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Resolving conflicts with Canada geese:  
an animal welfare perspective

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### **Resolving conflicts with Canada geese: an animal welfare perspective**

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*Abstract:* The scope and significance of human conflicts with urban and suburban Canada goose populations has been growing rapidly since the mid 1980s. A lack of basic understanding about the biology and ecology of locally abundant goose populations has led, in part, to argument between opposing camps over the appropriate approaches and methodologies to resolve human-goose conflicts. Animal welfare interests have focused on the humaneness of roundup and slaughter programs, and advocated non-lethal approaches coupled with what they view as the more benign population control activity of egg addling. Some traditional wildlife managers have argued that non-lethal approaches have been tried and have failed, and that procedures such as addling do not work quickly or effectively. Differences have led to legal confrontations that absorb considerable energy and effort and may make cooperative involvement more difficult. This paper articulates some of the arguments that comprises the basis for the perspective of animal welfarists. It ends with a call for greater cooperation and involvement between all interests concerned with Canada geese.

*Key Words:* animal welfare, Canada geese, roundup and slaughter

#### **Introduction**

The growth of Canada goose (*Branta canadensis* spp.) populations throughout much of North America is a relatively recent phenomena (Conover and Chasko 1985) for which causative explanation is still being sought. In part, this growth is an undoubted product of deliberate human actions involving the planned movement and stocking of birds by state and federal wildlife agencies that began decades ago (Cooper 1987). In part, it can also be attributed to a rapid adaptation by geese to the previously unoccupied but richly provident new habitat provided by human-

dominated landscapes. Following a dynamic period of expansion, some resident goose populations have come to be identified as problematic (Conover and Chasko 1985, Ankney 1996). Attempts to mitigate human-goose conflicts have had to account for both their protected status under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) as well as historical demand by state wildlife agencies for birds to satisfy stocking programs. The latter was easily achieved by the "roundup" of geese during the annual molt and their translocation to areas where they were wanted. Simple nonlethal strategies that did not require federal permitting proved effective when goose

numbers were low. Recently, with the states less willing to accept new birds, and non-lethal approaches said to be increasingly ineffective, the practice of roundup and slaughter has been proposed, and in some places adopted, as a means of resolving conflicts. This practice is highly controversial, with animal welfare and protection interests vigorously challenging its need and rationale.

Here, we examine the issue of Canada goose management from an animal welfare perspective, seeking to frame some of its components from the field of interest that we represent. We intend in this to follow the long established tradition of opinion pieces in the wildlife damage literature (e.g. Howard and Schmidt 1984) in which a position is argued less on the facts of the case than from the logic of a particular school of thought - in this case, animal welfare. Such arguments are, of course, quite germane to the field of wildlife damage management, where not only the physical impact wildlife has on human interests is important, but the attitudes, feelings, and values of stakeholders are as well. As in any commentary concerning wildlife damage management that emanates from the animal protection and welfare community, the essence of our message is that animal welfare concerns should not be trivialized. They are a core concept and central concern in this field of human endeavor.

### **Defining problems associated with Canada geese**

Wildlife damage management actions should be triggered by concerns that can be measured, appeal to some agreed and validly defensive standards as "damage", and can be justified as meriting the level of response directed at them. Identifying wildlife damage

and assessing its severity can be highly subjective activities that vary significantly from case to case and one individual to another. Beyond the actual physical damage that wildlife can do to human interests lie the intangibles that occur when there is less injury than insult emanating from a wildlife "problem". Under some circumstances "damage" may be defined by feeling and attitude more than by a measurable and scalable consequence of animal activity. To the animal welfare community, the bulk of claims concerning resident Canada geese seem to fall somewhere between actual damage and assumed insult. Requests for the removal of geese frequently seem to be based on the inconvenience they cause and out of frustration for what is an objectionable, but not gravely serious, consequence of their use of the landscape — the deposition of sometimes copious amounts of fecal material. While practically everyone would rather not face the prospect of having to walk through goose fecal deposits, some would have no qualms about killing geese for such offenses, while others would be vigorously opposed to such calls as punishment that does not fit the crime.

