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COMPLEXITIES OF URBAN COYOTE MANAGEMENT: REACHING THE UNREACHABLE, TEACHING THE UNTEACHABLE, AND TOUCHING THE UNTOUCHABLE

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Abstract: Urban coyote (*Canis latrans*) management is often complicated, but the technical portion of any management program is only one part of the equation. The use of lethal (traps, snares, shooting, toxicants) and non-lethal (exclusion, guard animals, husbandry practices, harassment) coyote management strategies can be successful, less than successful, or not successful depending on the appropriate match of technical skill and technology available in a particular situation. However, technical sophistication is only a portion of the management dilemma. Issues of policy, law, politics, and economics, as well as human values, attitudes, and ethics play an obvious and profound role in shaping the development, implementation, evaluation, and eventual success or failure of coyote damage management programs. Urban coyote management programs are not immune to these influences. I describe how I teach university students about coyote management. I approach the classroom with the philosophy of teaching students how to think, not what to say or do. This involves giving them detailed information, and all of it. For urban coyote issues, students tended to be compassionate and realistic, yet still preferred less than lethal strategies. I discuss “the wildlifer’s lament,” or why we wish we could educate the public. People are exposed to many messages about wildlife, and most of these messages are not coming from wildlife management professionals. Although wildlifers wish they could educate the public, in most cases, they cannot.

Key words: attitudes, beliefs, *Canis latrans*, coyote, education, predator control, urban coyote, values

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WHAT ARE “THE COMPLEXITIES OF URBAN COYOTE MANAGEMENT?”

In April 2007, a coyote (*Canis latrans*) entered a Quiznos sandwich shop in suburban Chicago. One fascinating aspect of this incident is the number of people interested in this news story, which had significant television coverage nationwide, and what actions occurred following this event. The Chicago area animal control personnel stated that it was the seventh coyote they had dealt with in a year’s time

while, in the same time period, a private wildlife control operator in the Chicago region might have dealt with a hundred coyotes, none of which were captured on television.

The “Quiznos coyote” was dragged out of the store unceremoniously with a catch pole, put into a van, taken to a holding facility, evaluated by a veterinarian, and released the next day (Meinke 2007). Some of the comments in the local media included, from various sources:

“We just love animals and we make every

attempt to make sure our animals are rescued and placed in safe havens when freed, transferred, or adopted.”

“Adrian [the name given to the Quiznos coyote] was a sweetheart and a beautiful creature, and we have enjoyed having him visit us.”

This particular coyote, after being held overnight, was released on a private 7-acre lot the landowner described as “... a good place to release this coyote. We have a couple of resident coyotes. They’ll have a lot to eat and plenty of open space.”

“Rescue workers wanted to make sure they kept things as true to Adrian’s natural habitat as possible before he was returned to the wild.”

“I certainly hope he re-acclimates to the outdoors and finds good food sources. That didn’t appear to be a problem; plenty of deer were present just yards away from the release point.”

Was this a solution? It was a chance for people to learn more about wildlife. And, as you can see, there was great interest in what exactly was happening to “Adrian”. Should all 8 million people in metropolitan Chicago now expect that this is how all coyotes should be managed, by capturing wayward coyotes and giving them a new home? Although many wildlife managers try to stay out of the public spotlight, remember that there are others who are *in* the public spotlight, and they are going to be influencing how people perceive what urban coyote management is all about.

Coyote biology isn’t all that complicated. We know a great deal about their life history, movement and dispersal patterns, feeding ecology, and behavior. And coyote management practices haven’t changed very much over the past 50 years. There are fewer toxicants used, and more traps and bullets. It makes sense, when wildlife managers know what can be accomplished, and when the manager knows

what their client wants, to put these practicalities and goals together and come up with a solution that is both feasible and acceptable. But if professional managers know the techniques and strategies for managing coyotes, why is coyote management still controversial in many circles? A large part of this paper deals with the question of why there is a disconnect between what “the professionals” think is appropriate, and what “the public” seems to think. This is what I refer to as “the complexities of urban coyote management.”

There seems to be a lot of interest in the issue of coyote attacks on people, and I have a professional interest in large carnivores attacking humans, pets, and livestock. Much of coyote management occurs in rural or wildland settings. The question currently before us is this: what do we do when coyotes irritate, threaten, or attack humans in urban settings?

