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The Center for Human-Wildlife Conflict Resolution at Virginia Tech: A Model of Future Use

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Abstract: The Center for Human-Wildlife Conflict Resolution, located at Virginia Tech, was created in mid-2004 to bring together representatives of state and federal agencies, private sector practitioners, non-governmental organizations, researchers, educators, and other stakeholders common to most human-wildlife conflicts as a means to facilitate and expedite the process of attaining realistic and publicly acceptable solutions to human-wildlife conflicts. The Center has four critical missions: coordination, information transfer, research, and training. Participating partners (i.e., members) in the Center adopted upon an Advisory Board organizational model and operate under a “majority rule” protocol. Increased awareness and understanding of the missions, regulatory mandates, and responsibilities and limitations of each member organization were an immediate outcome of early coordination efforts; knowledge of the experiences and individual strengths of partners immediately helped to improve relations among participating members and strengthen both the services provided and competitiveness when seeking funding support. A reduction of duplication of effort among agencies and organizations, reduced costs, and development and delivery of a consistent, science-based message to clients are other benefits realized to date. A new educational web site was developed and immediately has become the “go to” resource for information on human-wildlife conflicts in the Commonwealth. Training and education programs for professionals have been designed and offered to improve the quality of service available to the public and to enhance the professional development of practitioners (i.e., attaining and/or maintaining professional certification). Although the circumstances that lead to the creation of this Center in Virginia may not be present or similar in all states, the approach of using an impartial, unbiased, third party entity to unify and coordinate the response taken to such conflicts may be of interest to other states.

Key Words: community involvement processes, conflict resolution, coordination, human-wildlife conflicts, wildlife damage

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Introduction

As Conover (2002), Sullivan and Messmer (2003), and Adams et al. (2006) recently reported, both the number and type of human-wildlife conflicts and the frequency with which these conflicts are occurring nationwide are rising. Estimates of damage inflicted by wildlife collectively now exceed \$3 billion annually (Conover et al. 1995). There also has been a concurrent, but unmistakable, evolution in these conflicts; these disputes are becoming much more complex and the probability of attaining satisfaction among all stakeholders is declining. It also is telling that we have not witnessed significant tangible progress in actually reducing or preventing many of these conflicts, despite the fact that 1) we significantly have increased our knowledge about the basic life history, habitat requirements, and behaviors of wildlife species commonly involved in conflicts, 2) we have greater understanding of the conditions that lead to or create opportunity for a conflict to arise, and 3) we have made substantial advances in the tools and techniques available to manage wildlife damage. Somehow, the transfer of this knowledge and experience is not reaching those affected by these conflicts. Homeowners and commodity producers confronted with wildlife damage situations frequently express dissatisfaction over their inability to efficiently locate or receive accurate and appropriate technical assistance in a timely fashion to resolve the conflicts they face. Others express exasperation and frustration even after they have reached the “experts” over what they describe as conflicted messages, in other words, being provided with recommendations or resolution strategies from several different agencies or response contacts that often directly contradict each other. In the face of such contradictions, they are left wondering what to do.

Clearly, the shortcomings identified above have not arisen due to a lack of available information. In fact, just the opposite may be the case. In today’s computer age, people have ready access to a myriad of suggestions, guidelines, and recommendations for resolving human-wildlife problems. The ultimate difficulty for affected individuals now lies in their ability to sort out from this mass of information the critical elements that are relevant, accurate, and suitable for use in their particular case. People seeking advice easily

can be overwhelmed with too much information from all over the globe and, lacking the capability to distinguish reliable from unreliable, legal from illegal, or effective from ineffective, they can be influenced by those that look the most professional or sound best. In other instances, and despite the fact that there may be overwhelming evidence to support use of a particular response action, affected individuals may continue to search until they find a “preferred solution” that matches a personal value or belief set rather than a biologically appropriate and scientifically desired outcome. It ultimately leads to the creation of deeper quandary: who’s right?

