry of Natural Resources for assistance. Although it is not the Ministry's mandate to handhold us through our own crises, they were very helpful in providing guidance and advice. On September 18, the Ministry conducted a complete and thorough inspection of Aspen Valley and provided recommendations. Since then, we have made huge improvements.

There is still work to be done before the Ministry is fully satisfied. But the Management and the Board of the Sanctuary intend to move forward with the direction and cooperation of the Ministry, and we are grateful for their assistance. Speaking to the Bracebridge Examiner/Gravenhurst Banner on September 30, 2009, the Minister of Natural Resources, Hon. Donna Cansfield, said, “We’re satisfied the animals are being cared for and that there are appropriate people in place.”

We have been approached recently by a reporter who seeks to do a follow-up story about Aspen. Unfortunately, it is evident from the questions being posed that an attempt to sabotage the Sanctuary further is underway. We aren’t sure how this reporter knows to ask some of the questions posed, but it is clear that information which should be between Aspen Valley and the Ministry of Natural Resources is getting out.

All issues surrounding any inadequate care of animals that were under the auspices of our former employees have been addressed. A significant mess that they left behind has been removed, repairs that they didn’t perform have been undertaken, records that disappeared at the same time as the employees have been reconstructed.

The OLRB matter is, as of this writing, not resolved. We continue to believe that Aspen is blameless in this regard.

A fresh wrinkle, however, was the Ministry of Natural Resources arriving at the facility December 7 to remove an “unauthorized” wolf from our care. One of our former employees had the responsibility to file logbooks with the Ministry every year, and the records we have indicate that he made a mistake in copying data from one year to the next. The Ministry has elected to charge us with unlawfully harbouring wildlife, and we are due to appear in court on January 21, 2010. This is a serious offense, but we believe it can be refuted successfully. We accept that the paperwork is wrong, but we believe the charge is fundamentally excessive in the circumstances.

Looking Forward

The three-person Board of Directors that was formed after the previous Board was dismissed has now been formally reconstituted. A complete set of bylaws has been created and approved, designed to drive the Sanctuary forward into

the future. Those bylaws also allow the public to have a say in the management of Aspen Valley.

Our Board is now constituted with six members, although one seat is currently vacant. A new General Manager is in place, along with a full compliment of capable staff.

Aspen Valley is currently in the planning stage for a huge specialized animal treatment facility, thanks to a very generous grant from a friend of wildlife. We are going to have to find a lot of funding on our own, but this is a very welcome challenge.

And we are grateful to another long time supporter of the Sanctuary and the work we do for making funds available to allow us to continue with a study of bear behaviour, from rescue to release and beyond.

Beautiful walking/ski trails have been installed that allow people to see much of this huge stretch of stunning landscape, beyond the area where the animals are housed.

A new schoolhouse has been erected and is already in use for the education of the public, young people in particular, about living with wildlife.

We know we have a lot of work ahead of us, including some work to win back trust from members of the public who might have been misled by press coverage. But we are confident this organization is already stronger than it has ever been, and has a very bright future.

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