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# TAPPING THE POTENTIAL OF THE WILDLIFE REHABILITATION COMMUNITY FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION ABOUT WILDLIFE DAMAGE MANAGEMENT

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# TAPPING THE POTENTIAL OF THE WILDLIFE REHABILITATION COMMUNITY FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION ABOUT WILDLIFE DAMAGE MANAGEMENT

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**Abstract:** Wildlife rehabilitators frequently interact with the public, but the extent and impact of their activities as public educators had never been well documented in New York State. In 1991 the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) sponsored a mail survey of all 430 rehabilitators in New York to address this information need. Rehabilitators showed high interest and involvement in public education, and they reached a large audience, suggesting that they may hold potential as contributors to public education concerning wildlife damage control. Realizing that potential offers an incentive for DEC to work more closely with rehabilitators to provide wildlife-related information. However, value orientations of rehabilitators and wildlife managers may differ fundamentally. The value differences implicated here must be further clarified and addressed if DEC is to realize a relationship with rehabilitators that enhances the state's ability to address public demands for damage control information.

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Addressing public demands for information and assistance with urban wildlife problems is an important consideration to wildlife managers, and one that consumes significant agency resources (Lorence 1991, McKegg 1984). In New York State, the DEC receives thousands of telephone information requests about wildlife nuisance and damage situations (Lorence 1991). Though nuisance control is not their primary interest, New York's licensed wildlife rehabilitators are also contacted by members of the public seeking damage control information and assistance with wildlife damage problems.

The impacts of wildlife rehabilitation on wildlife populations and wildlife damage control are debated by wildlife managers (Steinhart 1990). Most rehabilitation work is conducted with common species that have secure populations. Survival and subsequent breeding of released rehabilitated animals are not well documented. However, under some circumstances wildlife nuisance and damage problems have been created by release of rehabilitated animals (Steinhart 1990). Additional postrelease research is needed to clarify the impacts wildlife rehabilitators have on wildlife populations through their wildlife-care activities.

The interaction that occurs between wildlife rehabilitators and the public also concerns wildlife managers in New York State. Research on the topic is limited, but suggests that public contact with rehabilitators may be substantial (Marion 1989, Horton 1987). Surveys of rehabilitators who belong to the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association (NWRA) indicate that many rehabilitators have an educational program associ-

ated with their efforts (Marion 1989), and that collectively they receive hundreds of thousands of telephone information requests each year (Horton 1987).

Over the last decade, the number of active rehabilitators and rehabilitation facilities has increased both nationally (Marion 1989) and in New York State (C. VonSchilgen, D Environ. Conserv., pers. commun.). As participation in rehabilitation activity and public demand for information on wildlife and wildlife damage have increased, wildlife managers in New York State have become increasingly interested in exploring: (1) the degree to which rehabilitators address public information demands; and (2) the possibility of developing a relationship between wildlife managers and rehabilitators that enhances delivery of wildlife-related information. To address these and other questions, DEC sponsored a study of wildlife rehabilitators in New York State. This report summarizes findings from a survey that suggests wildlife rehabilitators may have the potential to play a larger role in meeting the public's demand for information about nonagricultural wildlife damage problems. We conclude with a discussion of the challenges wildlife managers in New York State must address in order to realize the potential the wildlife rehabilitation community may have as contributors to public education on wildlife and wildlife damage.

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#### PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

We collected information needed by DEC to develop and maintain effective communication with licensed wildlife rehabilitators. We planned to meet this overall goal through a 3-phase study involving surveys of wildlife rehabilitators, the publics they contacted, and DEC personnel. The objectives of the study phase reported herein were to: (1) characterize licensed wildlife rehabilitators (both their activities and their attitudes); (2) assess their perceptions about their interaction with DEC; and (3) identify the factors they perceived as impediments to their effectiveness as wildlife care and information providers.

#### METHODS

Mailing addresses were obtained from DEC for all 430 individuals licensed to rehabilitate wildlife in New York State during 1990. Each licensee was mailed a self-administered, mail-back questionnaire on 22 April 1991. Up to 3 mailings were made to nonrespondents at 7-10 day intervals. We received a 71% ( $n = 299$ ) response. Given this high response, we did not conduct follow-up interviews to assess possible nonrespondent bias.

The questionnaire sought information on each rehabilitator's facility (i.e., facility size, staffing, location, operating budget), background characteristics (i.e., age, sex, education, training, income), wildlife care and educational activities, attitudes toward wildlife and wildlife conservation, motivations for involvement in rehabilitation, and attitudes toward DEC regulations and interaction with rehabilitators. Items about impediments facing rehabilitators as wildlife care-givers and information-providers were developed from a nominal group meeting with NYSWRC members. The questionnaire was revised following peer review, and finalized with input from representatives of DEC, NYSWRC, and NWRA.