Even among those individuals and entities who have a defined role to play in helping to reduce and/or resolve human-wildlife conflicts, there is considerable misunderstanding or lack of knowledge about the roles each other plays, the legal authority and mandate such players hold, and, in some special cases, who has “primary” responsibility when more than one “authorized” entity responds to a situation. Another growing concern is occurring at the local governance level, where municipal animal control employees are being asked to perform tasks or provide services that lie outside their legal authority and/or their expertise (i.e., handle wildlife complaints when their mandate is restricted only to domestic animals); such demands can place these individuals in potentially compromising positions or serious personal or legal jeopardy (Kevin Kilgore, Virginia Animal Control Assoc., pers. comm.). In many conflict situations, there is little coordination among responding entities, which leads to a needless waste of time, money, and effort. In today’s real world, natural resource management agencies and non-government organizations (NGOs) have precious few resources (economic and personnel) to squander in wasteful and duplicative responses to human-wildlife conflicts when those resources could be directed more effectively to real needs.

Recognition of Need for Coordination

Having spent nearly 20 years working on human-wildlife issues in the Northeast and now in the mid-Atlantic region, I have witnessed a consistent and repeating pattern in how many of these conflicts have been dealt with. The suite of problems identified above is not unique to any one area or cadre of stakeholders – it is common everywhere. Whether within the walls of academia or in the bowels of a government agency, NGO, or private enterprise, we (i.e., all of the “experts”) often are so busy doing the day-to-day tasks (e.g., taking calls and e-mails and offering technical assistance, producing new literature and brochures, making site visits, conducting training, etc.) that we never have a chance to step back and truly see what has been transpiring on the ground. As individuals, we strive to make sure that we have done our part and fulfilled our responsibility, but rarely do we take the time to evaluate the impact of our actions in a comprehensive manner. Did the colleague in the state agency or USDA Wildlife Services get the same call? Did he or she dispense the same information and resource materials? Was the message consistent and scientifically sound? Was there any follow-up made to determine if the original complaint was rectified properly and effectively? In most cases, we never know or seek to find the answers to these questions.

Over the years, I repeatedly kept hearing comments from our local county extension agents that they did not know who in their area had primary responsibility or authority for responding to certain human-wildlife complaints. They did not understand the differences in mandates among the various state and federal agencies or whether a particular type of conflict should be referred to a local private service provider (if one existed) or the local municipal animal control unit (where one was present). While conducting discussions with personnel from within each of these various entities, it became clear that they too did not understand the roles and responsibilities of each other. Further, there was no evidence that the major players involved in providing assistance to the public attempted to coordinate their response. As a general rule, resources that were being developed (e.g., literature, brochures) were not shared, reviewed, or collaborated; they simply appeared and often were stumbled upon haphazardly by the other parties. Similar, but subtly different, messages or documents frequently were being disseminated, creating confusion and uncertainty among the public. Something clearly needed to change.

A New Model

In 2004, I met with the Director of the Conservation Management Institute (CMI), a semi-autonomous research center within the College of Natural Resources here at Virginia Tech, to discuss partnering to establish a new coordinating entity for human-wildlife conflicts across the state. Although affiliated directly with the university, CMI is not considered an academic unit nor are they encumbered by the “ivory tower” perceptions often associated with academic institutions in the eyes of the public. As a research center, there also are certain financial advantages to running an operation through CMI rather than through an academic program (e.g., more favorable indirect costs).

The focus of the partnership was to bring together for the first time key stakeholders statewide who have a legal mandate or responsibility relative to human-wildlife conflicts. A facilitated discussion meeting was convened later in 2004 to bring together representatives from state and federal agencies, local municipalities, private service providers, NGOs, and other important stakeholders (e.g., animal welfare, agricultural interests) to examine the current situation in the state and to discuss the concept of creating a new coordinating body. Participants at that first meeting included representatives from the following entities: Virginia Cooperative Extension, CMI, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (both the ecological and enforcement divisions), USDA APHIS Wildlife Services, Virginia Animal Control Association, Virginia Nuisance Wildlife Control Operators Association, The Wildlife Center of Virginia (a wildlife rehabilitation hospital/research facility), and the Virginia Federation of Humane Organizations. Participants introduced themselves and the organization they represented, and presented a summary of the specific mandates or legal authorizations within which they operated as related to human-wildlife conflicts. After looking around the table, participants identified suggested additions of players not present, but deemed necessary for future involvement.

