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# WHY BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD ANIMALS

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# WHY BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD ANIMALS

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ABSTRACT: The terms "good" and "bad" are completely subjective, yet the public has expectations that wildlife damage management professionals "do bad things to good animals." It is argued that wildlife damage management decisions are made in a value-laden context, with science in a supportive role. The *principle of collective human values* is the driving force of society's concerns, and collective values are currently highlighting animal welfare and other environmental concerns. Wildlife damage management professionals could modify their operational paradigm from a focus on *populations* of animals to a focus on aggregations of *individual* animals in order to respond proactively to both emerging and recognized social values.

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## INTRODUCTION

"Do we have to kill the mouse?"

"I don't want the animal hurt... it won't hurt, will it?"

"Why do bad things happen to good animals?"

Given enough time, all wildlife damage management professionals will be asked these or similar questions. Historically, many professionals have ridiculed, in public and private, all types of "emotional" questions. However, these "emotional" questions are now recognized as legitimate by a significant and growing proportion of the public. This is the same public that spends its dollars to solve wildlife damage problems and the same public that votes for the politicians who make decisions on how federal and state dollars are appropriated and spent. Wildlife damage management professionals need to provide logical, understandable, and sensitive answers to the people asking these questions. This essay is my attempt to provide a framework for understanding the complexity of "emotional" questions, and to develop a strategy for preserving the professionalism and utility of those attempting to solve wildlife damage problems within these societal constraints.

## DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD ANIMALS?

The question, "Do bad things happen to good animals," begs to be answered in two parts. First, are animals good or bad? Second, what is defined as a "bad thing" happening to an animal? In this essay, I am specifically referring to non-domesticated wild vertebrates, although there may be relevance to domesticated vertebrates.

"If an animal walked through the woods, and no human was there to recognize it, could it still be a good animal?" The question is meant to be rhetorical, but the key point is that "good" and "bad" are human value labels. Are the Los Angeles Raiders a good or a bad football team? Did you receive a good or bad recommendation from your last job? Is a gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) a good or a bad animal? The answers to these three questions require the human element: to whom are you speaking? The adequacy of the Raiders as a football team depends on whether your hero is a member of the team, or where in the country you live, or whether you won or lost money on them in the office betting pool. An employment recommendation may be considered negative if it concludes that you cannot be trusted to handle large sums of money, but perfect if you desire to run for public office. And wolves, depending on whether you are a cattle rancher, a birdwatcher, a politician, a steelworker, a wilderness enthusi-

ast, or a wildlife damage management professional, are quickly labeled "good" or "bad". In addition to there being a lack of consensus from person to person about the goodness or wickedness of a particular animal, humans retain the flexibility to change their mind when convenient. Thus, the same individual may, at differing times in his or her life, fear the big, bad wolf, pester the parents to see the icky wolves at the zoo, attend collegiate rallies to "save the wolf," raise a family and care less about wolves, be angry because wolves ate the family dog, repent and donate money to a "save the wolf" organization, and, to end the cycle, go senile and care less about wolves again. Thus, "good" and "bad" labels, to be used effectively, require a great deal of qualifiers, assumptions, and definitions.

Even if people were consistent in their labeling of animals as "good" or "bad," how are animals to be labeled when nobody cares, or when nobody is around? For example, were dinosaurs, seen by no human eyes, good or bad? In more recent times, a new species of monkey, the black-faced lion tamarin (*Leontopithecus caissara*), was discovered on an island off the coast of Brazil in 1990. Was this rare mammal good or bad prior to being found? Following the discovery of the black-faced lion tamarin, there were probably none who would label it "bad". At some future point in time, perhaps when a resort is planned for the island of Superagui, feelings may change.

Animals, of course, are neither good nor bad. They are simply animals. Goodness and malfeasance are human value labels. You can label animals as you wish. Since I label animals as good—and this is my qualifier—at *being animals*, I have no difficulty with the "good" label. Alternative opinions require a simple majority vote of one.

The second part of the question, "Do bad things happen to good animals," also requires clarification and explanation. Do "bad things" happen to animals? I can't speak for a female mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) plucked from her nest by a foraging red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), or a California vole (*Microtus californicus*) stepped on by a black-tailed deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), but I would think that the mallard and the vole have very different opinions than the fox and the deer concerning the appropriateness of the event! Again, I have to argue that before humans appeared on the scene, before the concepts of good and bad were first uttered by humanoid lips, animals "did their thing." Today, that "thing" is still being done.