Completed questionnaires were coded by Human Dimensions Research Unit (HDRU) staff and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSSx) software (SPSS Inc. 1988). The educational activities reported herein represent the efforts of individual rehabilitators. Though some of these individuals operated in facilities such as nature centers, the broader educational efforts made by other staff in such facilities were excluded for purposes of this study.

#### RESULTS

##### Information-Education Activities

Two hundred fifty-one of the 299 respondents (84%) said they were interested in providing public education about wildlife, and more than 90% had answered telephone information

requests. Collectively, individual rehabilitators reported 16,600 telephone information requests. One hundred ninety-four individuals (65 %) responded to fewer than 50 telephone inquiries, but 57 (19%) answered over 100 information requests.

One-hundred-seventy (57%) of 299 rehabilitators had conducted additional wildlife-related education activities (Table 1). The most common activity was one-to-one communication with those who delivered animals to a rehabilitation facility. Nearly 13,000 animals were received by rehabilitators in 1990 (C. VonSchilgen, Dep. of Environ. Conserv., pers. common.), suggesting thousands of direct contacts between rehabilitators and members of the public. The majority of rehabilitators providing educational opportunities also gave formal presentations and distributed written information to the public. A substantial number of rehabilitators gave newspaper, television, or radio interviews.

Table 1. Modes of communication used by New York State wildlife rehabilitators to deliver information to the public in 1990.

| Communication Mode                                    | % Respondents ( $n = 170$ ) |
|---|-----------------------------|
| One-to-one dialogue with people who delivered animals | 92.4                        |
| Formal information presentations                      | 60.6                        |
| Distribution of written materials                     | 58.2                        |
| Exhibition of information displays                    | 44.7                        |
| Radio, television or newspaper interviews             | 34.1                        |
| News releases for radio, television, newspapers       | 25.3                        |
| Publication of wildlife-related manuscripts           | 5.6                         |

The extent to which New York's rehabilitators reached the public through educational presentations was of special interest to wildlife managers. About 1 of 4 rehabilitators gave such presentations in 1990. Rehabilitators commonly delivered presentations to elementary school groups (87%), other youth groups (73%), and general audiences (69%). Service groups and high school groups were contacted by fewer presenters (38% in both cases). Each respondent was asked to estimate (to the nearest 50) the total number of individuals reached through presentations. Individual rehabilitators reportedly contacted 59,000-60,000 people through educational presentations in 1990.

Rehabilitators who provided wildlife-related information were also asked to report the topic areas they addressed. In addition to topics directly related to care of individual animals, many rehabilitators also discussed topics such as nuisance and damage control, habitat conservation, natural history, and environmental conservation law (Table 2).

Table 2. Topics addressed by the majority of New York State wildlife rehabilitators who delivered information to the public in 1990.

| Education Topic Addressed                                   | % Respondents (n = 170) |
|---|-------------------------|
| How to tell if an animal needs help                         | 85.0                    |
| Laws against keeping wild animals as pets                   | 85.0                    |
| The importance of habitat conservation                      | 81.5                    |
| Human impacts on wildlife                                   | 80.9                    |
| Encouraging concern for individual animals                  | 70.5                    |
| Basic wildlife ecology and natural history                  | 68.8                    |
| Preventing wildlife casualties                              | 65.3                    |
| The importance of the natural systems that support wildlife | 64.2                    |
| Dealing with wildlife nuisance and damage                   | 53.7                    |

#### Constraints Facing Educators

NYSWRC Board members helped identify a range of factors that rehabilitators believed constrained their efforts as information providers. These fell into several categories which we labelled: (1) universal limitations (i.e., time and money); (2) educator training needs; and (3) opportunities to deliver educational presentations. We developed 7 items to assess the degree to which these were perceived constraints across the rehabilitation community. The most widespread educator constraints were limited time (66%), money (51%), and access to printed education materials (63%). Fewer educators cited constraints related to training needs (42%), lack of standards for wildlife educators (21%), or access to educational settings (10%).

#### Attitudes and Values

To understand more about the impacts of rehabilitators as public information providers, wildlife managers will have to gain a better understanding of rehabilitators' attitudes, values, and perceptions. Toward this end, we asked rehabilitators a variety of attitudinal questions. Our questions explored 3 areas critical to ongoing relations between rehabilitators and wildlife managers. These issues were wildlife management and use, animal welfare, and wildlife conservation. Though attitudes on these issues varied widely across this group, several general findings emerged.

