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CONTROLLING COYOTES IN AN URBAN ENVIRONMENT – EFFECTIVE EVALUATION OF REQUESTS BY THE GENERAL PUBLIC FOR CONTROL SERVICES

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Abstract: The incidence of request for control services in regards to human conflict with coyotes (*Canis latrans*) in urban/suburban environments continues to increase countrywide. These incidents have created a need for a systematic means of evaluating the perceived need for control to determine first if control is necessary and would it be effective in solving the problem. Generally we have found the public is uninformed and surprised by their first sighting or encounter with coyotes. We have taken an approach that allows us to evaluate the clients concerns and enable us to make recommendations to them on possible control methods that might be effective, practical, and economically feasible for any given situation. Most calls from the public do not require control and we need to save time and money for the client and ourselves as a business. This model decision process could be used by anyone to evaluate urban coyote conflicts in deciding if control was needed or warranted.

Key words: *Canis latrans*, client education, coyote behavior, coyote control, evaluating conflict, private sector, seasonality, urban habitats, wildlife control operator

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I'd like to talk about the private industry perspective. Much of the information presented throughout the day reiterates and justifies how we, as a private business in a city, set up our program and operate. We learn things from research, Wildlife Services, and Extension. Several of the agencies help provide the private operator with the knowledge we need to set up a program; an effective, legitimate, ethical program.

I'd like to show you that, from the private perspective, how we do things. We are probably an unknown entity to some of you, and to others we have had little interaction, but our practices are similar to those already described today by several other agencies. We are just getting paid a little better than some of the rest of you.

We have found that the best deterrent, in my market, is cost. We have heard about the human dimensions aspects of coyote (*Canis latrans*) conflicts, and this has raised the question of how to evaluate if the person's sighting of a coyote, or their encounter with it, is a problem. Short of doing a long interview with the client, cost is sometimes the best measure. If a client has seen a coyote running along her back porch, is she twenty dollars upset, or is she five hundred dollars upset? How much she is willing to pay is usually a pretty good indicator, and we use that factor to help people evaluate their values.

Services that offer to end or mitigate the damage should be offered on the basis of an individual situation. Many factors should be considered before deciding whether

action should be taken, and if so, which methods should be used. More often than not, a simple explanation is all that is needed to relieve the fears resulting from a caller's first encounter or sighting of a coyote in their neighborhood. I would like to briefly review how my company has decided to evaluate the coyote complaints we receive, and how we decide to take action, if in fact we decide taking action is appropriate and needed.

We go through an evaluation process, similar to the ones that have been described for San Diego, CA, and for Austin, TX. I am really excited to hear about Austin's program, because I'd like to take that information back to the private industry. Today I'm wearing two hats one as a private operator and one as President of NWCOA. We are active in putting together training packets for our members. I will be able to utilize these very concrete examples of how evaluations of coyote problems can be done, and to draw these into our training program. These will help other operators know how to effectively evaluate coyote complaints, and what control to provide. So today's presentations are really going to provide a good collection of information for our industry. It will help us evaluate problems, and decide what we can offer the client. I refuse to accept jobs simply for the sake of accepting jobs. We have been accused many times of being mercenaries, but we really do not take a job unless we're providing a benefit. And there is an economic reason for that. If I go out and take jobs for the money, regardless of what I'm able to provide, what I end up with is a dissatisfied customer. And then my business and reputation goes downhill. So, if we can not provide a positive result, we choose not to provide any service, and instead just provide the caller with information and advice. We will tell them that we understand their situation, and I wish

we could help them, but there is really nothing we can do for them. Then we refer them to a government agency and it becomes the state's fault if the problem isn't solved!

We are really adamant about what the property owner should expect as a result. Often, it is not a quick fix, and the problem is over. We do not kill the coyote that killed the cat, and now the client can live happily ever after. Life is not that way, and nature is not that way. The coyote that is removed is replaced. It is a management issue, and that is how it has to be seen, even from the standpoint of the private property owner. The client needs to understand the state's management plan for urban coyotes. Austin, Texas is a perfect example, what they have done is to speak to the constituency and tell them we care. We do have a plan. We are managing coyotes. Then, the client isn't so frustrated by thinking, "no one cares, and no one is doing anything, and I have to deal with the problem myself." When the city has a plan like Austin's, I could really use that to help a caller or a customer recognize that it is a larger problem it is just not in one person's backyard.