To be sure, there are situations involving resident geese where there should be a preeminent concern for human safety, such as in aircraft operations. Still, we believe it reasonable to ask for reassurance that the killing of birds around airports measurably reduces the risk of collisions between geese and aircraft. If it does, especially when it is practiced on flightless birds, then this should be critically demonstrable. Seemingly logical assumptions do not always prove right, especially in the field of wildlife damage. For example, it should be quite logical to assume that a linear relationship would exist between

the numbers of a pest species and the amount of damage they do. In fact, this is not always the case (Hone 1994, 1996), and we find it prudent to ask that a relationship be demonstrated that reassures us that the birds targeted for removal must be removed, and that the resources expended actually contribute to greater human safety.

Concerns about the relationship between growing numbers of geese and public health are currently being raised. While the potential for geese to carry pathogens that may be dangerous to humans has been demonstrated (Graczyk et al. 1998), there is still a way to go between recognizing potential and realizing actuality in the transmittal of disease to humans. The rebuttal made by animal welfare interests had been that, potential or not, no documented case of human illness had ever been attributed to Canada geese. This fell in the past year to a published report that claimed hypersensitivity in a single individual whose illness was attributed to exposure to goose feces (Saltoun et al. 2000), but that one case with its unique and idiosyncratic aspects did not, to us, demonstrate a larger public health threat. Regardless of whether or not general health threats will be validated, it alarms us that claims for that potential have been used in part to justify the killing of geese (Keel et al. 1999, Lowney et al. 1999, Maestrelli et al. 2000). Ascribing a need for the killing of wildlife based on a possibility that they may cause human health problems is anathema to the animal welfare community, and, we hope, of more than passing concern to others as well. Responsibility for the public's health has, appropriately, been placed in the hands of public health professionals, not wildlife biologists, private wildlife control interests, animal welfare advocates, or others. Such

concerns must be justified and documented with reasonable and acceptable certainty, and action taken according to an accepted plan that addresses the root cause of problems and not just their symptoms. In this case, water quality problems in urban and suburban watersheds demand more comprehensive solutions than the manipulation or management of individual animal species and cannot be solved by simplistic approaches that address only one aspect of the more complex environmental problems they encompass.

### **Understanding Canada geese: biology and ecology**

Although attention was drawn more than two decades ago to potential conflicts between humans and geese (Hawkins 1970, Smith 1974, Conover and Chasko 1985), it appears to us that research on these birds has lagged far behind its need. To animal welfare interests, and we assume to wildlife damage management professionals as well, a fundamental understanding of the biology and ecology of resident geese should be deemed a necessity for the development of sound intervention strategies. Certainly, we should at least be asking and answering questions about the basic nature and composition of flocks of such birds, their seasonal and annual movement and activity patterns, and the extent to which philopatry plays an important role in their lives. Given that efforts are currently underway to create regulatory changes that will almost certainly make it easier to kill resident geese (United States Fish and Wildlife Service 1999), it is a dark suspicion of the animal welfare community that basic studies of resident Canada geese are simply of little interest to the federal and state wildlife agencies. What difference, we imagine them asking, does it make if the birds nesting on a

small urban lake are related to one another or not when management approaches will be based on population reduction anyway? Yet, where basic questions have been asked, such as in Michigan, surprisingly nonintuitive findings suggest that there is much more about the behavior patterns of resident geese to learn, and that some of the information may have direct and immediate consequences in helping shape management programs (Michigan Department of Natural Resources 2000). Even if practices such as widespread translocation were not exhaustively evaluated in the past, they can be now. One of the principal lessons that should be learned from repatriating Canada geese is one that we fear is not being learned at all: human manipulation of animal populations must be based on sound biological and ecological information and not simply an interest in injecting animals into landscapes to satisfy recreational interests.