*Wildlife Management and Use.*-Rehabilitators held a wide range of opinions on the management and use of wildlife. Overall, rehabilitators believed some use of wildlife was appropriate, but that some management techniques and activities were not. The majority said they were in favor of some human control or manipulation of wildlife, and many believed it was appropriate to use wildlife for food or educational display (Table 3). However, most rehabilitators were personally opposed to recreational hunting and trapping, and a substantial

number were personally opposed to population manipulation, or limiting wildlife populations to reduce human health and safety risks, crop damage, or nuisance problems (Table 3).

*Wildlife Conservation.*-Rehabilitators showed strong interest in wildlife conservation. Nearly 90% believed that New Yorkers were not doing enough to conserve the natural systems that support wildlife, and that limiting human behavior was appropriate to conserve wildlife and wildlife habitat (Table 4).

*Animal Welfare.*-Four items explored issues concerning animal welfare (minimizing animal pain and suffering). There was widespread agreement that wildlife management programs should consider animal pain and suffering, and that people who use animals should do so in a way that minimizes animal pain. However, the majority (82%) also seemed skeptical about whether animal pain was an important consideration in New York State's wildlife management programs (Table 4).

#### DISCUSSION Conclusions And Implications

Most wildlife rehabilitators are interested in providing wildlife-related information, not just about the care of individual wild animals, but about a wide range of issues important to wildlife managers. At least half of all rehabilitators are providing wildlife-related information and appear to be reaching a large and diverse audience. Through their wildlife care and educational activities, rehabilitators have regular opportunities to influence public understanding of natural history, ecology, and control of wildlife nuisance and damage problems. Moreover, they appear to be reaching people of all ages, including urban, nonhunting audiences that are difficult for wildlife managers to reach (Marion 1989).

The people of New York have expressed a substantial demand for damage control information and assistance. However, it would be prohibitively expensive for DEC to meet all of this demand through the traditional state wildlife program. The potential to meet some public demand for wildlife-related information through the private sector offers a powerful incentive for DEC to explore a closer working relationship with wildlife rehabilitators.

However, real differences may exist between the value orientations of these groups. Rehabilitators and wildlife managers appear to hold many common values related to environmental conservation and humane-use issues. Wildlife managers and wildlife rehabilitators also seem to share the same ultimate goal of maintaining a healthy community of wildlife species. However, they may also have very different views on the appropriate relationship between people and wildlife. In many instances, professional wildlife managers and rehabilitators may differ in their fundamental orientation toward wildlife. The typical wildlife management professional is oriented toward conservation of viable wildlife populations, while the wildlife rehabilitator is oriented toward preserving the life of individual animals (Tennant 1989). This basic difference creates a poten

**WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AND USE**

|   |      |      |      |      |      |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|
| It is ethical for humans to manipulate populations of wild animals.                                 | 18.3 | 28.9 | 18.7 | 19.7 | 14.4 |
| Hunting is justified only when it is necessary to sustain human life.                               | 21.9 | 15.1 | 16.1 | 25.7 | 21.2 |
| An important step in conserving a species of wildlife is to protect it from all forms of hunting.   | 32.1 | 15.4 | 14.7 | 21.2 | 16.6 |
| Trapping wild animals is morally wrong if it is done primarily for recreation.                      | 73.0 | 11.3 | 5.4  | 3.1  | 7.2  |
| Having uses for wildlife gives society a vested interest in the long-term conservation of wildlife. | 35.6 | 28.2 | 20.8 | 9.9  | 5.5  |
| Hunting wild animals is morally wrong if it is done primarily to obtain food.                       | 6.8  | 6.8  | 14.3 | 29.3 | 42.8 |
| Using wildlife for food is a natural part of human existence.                                       | 23.1 | 30.6 | 20.1 | 16.0 | 10.2 |
| Killing wild animals to sell their fur is morally wrong.  | 59.4 | 14.9 | 8.1  | 8.8  | 8.8  |
| It is wrong to regard wild animals as a renewable source of food.                                   | 22.3 | 19.6 | 22.3 | 22.7 | 13.1 |
| Hunting is morally wrong because it violates the right of an individual animal to exist.            | 18.9 | 12.2 | 22.6 | 25.7 | 20.6 |
| People who participate in trapping do not feel compassion for wildlife.                             | 32.6 | 17.2 | 17.9 | 14.8 | 17.5 |
| It is possible to view wildlife with reverence and still participate in hunting.                    | 35.4 | 32.0 | 11.2 | 9.2  | 12.2 |