Based on what participants described as a successful and informative learning session, they agreed to reconvene with the intent of examining further the feasibility of creating a new organizational structure to facilitate coordination among all parties working in this arena. After several additional meetings, the Center for Human-Wildlife Conflict Resolution was born.

Organizational Model

The Center for Human-Wildlife Conflict Resolution is organized to operate through an advisory board structure and a “majority rule” process. Members of the Advisory Board, in concert with the Center Director and staff at CMI, collectively identify, discuss, and then prioritize, using nominal group process, the conflict issues of importance to the state and those that the Center will focus immediate attention to. The Advisory Board typically meets face-to-face twice a year to review progress-to-date and to re-evaluate issues or priorities. A far greater amount of activity occurs via conference call and e-mail among Board members throughout the year.

One of the earliest tasks for the Advisory Board was to establish mission and vision statements for the Center (this guidance document or “White Paper” can be found on the Center’s web site at <http://www.humanwildlife.org>). From that process, 4 basic missions for the Center were established: 1) Coordination, 2) Information Transfer, 3) Research, and 4) Training. For each of these missions, a defined list of goals, objectives, and actions has been established and against which progress can be assessed. This list of desired outcomes is reviewed and modified each year by the Advisory Board to reflect successful completion of accomplishments and to account for new priorities.

Tasks under Coordination principally seek to define or frame a consistent purpose and establish a set of operating principles to which all partners will abide, reduce or avoid duplication of effort among partners, and seek ways to improve or advance the overall effectiveness of individual partners by taking advantage of the collective strengths of all participants. Another objective under coordination is to help each other stay informed of what each currently is working on or involved with in a timely manner, whether those activities are conflict response oriented, educational, or research based.

Objectives under Information Transfer, as the name implies, relate to the development and dissemination of accurate, timely, and science-based information that will help improve awareness of and understanding about human-wildlife conflicts, the methods and/or approaches available to resolve such conflicts, and descriptions and critical evaluations of public participatory conflict resolution processes that have been or could be used by communities. The primary intents under this task were three-fold: 1) to provide the most up-to-date information and resource materials to individuals and communities to enhance proactive response to potential conflict situations, 2) to reduce and hopefully eliminate the redundant duplication of effort and wasteful expense by agencies and other responders to the public's demand for information on how to cope with such problems, and 3) to establish a consistent, repeatable, and factual statement about cost-effective approaches, with realistic expectations attached to each, on means to respond to human-wildlife conflicts. Although "hard copy" and electronic publications still will be produced and delivered to clients by members on an "as needed" basis, the Advisory Board decided early on that there had to be a central, primary resource where clients could be directed for immediate assistance, regardless of which agency or member first was contacted. Given that, members agreed to establish and support a web site (<http://www.humanwildlife.org>), hosted by CMI, and that all participating members would recognize and support as the primary outlet for products of the Center.

The third mission area of the Center is Research, and one that should be self explanatory. All members recognized the continuing need to develop new, more cost-effective techniques and approaches to resolve human-wildlife conflicts and to enhance our understanding of the underlying causes of conflict. Therefore, members of the Advisory Board agreed to work together to identify priority research needs relevant to Virginia and to collectively work toward garnering the resources necessary to attack those problems. The very nature of this cooperative venture lends itself well to many requests for proposals where partnerships and collaborative practices have become common, if not required today. Having already come together and working as a defined, single entity has improved the collective competitiveness and ability of the Center to pursue certain types of funding opportunities that an individual member may not have been able to do. Further, by directing proposals through CMI, rather than through individual researchers, other financial advantages have been realized (e.g., more favorable overhead rates). Finally, by utilizing the collective strengths and experiences that each member brings to the Center, we have a deep and diverse pool of expertise that can be tapped and allows us to cover many different opportunities that any one individual normally would not be able to cover alone.

