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THE ROLE OF STATE AND WILDLIFE AGENCIES IN WILDLIFE
DAMAGE CONTROL
by Charles D. Kelley*

ABSTRACT

The Alabama Game and Fish Division is responsible for the stewardship of the wildlife and fisheries resources in the state. Within this context and the cooperative efforts with other agencies that have dealings with animal damage, the Division develops, permits, approves and administers control of both game and nongame (except migratory) species of wildlife.

Animal control complaints fall into two major areas - crop damage and nuisance animals. Nuisance animals, with some exceptions, are bats, armadillos, alligators, woodpeckers, snakes, birds that roost or nest in rookeries. Squirrels, bears, rabbits are the cause of both nuisance and crop damage complaints. Deer, beaver, squirrel, bear and rabbits frequently are the cause of serious damage to agricultural crops, planted pines, ornamentals and orchards.

Approach to satisfying nuisance animal complaints is two fold. Preventive measures include actions such as closing entrance holes (bats, woodpeckers, squirrels) or altering the habitat to cause a change of range (clearing or thinning bird rookeries or roosts or prohibition of feeding activities (raccoons, bears, pigeons). If the preventative recommendations fail, removal of the nuisance animals by trapping and relocation or shooting is approved.

Crop damage complaints usually require removal of the animal(s). Permits are routinely issued to remove deer, rabbits, squirrels, raccoons at anytime or any manner expedient. Use of edible meat

which result in removing these animals are designated by our agents so as to reduce waste to a minimum. A new program, the Alabama Deer Management Assistance Program (DMP) is operational and is expected to provide additional relief from deer damage even though the program is not designed specifically for this purpose.

The extent that Game and Fish Division personnel are involved in animal damage control is in investigating, permitting, enforcement of permit conditions, approval of other agency plans and to a secondary degree, instruction in trapping techniques, mostly leghold traps.

BACKGROUND

The Alabama Game and Fish Division has been involved in animal control for many years. A Division trapper was responsible for providing predator control in requested areas prior to and during World War II. Following this "predator control is necessary wildlife management" era, trapping of bobcat and foxes became secondary and was later discontinued. The trapping effort was then directed to the suddenly troublesome beaver. A vacancy in the trapper position ended direct trapper as an animal control activity in the Game and Fish Division.

Populations of other wildlife species had increased and they became problems. Several of these troubles were totally new to the Game and Fish Division such as deer damage to agricultural crops. Some were old problems in new places - as with newly occupied beaver range. Black bears became a small problem as the low population in southwest Alabama began growing and expanding under complete protection.

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The Game and Fish Division, because of its stewardship responsibilities for the wildlife resources as well as the agency to mediate differences between sportsmen and farmers (or the injured parties), had to develop efforts to provide relief for damage and nuisance animal problems.

Today, we recommend and/or provide several methods for relief. Presently, the greatest problem comes from deer, but bear, raccoon, squirrels, rabbits, alligators, several species of birds, beaver and armidillo are common sources of complaints.

APPROACHES TO CONTROL

Every wildlife administrator has been in the middle of a disagreement between the license buying hunters and the farmer or landowner, who is suffering loss of crop production or some other problem caused by wild animals. These confrontations can become serious with organized opposition on more than a local basis.

In almost every conflict between hunters and landowners, wildlife administrators must try to remain neutral and seek to settle the difference with compromise always keeping the welfare of the species in mind. We will always be in the middle when there is a conflict and we can always expect to receive criticism from landowners for having stocked the deer or beaver and from the hunters or trappers because they feel any controls imposed are not necessary or justified.

The beaver problem became so widespread and destructive that landowners and timber managers demanded that they be afforded relief. The result was that Alabama promulgated a regulation to remove the beaver from harvest restriction or other fur-bearers and now there is no limit or season on the beaver. The "trapper" can take beaver in any manner or time he chooses. I must report that this is only partially effective and many situations still exist with extensive damage to timber and row

crops. We still receive not so polite criticism for ever having restocked beaver into range where it had been trapped out.

We address special cases by having a field staff member visit the damage site and offer recommendations for relief. If a situation requires it, a staff member with knowledge of trapping techniques will school the individual needing relief, especially for beaver problems.

Complaints of bats and/or squirrels in the house, chimney swifts in the fireplace, etc. are handled by telephone. Instructions about closing entrances are frequently all that is needed. To solve the problem of raccoons roaming the backyards of subdivisions all that is usually necessary is to locate the individual who is feeding them.

Alligator problems are handled by staff personnel trapping and relocating. Rarely is it necessary to shoot the animal, but when time necessary to trap the offender is long, we will not hesitate to kill it.

Bear complaints requiring removal of the offending animal are always handled by trapping and relocating the animal. Our small wild population is growing and these calls are becoming more frequent. Many callers only want "how to" advice to keep the bear from causing them damage. They want the novelty of the animal without its' removal. If recommendations fail to provide relief, they often will tolerate the damage.

A permit to remove the offending animals is by far the most frequent method we use in damage control efforts. Deer, raccoons, squirrels and rabbits generate the most complaints with deer leading the list by a long way.

Crop damage complaints from these animals are satisfied by issuing permits for removal of a specified number of deer. Guidelines for taking animals are very liberal for the persons specified on the permits. During the past two years, more than 400 permits have been issued for removal of more than 4500 deer. These were causing damage to soybeans, pine seedlings, peanuts, truck

crops and orchards. In a few situations, we have issued permits on winter wheat or oats.

FUTURE PLANS

Recommendations from some sources in the public sector say that the Alabama Game and Fish Division should become more involved by paying bounties, providing trappers for trapping or shooting and paying for damages by wildlife. These suggestions will be vigorously resisted.

The Alabama Game and Fish Division has always reacted to legitimate needs of farmers and landowners needing relief from wildlife problems and we will continue to do so. A recent example is our recommendation for a Hunter's Choice season in a section of one county that is twice as long as the regular season. This was in response to a need. It hasn't solved the problem, but it has satisfied many farmers.

We have recently initiated a deer management assistance program that is designed to provide additional relief from the problems of deer over-populations. I anticipate this program will expand in the future. This will not solve the deer damage to crops everywhere, but it will help. One welcome attribute of the DMP is that none of the animals taken are wasted as is the case in permits.

We encourage harvest of all species of wild game as one method which will reduce a need for further control. This is not always successful. Even Wildlife Management Areas where hunting is free and seasons are long, there is still extensive damage by raccoon on chufa and corn. We frequently hear that the coon hunters take the coons and/or that the trappers get them and neither side is really convinced that the population usually remains high.

As I view animal control, there will never be a solution to damage and the associated control needs. However,

administrators must continue to strive for complete utilization of these renewable resources by all user groups or at some future time there will be too few trappers and/or hunters to maintain political identity and influence which is needed to protect hunting and trapping. When this occurs, we will be out of the business of wildlife management because there will no longer be money to operate viable fish and wildlife agencies.