**WILDLIFE CONSERVATION**

|  |      |      |      |      |      |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|
| The resources expended in New York to manage wildlife for hunting would be better spent on conservation of threatened and endangered wildlife.                         | 39.8 | 22.4 | 16.7 | 12.9 | 8.2  |
| The resources that society expends to care for individual animals in non-threatened populations would be better spent on conservation of habitat used by that species. | 21.1 | 41.0 | 25.0 | 9.4  | 3.5  |
| The perpetuation of wildlife populations is more important than the welfare of individuals within populations.   | 16.7 | 24.3 | 23.2 | 21.9 | 13.9 |
| It is ethical for society to restrict human activities to minimize negative impacts on wildlife.   | 68.8 | 24.0 | 4.8  | 2.1  | 0.3  |
| It is more important to manage wildlife for species diversity than it is to manage for a large number of animals in a small number of species.                         | 35.9 | 31.0 | 26.4 | 3.9  | 2.8  |
| The people of New York are not doing enough to conserve the natural systems that wildlife depend on for survival.  | 60.2 | 27.6 | 8.5  | 2.4  | 1.3  |

**ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUES**

|  |      |      |      |      |      |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|
| People who are allowed to hunt or trap should follow practices that cause the least animal pain and suffering. | 89.1 | 8.2  | 1.7  | 0.0  | 1.0  |
| Anyone who uses wild animals in some way should be concerned about the pain and suffering of those animals.    | 86.7 | 11.6 | 1.1  | 0.3  | 0.3  |
| Pain and suffering of individual wild animals is not important if the population is not jeopardized.           | 2.4  | 1.4  | 4.4  | 21.4 | 70.4 |
| Minimizing animal pain and suffering is an important consideration in New York's wildlife management programs. | 9.3  | 9.6  | 81.7 | 0.0  | 0.0  |

SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree

Table 4. Rehabilitators' opinions on various wildlife management activities.

| Management Activity   | SF <sup>1</sup> | % Respondents (n = 286-297) |      |      | SO   |      |
|---|-----------------|-----------------------------|------|------|------|------|
|   |                 | F                           | NO   | O    |      |      |
| Human management of wildlife populations  | 23.3            | 36.5                        | 17.7 | 13.9 | 8.3  |      |
| Hunting wildlife primarily for food   | 19.5            | 36.9                        | 22.5 | 9.9  | 11.3 |      |
| Hunting primarily for recreation  | 3.4             | 8.1                         | 12.5 | 16.2 | 59.8 |      |
| Trapping wildlife for sale of their fur   | 4.7             | 7.5                         | 9.2  | 13.9 | 64.7 |      |
| Trapping wildlife primarily for recreation                                      | 2.4             | 4.4                         | 5.4  | 7.1  | 80.7 |      |
| Use of animals for public educational display                                   | 24.7            | 42.5                        | 20.6 | 9.4  | 2.8  |      |
| Limiting wildlife populations to reduce wildlife threats to human health or ety | 8.0             | 23.8                        | 6.9  | 26.6 | 14.7 |      |
| Limiting wildlife populations to reduce wildlife damage to agricultural crops   |                 | 4.5                         | 25.2 | 20.7 | 32.4 | 17.2 |
| Limiting wildlife populations to reduce nuisance wildlife problems              | 4.5             | 19.4                        | 20.1 | 31.8 | 24.2 |      |

<sup>1</sup> SF = Strongly Favor; F = Favor; NO = Neutral Opinion; O = Oppose; SO = Strongly Oppose

tial for tension to develop between these 2 groups. However, their positions are not mutually-exclusive, and the two groups may be most effective by cooperating.

By working together on important issues that are common to both groups, and by agreeing to accept divergence on some issues, it may be possible for management professionals and rehabilitators to minimize conflict and forge a mutually beneficial relationship. For this to occur, both the wildlife management profession and the licensed wildlife rehabilitation community must intensify their efforts to understand each other and develop effective mechanisms for communication. Value differences, especially those related to wildlife management techniques and wildlife-use issues, will have to be identified, clarified and addressed if a closer, mutually beneficial relationship is to be developed.

#### Continuing Research Planned for 1991-92

This survey represents the first comprehensive effort to examine these issues in New York State. Though ongoing efforts are needed to clarify the degree to which these 2 groups can work together, this research provides information both groups can utilize to enhance public education concerning wildlife and wildlife management issues. Constraints facing educators were identified and steps can be taken by both groups to reduce those problems. Also, common attitudinal ground on animal treatment and environmental conservation was identified, and can serve as a basis for common understanding and purpose (an incentive for further values clarification).

In study phase II, information on the same critical attitude and value areas will be obtained from personnel in DEC. We will then be able to identify the degree to which wildlife managers and wildlife rehabilitators agree with each other, accurately perceive one another, and understand their true similarities and differences in 4 critical issue areas. The combined data from these studies will further identify and clarify potential communication concerns, and should improve coordination and cooperation for providing wildlife-related information to the public.

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