I teach a course at Utah State University titled “Living with Wildlife”¹, which has 70 students. Its objectives are three-fold: to have the students learn more about wildlife; to have each student reflect on their personal relationship with wildlife; and to have students learn what other people think about wildlife. The class requirements include a service-learning project, such as building barn owl (*Tyto alba*) boxes, planting trees for wildlife habitat, dissecting owl pellets in elementary schools, teaching hunter education classes, organizing public lectures on wildlife themes, trapping feral cats to be neutered, and bringing captive wildlife to local schools. There is a wide range of projects available, because my goal for the students is to have a hands-on experience with wildlife management and wildlife education. The text I use is *Wildlife Issues in a Changing World* (Moulton and Sanderson 1999), which focuses on general wildlife issues, biodiversity, and wildlife

¹ Contact the author for a copy of the syllabus.

conservation worldwide, as well as wildlife management practices in the eastern and the western United States. I also have students read *The Beast in the Garden* (Baron 2004), which is about mountain lion (*Felis concolor*) attacks, the fuzzy boundaries between wildlands and civilization, and the complexity of wildlife management problems and solutions. We actually hold a mock trial, where we have to decide whom, if anyone, is at fault for the death of a young jogger, Scott Lancaster, who was killed by a lion in Colorado in January 1991.

I also require that each student go through Utah's Hunter Education course. They may have completed it at a younger age, but unless they've done it within the past 6 months, I require them to take the class again (many students took it at age 12). This makes our classroom discussions interesting, because all students – hunters, non-hunters, and anti-hunters – have, at a minimum, participated in an official, state-sanctioned hunter education program. My class is a “depth” course; the General Education requirement for USU is that every non-science major must take a “depth” science class of some sort. This class is primarily comprised of non-science majors, or the people that in a few years are going to be suburban residents, living with urban coyotes, and interacting with the people involved with urban coyote management in a real-world setting.

In this class, we also have a whole module that deals with issues relevant to topics in this Urban Coyote Symposium. We use videos and CDs to bring the “real world” into the classroom. Students see *Killing Coyote* (High Plains Films 2000), which is really a critique of some coyote-killing methods. They also watch *Coyoteland* (The Video Project 1992), which is about a person trapping and shooting a nuisance coyote in the Los Angeles area, and is very positive toward the

need for coyote management. We talk a lot about traps and trapping. In fact, in previous years I required the students to go through the Fur Harvester Education course as well as Hunter Education. We watch *The Cull of the Wild* (Animal Protection Institute 2002), which is critical of trapping, and *Destroying the Myth* (National Trappers Association 2004), a pro-trapping video. We have trapping demonstrations. We talk about wildlife damage issues in the current media, including urban wildlife issues, as they occur throughout the semester.

At the end of spring semester, 2007, I asked my students, “What should be done about coyotes in urban areas?”– an open-ended question. This is a representative sampling of their responses:

“Coyotes definitely pose an interesting problem for urban areas. What should be done may not be as important as what shouldn't be done.”

“I believe that if citizens are more responsible, then coyote problems will not be as bad.”

“It upsets me that people feed wild animals and don't realize the danger.”

“More should be done to make the city a less attractive place for coyotes.”

In an essay question about urban coyotes, 41 of 54 students (76%) who answered this question stated that, in general, urbanites are the ones deserving blame: *“We attract coyotes; we need to learn how to co-exist; we should not feed them.”* That clearly was the majority opinion of these young adults – your future suburban clients.

Of the students volunteering what should be done, if anything, regarding a problem coyote, 23 stated that the coyote should be relocated, 9 said it should be relocated or killed, 6 said it should be killed, and 1 said that nothing should be done. Remember, these are students who, for the last 15 weeks, had been discussing

complicated wildlife management issues. They had seen videos of the good, the bad, and the ugly. They've discussed these topics, they've gone through hunter education, and they've seen trap demonstrations. Finally, when they were asked, "What do you think should be done?", the majority still thought that the problem was homeowners, and the solution was to relocate the coyote. And, by the way, some pretty "hard-core" hunters in the class also said that nuisance urban coyotes should be relocated.

I thought that the students' problem recognition was excellent; they saw there was a problem that needed to be solved. The issue was what to do about it. So, do we just go ahead and do what was done with "Adrian", or do we take different routes, such as some of the solutions that are being discussed in this symposium?