The last defined mission area of the Center is Training, and this may be the single most important contribution the Center can fulfill for its own members. Professional development opportunities are a critical concern among members who need to maintain certification as a part of their profession. Without readily available credit-bearing education and training programs that meet or exceed the standards of certification agencies, practicing professionals are forced to travel significant distances, and often at great personal expense, to secure the requisite credits needed to obtain or maintain professional certification. Additionally, as new or more effective conflict resolution techniques and approaches arise, there is a growing need to get this information into the hands of practitioners. Lastly, more and more municipal animal control agents have indicated that they are being asked to take on more responsibility and handle species for which they are ill prepared to handle (i.e., no prior training or experience with that animal or that type of equipment). Thus, there is a large professional development void that needs attention. So far, the Center already has designed and conducted a number of targeted workshops and hands-on training programs for the Virginia Animal Control Association. Plans currently are underway to implement a statewide education/training program for first responders (i.e., 911 and dispatch operators) on improving the directing of calls to the proper response entity and in the use of the new web site, where much of this information now resides.

Other On-Going Activities

A major focus for the Center Director and the staff of CMI has been to provide technical assistance to local community leaders in designing and implementing comprehensive public planning processes for

dealing with human-wildlife conflicts. The emphasis has been to move communities from a passive, reactive position to a more proactive, visionary state of preparedness where conflicts are anticipated and dealt with before they arise to crisis status. The Center currently is working with over 20 municipalities to design and implement response protocols that are cost-effective, objective driven, and publicly accepted. Many of these efforts initially arose in response to requests from communities trying to cope with an existing conflict with a single species (e.g., deer, Canada goose, beaver, vulture), but the effort has since transformed into a desire to develop a comprehensive wildlife response program, not merely a single-species protocol alone. It has become an effort to develop workable protocols for wildlife conflicts in general, irregardless of the species involved at the moment. An added advantage the Center brings is the ability to quickly bring relevant partners to the table and offer leaders input and feedback from entities that ultimately could be involved at some point in time; discrepancies or problems can be identified early in the process and corrected before formal requests for authorization or permits occurs.

In addition to this type of assistance, the Center is being asked to provide unbiased facilitation services to communities struggling to design and adopt a publicly acceptable response to wildlife conflicts. Community leaders realize the difficulties and inherent biases they face in having to design, but then approve and implement, the community's response conflicts that very often are emotion and value laden issues. The Center is seen and has been providing service as an impartial, outside, third-party to facilitate the process leading up to a community's adoption and implementation of a human-wildlife conflict resolution program. It is anticipated that such requests will grow significantly in the coming years as the number and complexity of human-wildlife conflicts increase.

Summary

The Center for Human-Wildlife Conflict Resolution has been in existence for only about 3.5 years, but already has much to report. Interaction and communication among agency personnel, NGOs, and other service providers has improved greatly as a direct result of the coordination efforts of the Center and its Advisory Board members. A new educational web site has been launched and increasingly is being adopted as the primary point of reference for questions about human-wildlife conflicts in Virginia. Critical conflict issues within the Commonwealth have been identified, examined, and ranked collectively by board members and a plan to address the highest rated issues has been formulated such that all members are working together to resolve these problems, and in ways that take advantage of the group's strengths and experience.

Clearly, these accomplishments did not happen overnight or without hard work. The objective in forming the Center never was to achieve unanimous consent and total agreement on all aspects of human-wildlife conflict; that probably is not possible. However, by bringing together the key parties to these conflicts and stimulating frank, open, and, at times, potentially heated discussion, we have been able to confront the problems in productive ways that utilize the individual talents, skills, and experiences of individual partners in constructive ways. The enhanced awareness and knowledge of the capabilities, legal mandates, and aspirations of the various partners has been eye-opening to most participants and has lead to new bonds. Clearly, differences in attitudes and beliefs still exist among members and among the various stakeholders in these issues; those differences always will exist. However, by recognizing that these differences exist, understanding why the differences arise, and, where necessary, agreeing to disagree and move on, overall productivity toward resolving important core issues can be maintained. It is not and never was the intent of the Center to force partners to change or modify their positions, per se; it was to properly identify and frame the issues, help identify areas of common ground among stakeholders, establish a "meeting of the minds" that will allow parties to move toward workable science-based solutions to problems that are acceptable to the majority of affected individuals. Although we have much work left to tackle here in Virginia before we can say that we have turned the corner on resolving human-wildlife conflicts, the early successes of and the approach implemented through the Center for Human-Wildlife Conflict Resolution here at Virginia Tech may serve as a potential model that other states currently wrestling with similar types of conflict might wish to examine and perhaps adopt.

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