Humans do things to wild animals, however. Millions of coyotes (*Canis latrans*), striped skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*),

beaver (*Castor canadensis*), raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*), nutria (*Myocastor coypus*), foxes (*Vulpes* and *Urocyon* spp.) and deer (*Odocoileus* spp.) are killed by legal hunting, trapping, and wildlife damage management programs every year. Some animals simply are in the wrong place at the wrong time. For example, 6,625 animals were killed inadvertently in the process of attempting to resolve damage complaints in 1988 (Animal Damage Control 1990). In the United States alone, tens of thousands of deer and hundreds of thousands of birds and small mammals are killed by vehicles on the highways every year. Millions of animals, of all varieties, are killed directly or indirectly through the process of displacement from agricultural, residential, manufacturing, and even recreational activities. Are these good things or bad things happening to these animals? Obviously, who you talk to in order to answer this question defines the response you will receive. Through my capitalistic, value-tainted eyes, I can accept responsibility for a portion of those deaths. What should be my professional response? Before I answer that, I need to elaborate on the "principle of collective human values."

#### THE PRINCIPLE OF COLLECTIVE HUMAN VALUES

It is becoming increasingly clear that natural resource management decisions, long thought to be ruled and defined by science or economics, are in fact driven by *human values*. I call this phenomenon the "principle of collective human values." In brief, the principle of collective human values states that the sum total of human values bearing on an issue determines the degree and extent of natural resource management decisions and processes. Old-growth redwoods (*Sequoia sempervirens*) were originally cut because humans collectively put more value in redwood products and economic development than in old-growth forest preservation. Today, that collective value judgment is shifting, and old-growth forest values are increasing relative to the traditional exploitation values. A similar shift is occurring in other natural resource arenas: wilderness use and preservation, grazing on public lands, endangered species, hunting and trapping, and the fate of wildlife involved in wildlife damage management activities. As an example, the Endangered Species Act of 1973 was a consequence of collective human values at the time of its passage. Its revision in 1992 will be a continued reflection of those values. It will alienate some and be proclaimed as severely compromised by others, but collective human values, as manifested in the political process, will determine its shape. Natural resources require sophisticated and reasoned management, based in science, and human values are an inescapable and essential part of the management equation (Wagner 1989, Decker et al. 1991).

The United States is always in a state of transition. This transition covers many fronts: education, population and demographics, economics, natural resources... the list can be as broad or as narrow as one wishes. The nation is becoming more urbanized and the value set of its citizens is changing, partly because of this urbanization, and partly because value sets are never stagnant, but are constantly evolving (Timm 1992, Schmidt et al. 1992). What most professional natural resource managers fail to understand is that science, the backbone of their training, has no opinion on whether there should be a single mountain lion (*Felis concolor*), redwood tree, or

dairy cow in California. It is not a science question whether the entire state of California should be paved or abandoned; whether mule deer should be hunted; whether redwood trees should be totally protected or whether they should all be cut tomorrow; or whether California ground squirrels (*Spermophilus beecheyi*) are allowed to live their lives without risk of pesticide intoxication. Science cannot answer these questions. What science can do is tell us the consequences of these actions, tell us how these actions can be accomplished, or how these actions might be reversed. Again, however, science has no opinion on the question of whether they should be done or not. That answer comes from human values and ethics which, as you well know, are not narrow or uniform. Societal values rule over science, not vice versa (Chelimsky 1991). *Values* tell us how science is to be applied. *Values* also tell us how wildlife is to be managed, now and in the future. Collective values tell us the direction, scope, and intensity of that management. Collective values tell us how the public accepts whether bad things can or should happen to good animals.

#### DEVELOPING A PHILOSOPHICAL PARADIGM SHIFT IN WILDLIFE DAMAGE MANAGEMENT

Within the field of wildlife damage management, I feel that our current philosophical paradigm can be paraphrased as follows: "Modern wildlife damage management controls excess nuisance populations." There is an emphasis on animal populations. Populations are measured by numbers: how large, how dense, how many births, how many deaths, and emigration and immigration rates, for example. These concepts tend to be ignored by the public as reflected in society's concerns. Populations don't bleed. Populations aren't killed. Populations don't scream. Bad things don't happen to good populations. Bad things happen to good individuals.

I believe it is time to develop a new philosophical paradigm in wildlife damage management which can be paraphrased as follows: "Modern wildlife damage management manipulates individual animals to reduce or eliminate damaging behaviors." What are the consequences of this shift, and is it justified?