I like to think about this in the context of something I've called the "wildlifer's lament," which is what we often say whenever we, as wildlife professionals, feel like we are being ignored or belittled: "We need to educate the public." And we don't really think about what that means. So, I've re-phrased the "wildlifer's lament" to: "reaching the unreachable, teaching the unteachable, and touching the untouchable." Let me go through some examples.

The ten top urban areas in this country have about 30% of the population (89 million). Compared to these 89 million metropolitan residents, how many urban wildlife managers are there? How many wildlife managers, wildlife control operators, or animal control officers are there in the United States? Twenty thousand? Thirty thousand? Whatever the number, it's not very many in relation to the number of residents in the U.S., which is currently 303.5 million (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). There is a net gain of one person every 13 seconds. If our goal is to reach and

teach every person, it's just not possible. One-on-one education isn't feasible. So we've developed other techniques, such as advertising and using various types of media exposure, to manipulate public opinion, in a positive sense, about what's right and wrong, or feasible and impossible.

You decide to do your best, however, and agree to present your material to a local Audubon chapter, write a letter to the editor in your local newspaper, or invite people to your home to talk about urban wildlife management. What would you say? I want you to think about who is doing the teaching, what is being taught, and what can result from this effort.

Who is doing the teaching? The World Wide Web is now a major player in informal education. There are some great web sites, with a lot of information from a variety of sources. In comparing the urban coyote-related web sites² of, for example, the City of Los Angeles, California, the City of Austin, Texas, the Animal Protection Institute, and the Humane Society of the United States, how does the average urban resident know which site has the best information? The one that looks slickest, or has the best graphics? How does the uninformed person sort all of this out and make the best decision? My sense is that there are a lot more web sites and materials that contain information on why the traditional methods of managing coyotes are wrong or outdated than there are sites

² City of Los Angeles:

<http://acwm.co.la.ca.us/scripts/coyo.htm>. City of

Austin, Texas:

http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/council/bm_urban_coyote_info.htm#

Animal Protection Institute:

<http://www.api4animals.org/articles.php?p=1139&more=1>

Humane Society of the United States:

http://www.hsus.org/wildlife/urban_wildlife_our_wild_neighbors/civil_war_or_civility_how_to_live_with_urban_coyotes/. All sites accessed 25 February 2008.

supporting and promoting the traditional wildlife manager's viewpoint (trapping and shooting).

There are a lot of people trying to educate the public to one particular worldview or another. So even if you could reach a large number of people, everyone else is trying to reach them as well. It's a challenge... unless you're "the suburban coyote's worst nightmare," what Rob Erickson was called in a January 2007 interview published in the *Chicago Tribune* (Kuczka 2007). Erickson got his point of view into the news with an extensive article that may reach an urban audience of up to 8 million people! It would be interesting to measure people's attitudes before and after such a widespread piece. It would also be interesting to determine whether Chicagoans remember Adrian, the Quiznos coyote, or Erickson, the suburban coyote's worst nightmare, and how this coverage affected their perceptions of urban coyote management.

And what *is* being taught, anyway? Think about the environmental issues being discussed locally and nationally in the local diner and between our presidential candidates. There's global climate change, biodiversity, endangered species, and pollution. People are told to protect themselves from avian influenza and West Nile virus. Oceans are running out of fish, and many fish are contaminated with mercury. There are many, many invasive species, and chronic wasting disease in our deer. What's a person to do?

What people are learning is that ecological systems of significance to their health and wellbeing, their recreational activities, or their interests are being modified, destroyed, or threatened. How would you expect the public to react when they hear that the solution to the urban coyote problem is "Just kill the coyote"? It is understandable, and predictable, that

people respond, perhaps in negative ways, to the traditional solutions. And in a world with multiple "experts", how do Joe and Jane Public figure out who is right, and who has the best recommendations? This is just part of the difficulty of conducting educational programs.

What do people learn? My family brought to my attention the online site YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com>), where anyone can post a video for others to watch. One of the most widely viewed video clips dealing with pets and animals, posted just in the middle of March 2007, was been a short, minute-and-a-half clip of 2 sea otters (*Enhydra lutris*) holding hands (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epUk3T2Kfno>). One year later, over 9 million people had viewed the Vancouver Aquarium sea otters, Nyac and Milo, "holding hands." Why is this particular video so popular? What do people learn about wildlife and wildlife management from this?

