

Training Volunteer Dog- Owner Teams to Detect Conservation Targets

Nick Rutter

PhD Candidate

Supervisors: Prof Pauleen Bennett

Dr. Tiffani Howell

A/Prof Arthur Stukas

Dr. Jack Pascoe

Why volunteers?

• Conservation Detection Dogs:

- Effective data collection
- Cost effective
- Save time

- “It is likely that the environmental movement would not exist if it were not for the hard work of thousands of dedicated volunteers (Ryan, Kaplan, & Grese, 2001).”

- But costs still prohibitive to small community groups (\$1,000s +).
- E.g. Turtles Australia protecting turtle nests from fox predation- Hard to find nests without dogs but difficult for groups like this to afford professionals and couldn't really care for their own dog.

• **SO:** Can we develop and formally evaluate a volunteer based conservation detection dog model?

- Ryan, R. L., Kaplan, R. & Grese, R. E. 2001. Predicting Volunteer Commitment in Environmental Stewardship Programmes. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 44, 629-648.



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Participants & Training



- Recruited 23 volunteers in under 2 weeks.
- 19 participants commenced a 12 week training program in our dog lab to detect a novel odour.
 - Dogs: Miniature Poodle, Labradors, Kelpies, Border Collies, Rough Collie, Ridgeback, Samoyed, Weimaraner. Age 1.5-8 years. Varied experience.
 - Handlers: M = 3, F = 16, Age 21-67. Varied experience. Very close relationship with their dog.
 - Teams trained by professional CDD trainers/handlers using professional training methods in a controlled environment.

Results



- All teams completed the Week 12 assessments with a minimum of 75% accuracy, yet some teams progressed through the training program faster than others.
- Retesting after 14 weeks of no training saw no significant differences between Week 12 search time, search accuracy or false alert rate.
- A volunteer based model may be an effective, economical and scalable way to train and deploy conservation detection dogs.

Overall implications



- This is the first step in developing a pool of fully trained volunteer dogs and handlers that have **passed relevant assessments** and are assessed as **safe** to work in an environment.
- Can train to criteria and **retain performance** after an extended break.
- Participate in local, grass roots conservation projects, e.g. Landcare, friends groups **with qualified handler supervision**.
- Some projects would be suitable for volunteers, some not.
- Low cost to small groups.
- Big impact to data collection and conservation efforts.
- Engages community in conservation efforts.

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