First, we try to decide what exactly is the problem. I think the 7-point "coyote behavioral score" that's been previously described (Farrar 2007) is great. So, we first interview the caller over the phone, before making a site visit, to evaluate the situation. We do not go out and look at the situation without being paid, because this is our business, our livelihood. It saves me a lot of time, and the client a lot of money, to do the initial interview, with pointed questions that allow me to determine what is the problem, not only their perspective of the problem, but if there really is a problem.

If the coyote is acting normally and is non-threatening, there is nothing to be gained by any active control measures. A simple explanation of coyote behavior,

cautions against feeding coyotes, and explaining risks that free-roaming pets incur, is the correct action. Calls or requests that are based on nothing more than observations of normal coyote behavior are ones that we never do anything about. We do not go out to the site. We do not provide active control. We do not go catch the coyote. And these are the majority of our calls. For example, out of 12 recent calls in a 4-month period, my company chose to provide services to only 2 callers. I am not saying that all private operators in Indianapolis have the same situation, but for us, we respond to less than 10% of all the coyote calls we receive, other than referring them elsewhere, discussing the situation, or providing information to educate the caller. The majority of calls are sightings of coyotes. A person has seen a coyote, which causes the individual to be fearful. Under the point system, this would be a “non-aggressive behavior.” So we explain to the caller, using the research information available to us, the reality: coyotes are out there, and people are going to see them.

I am anxious to get Stan Gerhrt’s new publication on urban coyotes (Gehrt 2006), as it will be very useful in helping this type of caller understand the coyote situation. I am quoting it already. I have also, for the last 10 years, been a trapping instructor in the Fur Takers’ College, and my specialty is teaching about coyotes, including the conflicts they cause in towns and cities. We’ve been using the publication by Steve Allen (Allen et al. 1987) of North Dakota to teach about their biology, territorial behavior, family groups, and life cycles, and now this new information from Stan’s work in Chicago will solidify some of our knowledge about urban coyotes, so I can add this to my teaching materials.

Every effort should be made to avoid categorizing typical coyote behavior as “good” or “bad.” Coyotes are just coyotes,

wild animals acting by instinct and adapting to their environment. Conflicts are a result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and acting instinctively as a wild animal. A coyote killing a domestic dog near its den site is not acting bad; rather, it is acting territorially towards a threat. However, this behavior usually cannot be tolerated in a suburban neighborhood. It could be argued that the human is also acting territorially and defending the neighborhood by killing the coyote. The difference is that the human can think before it acts, and the coyote simply acts.

If the coyote is exhibiting signs of having lost its fear of people, loafing and sleeping near houses, attacking pets, looking in windows, or exhibiting generally “tame” or domestic animal behavior, control is most often warranted. In dealing with the caller who may have a problem, we can talk to them about changing the habitat or the environment, or improving coyote exclusion from yards, and doing lots of nice and politically-correct non-lethal techniques. These efforts have a long-term management effect, but a very low “fix-the-problem-now” effect. These approaches are not fixes for my clients who have a genuine problem. They are very important in scope of overall management strategy, but they are not the immediate solution for a specific coyote incident. I am usually dealing with small, individual properties, and the incident is an isolated incident, for example, a client’s dog or cat being killed. So when I get the type of behavior that includes coyotes acting bold, fearless, and aggressive, we absolutely recommend control, so that the problem coyote is targeted and removed as quickly as possible. When these things are happening, we take action. Sometimes we can use harassment, and we have done so to move the coyotes, in cases where the coyotes are not really causing a human health and safety concern. In most cases when I visit a

client's property, it is to remove a specific animal.

This is how my company deals with it. We never do control without having a neighborhood meeting. This meeting includes the immediate neighbors. The 2 or 3 or 4 property owners around the immediate control area. If they are not willing to work together as a neighborhood, I am surely not jumping into that hornet's nest. The neighborhood meeting is a critical step. I sit on the tailgate of my truck and show them the traps I will use, and we discuss the situation, my recommendations, and the types of equipment I will use. If I have agreement with that plan, then we move on to the next step. In the discussion, we also talk about what is causing the problem. For example, the availability of food in the neighborhood that is attracting the coyotes, including possibly intentional feeding. It is important to get everyone involved, so they will understand what is happening.