As another example, in Kenya a lioness (*Panthera leo*) has adopted 6 oryx (*Oryx gazella*) calves over a period of years (Lewa Wildlife Conservancy 2007). She adopts and protects the calves until the calf starves or she's so tired that some other lion comes and eats it. The Kenya tourism officials are promoting this as an attraction – come to Kenya and see the lion that lies down with the lamb. As it turns out, people yearn for happy endings. We yearn for them in movies, in our literature, in politics, and even in nature. And in urban coyote management, perhaps we're giving people an ending that they aren't expecting. They're looking for a different result – a happy ending.

All people have value systems, with deeply held core beliefs, that inform us about right and wrong, and good and bad. And those values are there when we have our various experiences with pets and animals throughout our lives. Those

experiences shape our attitudes about animals, and how we manage animals, as we go through life. I think compassion is a core value for many of us. Thus, in talking to people about urban coyote management, we're trying to convince listeners that realism should trump compassion. Then we wonder why people react negatively to a recommendation that the solution to the urban coyote problem is to kill an animal.

Consider the experiences or attitudes people have in regard to urban coyote management techniques. There's this thing called a "leghold trap." We've not found anything that rates, to the general public, lower on a humaneness scale of wildlife damage management techniques (Reiter et al. 1999). Without debating whether the terminology is correct or accurate, I guarantee you that a random sample of Americans think that something called a "leghold trap" is very "inhumane". Cage traps, on the other hand, fare quite a bit better (mean response 3.7 versus 1.7 on a scale where 1 is "not humane" and 5 is "very humane"). And if cage traps work for some species, why not for coyotes? People apply this knowledge, and mix with it with their belief that leghold traps are bad and cage traps are good. We don't know all the factors people take into account as they develop their attitudes toward trapping and shooting. Do attitudes toward shooting coyotes in Los Angeles reflect impressions toward inner-city urban violence, and therefore have negative connotations? Does distaste toward leghold traps encourage people to request more compassionate management alternatives?

What experiences do people have with the issue of managing coyotes? Think about closely related species, such as domestic dogs. We have laws to protect dogs, and laws against dog abuse. Many people perceive pets as family members. If they are hurt, we take them to the

veterinarian. If they have to be euthanized, we "put them to sleep." Gray wolves (*Canis lupus*)? In most states they are threatened or endangered. "Protection, protection, protection" is what people hear. Coyotes, as canids, are in this mix. It shouldn't surprise us that people perceive the urban coyote situation differently than, say, striped skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*) and raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), given the conflicting messages and experiences. As a society, canids generally are put on the higher pedestal.

And then, the "untouchable" ...topics that are difficult for us, as managers, to even talk about. There is no one answer to urban coyote management. There are different solutions for different locations and situations. What managers can and will do depends on what people want, what they can afford, what the law allows, and what is feasible... a whole variety of things. There may be one solution for one neighborhood, and another solution for a different neighborhood; one for one town, and another for a different town; or different solutions for one state or one province. There can be different solutions for the same problem. Sometimes it is difficult for managers to discuss options they consider less feasible or practical. It is difficult to discuss management options using the currencies of suffering and compassion.

There is no consistency among experts. If I gave a questionnaire to all urban coyote managers about what should or could be done in a particular case, I would get different answers. Even the experts don't always agree on the same strategy. If this is the case, then how can we blame the public for being confused or expecting a different strategy? Wildlife management, especially urban wildlife management, is hard to teach. It is hard to reach people effectively, and *we* don't even agree on what can or should be done: the "wildlifer's

lament” in a nutshell.

WHAT CAN WE DO? WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Wildlife will always cohabit the environments we create. These animals will conflict with various people at various times. People will expect and demand a solution, but the solutions are always temporary. We need to keep in mind that Joe and Jane Public are realistic, yet compassionate, just like my “Living with Wildlife” students. Most of us will understand what that means. As one critic of lethal coyote management has stated, “You’ve got to kill animals with a tear in your eye.” Letting people know that you’re compassionate as well is hard for many wildlife professionals. That’s one of the untouchable things – for us to discuss how compassionate *we* are.

In the wildlife damage management profession, and among animal control and urban wildlife management professionals, if there’s a successful program somewhere, other managers will hear about it. We should expect that as new techniques for urban coyote management become available, there’s going to be lots of sharing. And remember – the public is listening. We should listen right back.

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