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# New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

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# PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN COYOTE MANAGEMENT DECISIONS

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In 1990, the Legislature passed a bill that would have allowed year-round hunting of coyotes (Cams latrans) in New York's Northern Zone, as opposed to the current system of open and closed hunting seasons established annually by Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) regulation. The bill generated such controversy that it was withdrawn pending a study by DEC. The objectives of the study were to: (1) assess the role of the coyote in northern New York in relation to people, wildlife, and livestock; (2) provide adequate opportunity for citizens to express their opinions concerning coyotes; and (3) prepare a status report with coyote information and management recommendations.

The study consisted of: (1) a review and analysis of available scientific literature; (2) consultations with leading coyote researchers and wildlife damage management specialists; (3) a survey of DEC field staff and Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) agents in northern New York; and (4) the active solicitation and analysis of both written and verbal public opinion.

The public participation process involved the issuance of a standard news release announcing the public meetings and inviting public comment, a survey of DEC field staff and CCE agents in northern New York, a direct mailing of 2,000 letters to individuals and organizations whose names and addresses were derived from the Wildlife Program Management System process, and 4 public meetings that were attended by at least 570 people.

The public meetings were the highlight of the entire effort. The format of all 4 meetings was similar. All meeting attendees were asked to register so that a summary of the public comments could be mailed to them at a later date. A coyote fact sheet was available at the registration table. CCE agents from Jefferson, Hamilton, Herkimer, and Saratoga counties acted as meeting facilitators. Following a brief introduction explaining the meeting's purpose and procedures, a 20-minute slide presentation that summarized the ecology and status of the coyote in northern New York was made by a DEC Senior Wildlife Biologist. DEC staff and coyote experts who sat in the audience, then answered questions from the audience for 30-45 minutes. Following the question and answer period, people were divided into working groups, and group facilitators (DEC and CCEstaff)recordedcomments. Everyone's comments and opinions carried equal weight. Snide remarks, value judgments, arguments, or debates among the participants, or between the facilitators and the participants, were not allowed. After receiving public input for 30-45 minutes, the small groups reassembled and group facilitators presented the highlights of their session to the entire audience. The summary session was followed by another short question and answer period. At the conclusion of each meeting, a debriefing was held with all staff to discuss recommendations for improvement. This review improved the quality of each subsequent meeting.

The public meetings provided something for everyone. The CCE agents provided a neutral medium that diffused hostilities toward DEC staff, which many people felt was, or should be, sponsoring the legislation. For those who attended simply because they were interested in learning more about coyotes and other wildlife (not because they had a particular position or philosophy), the slide presentation filled their needs. For those who had a particular opinion to express, the small working groups provided the vehicle to voice one's comments. For those who wanted to know what "the other side" was thinking, or had questions in general, the 2 open forums (after the slide presentation and again immediately following the small group sessions), provided the necessary outlet.

At the conclusion of the public participation process, CCE and DEC staff summarized public attitudes and perceptions about coyote management based on verbal and written comments obtained at the meetings, and comment forms or letters received at regional and central DEC offices. All comments were placed into 7 major issue categories so that related topics could be reviewed together.

Verbal input obtained at the 4 public meetings was listed, and the meeting location for specific comments were recorded. The percent of occurrence for each comment could not be calculated because a comment heard in a single small group discussion was recorded only once, even though more than 1 person might have agreed with that comment. However, a rank of high, medium, or low was given to each comment, depending on its relative frequency of occurrence among all the small group comments from all 4 meetings.

Written input (letters and comment forms), whetherreceived at the meetings or sent to a DEC office, was summarized using the same categories as the verbal input. Percent of occurrence values were calculated for the written comments based on the total number of letters or completed comment forms received. An overall summary of written input was completed by categorizing each letter and comment form as either for or against the bill. The position statements from organizations were summarized separately.

What began as a small group of loosely-knit DEC staff, soon evolved into a larger, cohesive team that included wildlife

biologists, communications specialists,coyoteresearchers,CCE agents, and support staff from the DEC, Cornell University, the College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Jefferson Community College, and 4 CCE offices. Everyone had a role, a purpose, and a function; and everyone contributed to make this a successful team effort. One person stated that the public meetings were the best in which he had ever attended and participated. Another wrote that "...the public meetings were executed superbly," and that "...DEC's handling of this matter (a potential problem) was so effective that your procedure might well serve as a model of how it should be done for similar cases in the future." Still another wrote "...the meetings ...have been run in an exemplary and professional manner. This reflects both excellent staff work in advance of the meetings and thoughtful strategies in dealing with public concerns at the meetings themselves. This kind of effective public involvement in DEC's decision-making is critical to our mission."

The final report, submitted to and accepted by the New York State Governor, recommended against a year-round coyote hunting season because a strong social demand or biological need could not be demonstrated. Public participation played a key role in that final decision. The success, or failure, of the report now rests with the New York State Legislature, and how they treat future bills that recommend year-round hunting seasons for coyotes.