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DEALING WITH DIFFERENT  
AUDIENCES: SPECIAL INTEREST  
GROUPS

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## DEALING WITH DIFFERENT AUDIENCES: SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS

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One of the classic cases of clashing special interests can be found in Brownsville, Texas, just a few miles from the border with Mexico. On the outskirts of town is a location that has become as much a gathering place for bird watchers as it is for birds. The site, referred to informally as the Mexican Crow Sanctuary, is the only reliable location in the United States to observe this species. Each year, visiting birders pump millions of dollars into the local economy while pursuing the Mexican crow. But not everyone looks with favor at the presence of the birds. The Mexican Crow Sanctuary is a favorite feeding area for gulls, blackbirds, and other species with soiled reputations. "Soiled" is an appropriate term for the birds, for the Mexican Crow Sanctuary is properly known as the Brownsville landfill. While birdwatching is an important element of the state's tourism industry, neither Brownsville's landfill workers, nearby residents, or office workers are enthralled with the droppings or activity of the birds. Each group has a valid but substantially different perspective on the management of Mexican crows and other urban birds that frequent the landfill.

A special interest group consists of members who have a special and common interest. The mission of a special interest group is simply to attempt to influence the decisions of government. In our representative form of government, special interests groups are an integral part of the process of proposing, deliberating and setting public policy. Examples of organizations that qualify as special interests include such diverse groups as those chartered for the prevention of cruelty to animals, sheep growers' associations, catfish farming cooperatives, sporting clubs, and the airline pilots' association. Institutional agendas are by no means confined to these special interests---they are merely a sampling of the myriad of voices that may have an active interest in a particular agency decision.

Every person here is a part of the advocacy system through which individuals unite to promote a common perspective. Each of us wears several special interest hats: as consumers, business people, and advocates. Certainly, no individual enters deliberations on wildlife damage control without being influenced by personal biases. While government regulators like to think of themselves as standing apart from the process, everyone is a stakeholder. Even decision-makers are influenced by their personal beliefs and attitudes. How many different special interests advocate issues of concern to you? Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect wildlife managers to serve as impartial referees on issues in which they too have personal interests.

Implicit in the attitude of many wildlife managers is the viewpoint that successful lobbying by special interest groups will thwart the overall public interest. A good lobbyist should not be regarded as an "obstructionist," but an expediter who provides useful input into the decision-making process. That immediately raises the question of how to define the public interest. Should it be determined by businessmen, consumptive users, ethicists, or some other segment of society? Or is the public interest best defined in terms of the considered judgement of regulators, acting on the basis of the best and most complete information and analysis available? If the process yields a reasonable proxy for the public interest, then regulators are making valuable use of special interest groups.

For wildlife managers to make balanced decisions requires access not only to technical information, but to the opinions of interested parties. Who are the stakeholders that are invited and encouraged to participate in the decision-making process? While wildlife damage control is rooted in the needs of the agricultural community, the United States is now largely an

urban society. The majority of Americans live in cities. According to the most recent census, 8 of 10 Americans live in urban areas and 1 of 2 persons resides in one of the 39 largest cities. If the severity of wildlife damage is not greatest in urban areas, it certainly ranks first based on the number of citizen complaints. It is now in the urban landscape that the mixing of wildlife, habitat, and people attains its most volatile and intense level.

Most governmental decisions on wildlife management go uncontested either because of the indifference of special interests or the restrictions imposed on them by limited resources. Moreover, a majority of animal damage operations are relatively inconsequential and do not attract the attention of any special interest group. While these activities are minor from the perspective of a government agency, from the perspective of one special interest or another, they may be tremendously important. Even though an action may not have public policy ramifications, special interests may seize upon a particular activity or proposal without regard to its broader significance. Their response may be propelled by the news media, the personal concern of a vocal or influential member of the group, or other factors. Too often, organizations representing special interests find themselves in the position of being reactive rather than proactive.

Wildlife managers look with disdain on cause-oriented groups because they focus on so-called hot issues, featuring emotional and moral debates that arouse special fervor among competing special interests and place regulators in an uncomfortable position. The use of animals in research was singled out in the 1993 political science book, *The Third House* (Alan Rosenthal, Congressional Quarterly Press) as one of the premiere hot issues. Wildlife damage control has also proven to be a topic that stirs the passions of diverse special interests.

Conflicts among special interest groups are rooted in their differing perspectives. To the sheep rancher, wildlife damage control is a business concern, while the animal advocate may view the same issue as a public policy question, and a

backpacker may see it as a public safety issue. Recent surveys show that the way in which citizens perceive animal damage depends to a large extent on how it affects them in the pocketbook. A threshold value exists relative to the cost of repairs. Citizens are more tolerant of problems that do not result in substantial economic losses. A person's attitude is also influenced by his or her years of experience with the problem---over time an individual gets accustomed to the damage. Finally, the type of damage sustained will play a role in peoples' perceptions and attitudes. While there may be agreement that something needs to be done, special interests often lack a consensus on a course of action. Their immediate demands and suggested solutions sometimes are ill-conceived and may not reflect a basic knowledge of wildlife population dynamics and behavior.