#### **Understanding Canada geese: the need for integrated solutions**

Although the need for integrated management approaches with resident geese is recognized and widely recommended (Allan et al. 1995, Gosser et al. 1997, Smith et al. 1999), there seem to have been few efforts to carry recommendations into implementation on a scale that would allow us to evaluate whether or not comprehensive, integrated program approaches really can provide solutions to human-geese conflicts. Where there should be numerous experiments underway to test and validate truly integrated management programs, we do not seem able to find them. One non-profit organization called GeesePeace™ is currently engaged in an effort to adopt a comprehensive (albeit exclusively non-lethal) approach to goose

management at a county-wide level, and recently convened the first national conference on the issue of resident Canada geese in December, 2000. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources (2000) initiated a broad-ranging and cooperative volunteer subscription effort in 1997 with organizations such as the Detroit Zoo, Michigan Humane Society, and The Humane Society of the United States to focus effort on an egg adding and replacement program that has, to date, been deemed quite successful. This program has been accompanied by a large-scale effort to both monitor and research resident goose populations in the state, with data from a variety of studies that are underway feeding back into the management program to help refine its components. Other large-scale efforts combining private and public resources at a landscape level are needed.

The animal welfare community advocates holistic approaches with full awareness that this means that lethal options are considered along with others. We do not unilaterally reject solutions that involve a lethal component from all consideration in wildlife damage management, but simply insist that this option remain the very last priority, and not be considered until all other possible approaches have been tried and failed. Decisions to exercise lethal control must be made on the basis of the most compelling need and established certainty of threat to human safety or health, or to address compelling concerns for the welfare of animals themselves. Lethal options are never defensible unless accompanied by realistic efforts to remove the causative factors that led to a problem's arising in the first place, and reasonable means are employed to ensure that the problem does not arise again. To us, it is axiomatic that comprehensive solutions are

not being advocated when we see no effort to work with resident goose populations that have not yet been deemed problematic, but that have the potential to become so. The compelling argument that problems be recognized and resolved before they occur is beyond dispute in the case of resident geese, but it apparently is not so accepted as to be commonly practiced.

### **Understanding Canada geese: the possible future**

While the primary concern of animal welfare advocates over the treatment accorded Canada geese in programs that involve roundup and slaughter is for the welfare of individual birds, we believe that there are broader concerns surrounding practices such as roundup and slaughter that have implication well outside the arena of animal welfare and protection. When it is reported that wildlife biologists refer to Canada geese as "sky carp", while other species of geese are being termed "tundra maggots" (Ankney 1996: 218-219), alarms ought to be sounding, we think, within the wildlife professions. If professionals within wildlife disciplines are so inclined as to hold such attitudes, how can we hope to avoid the general devaluation of these species, and eventually wildlife in general, in the public's mind?

The controversy surrounding resident Canada geese will not be resolved in the courts, although legal challenges to proposed management actions can and will continue for both strategic as well as tactical reasons. It will not be resolved by practices such as roundup and slaughter, since these will continue to be vigorously opposed by significant numbers in the general public as well as the animal welfare community for as

long as they are proposed or implemented. The future of conflict resolution with this species will lie in community-based approaches that encompass a broad range of options that can be supported by all stakeholders in the issue. State and federal wildlife agencies will not have the resources to directly intervene in all of the communities where conflicts with geese occur, nor will animal welfare organizations. The resources to resolve the community's problems will come from within the community itself. Certainly, there will be debate within communities as to whether or not the killing of geese is necessary. To a great extent, the future of Canada goose management will involve new paradigms for wildlife management. There will be a need for cooperation between traditional allies, but also between traditional opponents. To us, the future of managing Canada goose-human conflicts involves active cooperation, community mobilization, effective and progressively constructive scientific input, incorporation of environmental values, restoration of public confidence in agencies, appreciation of the natural world, and commitment to life-affirming solutions.

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