The most recent coyote problem we solved was on a cul-de-sac, involving 6 houses, with a surrounding wooded area. It was right in the middle of the city, an older community that had a lot of green space around it. The coyote was sleeping on a deck, below a house's back window, looking in the picture window and loafing around the edges of the yard. It was obvious that this coyote had been habituated and had no fear of the residents. In my opinion, that specific coyote needed to be removed. I explained to the client that we should target that single, individual coyote and then evaluate the result. The neighbor next to the house with the coyote on the deck had three cats, and the cats roamed. The neighbor was concerned about the danger of catching one of the cats in a trap. I explained to them the

risk of harming a cat and explained that the traps I use, #3 Victor SoftCatch™, have several swivels and other selective features. They chose not to do control, because they felt the risk of harming a cat was greater than the benefit of removing the coyote. But about a week-and-a-half later, that coyote ripped through a screened porch and took a cat. As far as I know, they have still got the coyote. But we went through the process: we had the neighborhood meeting, I explained the risks, they made their choices. They could not agree on my plan to remove the coyote so they had the consequence.

In evaluating a coyote incident, we take into consideration seasonal changes in coyote behavior (Table 1). We first look at what time of year it is, and what types of coyote activity are occurring. In central Indiana, we have breeding activity in January, and we typically see several adult coyotes, hear howling, and see other activity typical of the breeding season. An explanation of this behavior can help the caller evaluate what they are seeing. If it is determined that the coyote needs to be removed, we almost exclusively use traps as our control tool. But in almost all cases, we recommend harassment. My favorite saying is, "If you see a coyote, take a picture, and then throw a rock at it." Educate that coyote, and do not let that coyote associate you with positive things or friendly human behavior. We also encourage population management and coyote harvest, not as an alternative to solving specific problems, but in addition to solving damage problems, to promote wise resource management. We talk about the state's role in the management of wildlife populations, and we explain the fur harvest season and the goals of fur harvest.

Table 1. Seasonal cycle of coyote biology and behavior, with preferred control methods.

<i>Time of Year</i>	<i>General Activity</i>	<i>Recommended Control Activities</i>
Dec – Jan – Feb	Breeding activity	Remove specific animal with traps, shooting, or possible harassment. *
Feb – Mar – Apr	Den site selection	Remove animals with traps, shooting, or possible harassment at den site.
Apr – May	Birthing	Remove animals with traps, shooting, or possible harassment at the den site.
May – Jun – Jul	Raising pups	Remove animals with traps and shooting.
Jul – Aug – Sept – Oct	Expanding home territories	Remove animals with traps and shooting.
Oct – Nov – Dec	Dispersal of Pups	Remove specific animal with traps or shooting. *

*Fur harvest can reduce populations replace older animals with younger, less bold individuals, as well as maintain fear of humans.

In talking to ranchers and land managers in more rural situations, their attitude is that any coyote is a potential problem without the opportunity. When the coyote has the right opportunity, a problem will occur. When coyotes are removed, it is true they are replaced with other coyotes. Current research may show that as older coyotes are removed, they are replaced with younger, less aggressive coyotes that are not as likely to cause problems. So, from the ranchers' standpoint, this is a benefit of population management. Cycling the older, more experienced coyotes out of the population and replace them with younger, less problematic individuals.

Harassment of coyotes at den sites has been a very useful tool. I use dogs in this strategy, and while they are not "coyote dogs", they are useful in denning. They are stout enough and disciplined enough that I can trust that I will not put them in danger by taking them to an active den site. Typically, all I have to do is visit the den site during the season when the den is being used. When I take my dogs to an urban den site they will typically urinate and sniff round, which sends the female coyote a message that she needs to move her den. If she moves a couple hundred yards away to a

woodlot or other more remote area I have solved the conflict. That coyote is not likely to be causing problems during the pup-rearing season at my customer's location. I do not need to catch that coyote, which would serve no particular purpose, unless it is a very aggressive coyote. Because it is a coyote's natural instinct to protect their den site, we "ask" them to move. If they move, the problem is usually solved. If they do not move, we then remove the coyote.

In the fall, October through December, the pups typically disperse, the coyote family group breaks up. Then in January it is the breeding season, and the cycle starts over.

My order of preference for control tools is first the foothold trap; second the snare; and third the Collarum™, for many reasons. The Collarum™ is my tool of choice when I am in a situation where there is a high probability of catching domestic animals (particularly cats), such as next to a driveway, or in a back yard, or next to a deck. But I prefer to avoid using tools in these risky situations, wherever possible. Snares can be very effective, non-lethal, safe, and species specific.

This model decision process, which I have described, can be used and adapted by

anyone to evaluate urban coyote conflicts and decide if control is needed or warranted. While this presentation is from the viewpoint of a private wildlife control operator, I trust this information will be useful to many of you.

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