First, this paradigm shift focuses on a professional responsibility to individual animals in a population, not just "abstract" populations or species. It personalizes actions. Society tells us that they view our actions as affecting individual animals. We need to be able to tell them that we understand the consequences of our action on individual animals, and that the public can trust us that we share their concerns. This should apply whether we are involved in managing a single dog food-eating raccoon or the management of a blackbird roost containing 10,000,000 individual birds.

It is easier to rationalize a non-lethal focus when you deal with individuals versus populations. Individuals are manipulated, not controlled. According to *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, "manipulation" means to "manage or utilize skillfully" or to "change by artful...means so as to serve one's purpose." "Control" means to "exercise restraining or directing influence over" or to "have power over." In today's social climate, "manipulate" seems more politically correct than "control." Again, the collective human values of society are asking us, as professionals, to develop non-lethal

strategies for resolving wildlife damage conflicts. We should accept that responsibility.

Second, focusing on individual animals assists in developing wildlife damage management policies which can recognize society's concerns over the welfare of individual animals. Techniques and policies can be assessed and developed with these concerns not treated as oversights, but as driving forces sensitive to public concerns (Schmidt 1989). Damage problems can still be resolved with existing practical methods. This is a key element, since professional responsibilities require that problems be resolved to the best of our abilities.

Is a focus on individual animals legitimizing the emotional sides of pro- versus anti-management debates? I believe this is a moot question. Collective human values have dictated to wildlife damage management professionals that emotional questions are legitimate, and that the public requires a professional response to their questions. We need to give them the answers. That is our role as professionals (Schmidt et al. 1992). To ignore this challenge is to accept the loss of public trust, a rare and easily lost commodity (Slovic et al. 1991). The public wants our assistance in stopping bad things that happen to good animals.

## CONCLUSIONS

What kind of system for managing wildlife damage issues is wanted in the United States? What techniques should be used? People have a variety of values which result in a variety of management possibilities. But which value is the correct one? Which value system is best for the short-term, and is that also the value system best for the long-term?

The trap we must avoid is the blank declaration that the public is ignorant, but with the proper educational inputs, the public will "see it our way." Do we really expect over 200 million people to become wildlife damage specialists? At the same time, perhaps these millions should become nuclear physicists, lawyers, and short-order cooks. Remember, as our profession decries the public's ignorance, other professional specialties within that same "public" are decrying *our* ignorance in some other topic. We are all specialists, yet we are all ignorant. It is unreasonable to expect that our nation will become a nation of wildlife damage specialists. Instead of convincing the public to change, our goal should be to understand and meet these desires, while at the same time encouraging awareness of the complexities of the issues.

We must agree that something has to be done, that the result of a lack of a plan of action will lead not only to increasing economic upheaval but also to a potential destruction of human and wildlife resources: timber, huntable and viewable wildlife, plant and animal agriculture, jobs, fisheries, and even human lives. My sense of the value system of the country tells me that the procedures and mechanisms for maintaining agriculture *and* wildlife in the country into the future is a very high priority.

Where does this leave the professional natural resource manager? Well, for starters, understanding society's role in driving resource management decisions means that the professionals aren't surprised when the various values out there collide. In fact, these conflicts should be anticipated and even part of management decisions and processes. The National Environmental Policy Act recognizes this value-driven system, requiring a scoping process which allows the various

values to become public information. We need to make sure that we understand the public's values on a wide variety of issues. For the wildlife biologist, this means understanding the emerging role of animal welfare considerations in shaping social opinions and concerns (Schmidt 1990).

Why do bad things happen to good animals? Because the collective human values of today say that animals are good, and that animal suffering is bad. Alas, we do not have the wisdom of a benevolent dictator to tell us what to do. Fallible, manipulable humans must plan their own destiny, and live with the results. We must learn from our mistakes, and from the mistakes of others, to do things right. Aldo Leopold (1970:251), trained as a forester, wrote in his book/*Sand County Almanac* that "... a system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. ... It assumes, falsely, I think, that the economic parts of the biotic clock will function without the uneconomic parts." Using a similar analogy, it is unwise to assume that we can function as wildlife damage professionals without considering the big picture, and to leave out part of that picture means that our professional clock must eventually begin to tell the incorrect time. Our professional responsibility lies in keeping track of our many clocks, and in keeping those many clocks working correctly.

Professional resource managers do not operate in the vacuum that they sometimes feel they are entitled. They work in a value-laden system that often conflicts with their own personal values. If their best professional, scientific, *and value-laden* judgments conflict with those of society at large, well, there is no crime in that for anybody. It is the system that we live in today. And everybody, *including the resource manager*, has a say.

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