Admittedly, wildlife damage control is a bio-political process. Issues that benefit a well-defined special interest, at the cost of another equally well-defined interest, are the ones most likely to generate organized conflict. Every group is interested in gaining or retaining an advantage in the regulatory process. It is little wonder that some aspects of wildlife damage control are so contentious. Issues may be redefined as time passes, but in the struggle among competing special interests, they may never truly be resolved. As issues arise, chances are they will spread from one locality to another. A current example of this phenomena is the issue of resident Canada geese inhabiting lakes and ponds in housing developments, on golf course ponds, and city parks.

My perspective on wildlife damage control is derived from my role as a representative of an animal protection organization. The first U.S. organization chartered for the prevention of cruelty to animals (SPCA) was founded 131 years ago. As the nation shifted toward an industrialized economy and urbanized society, so too was there an evolution in the mission of animal groups. By the end of World War II, local humane societies and SPCAs were primarily concerned with the plight of companion pets rather than working animals. In the 1960s, with the advent of urban

sprawl, these institutions began receiving occasional telephone inquiries from homeowners confronted with the presence of unfamiliar wild animals such as raccoons, opossums, and skunks. By the mid-1970s wildlife damage control had developed into a major program area for community animal shelters.

The personnel employed by humane societies and animal control agencies view themselves as practitioners of wildlife damage control. Often, the animal shelter is the most visible component of the animal care and control services in the community and it is the first place that citizens turn for advice and assistance with troublesome wildlife. Shelter employees rarely engage in "hands-on" wildlife damage control. James Parkhurst, Extension Specialist at Virginia Tech, calls us information brokers. The same term increasingly can be applied to the federal Animal Damage Control (ADC) specialist or Cooperative Extension agents. Anyone working in an urban area spends a good portion of the day on the telephone guiding callers to solutions rather than performing animal damage control field work.

Despite the integral role that shelter personnel play in handling wildlife damage complaints in urban communities, we are seen by many wildlife managers as spoilers rather than colleagues. They are suspicious of both our expertise and motives. For their part, shelter workers view managers as proponents of tactics that serve as palliatives rather than offering real solutions. They seem inclined to offer "quick fixes" rather than molding the attitudes of persons who perceive themselves to be suffering wildlife damage.

As a group, shelter workers are empathetic to the fact that wildlife managers are dealing with a burgeoning number of increasingly complex issues. But you can't legislate solutions. You must unearth the cause of the problem as well as considering the viewpoints of the diverse groups that have an interest in your decisions. If accord is to be achieved, policies and decisions must be based on good science and the principles of scientific

management. The message of the ADC specialist must be consistent, accurate, valid, informative, and responsive. In addition, there needs to be improved dialogue among affected segments of the community. Citizen Task Forces are one means of accomplishing this goal. Task forces have been organized in communities such as Rochester, New York; Montgomery County, Maryland; Los Angeles, California; and Lewiston, Idaho.

While the concerns of special interests once could be ignored, their staffs have become adept at utilizing grassroots campaigns to force wildlife managers to defend their decisions. In instances when regulators have been unresponsive to the public will, the referendum/ballot initiative is an increasingly popular mechanism for imposing the input of citizens on regulators. Since 1990, campaigns mobilized by animal protection organizations have resulted in the enactment of eight state referendums and the defeat designed to overturn two measures. Humane referendums/initiatives failed to prevail in only three instances. These measures dealt with issues as diverse as the aerial hunting of wolves to the baiting of bears. Clearly, it is in the interest of the wildlife manager to broker a consensus among special interests rather than catering to a traditional constituency. It is only through open dialog that you can foster trust, credibility, and mutual respect between ADC specialists, closely aligned professions, and special interest groups.

The regulatory process would not be effective without the consistent and varied input of a myriad of interest groups. Our government is designed to accommodate a free flow of ideas between these groups and government officials. The system, as it exists, is designed to allow every citizen the opportunity to make our concerns known to decision makers, and it requires regulators to make the *EFFORT* to reflect those concerns in their management programs. Certainly, this brings into play political pressures, but if the decision-making process is undertaken with objectivity, it can

enhance the regulatory process rather than undermining it.

Special interests can shape the substance of proposals by providing input on the implications of a decision, as well as its effect on citizens. It is the wildlife manager's task to bring these diverse interests together in attaining a consensus. You

should provide a forum for discussion and debate. The competition between interest groups with varied points of view creates the environment in which agencies receive an amalgam of opinions upon which to base decisions. It is through this rather complex maze that meaningful regulations and policies emerge.