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CONTROL OF WILD ANIMALS AND PUBLIC OPINION*

by

Charles H. Callison, Executive Vice President
National Audubon Society

In 1957 the noted ornithologist Robert Cushman Murphy and other landowners on Long Island went to court in an effort to enjoin the U.S. Department of Agriculture from the aerial spraying of DDT to "eradicate" the gypsy moth. This event was years before Rachel Carson wrote Silent Spring. It may have been the first of the modern environmental law suits, although no one called it that. Certainly it was a forerunner of the modern environmental law organizations, because about ten years later the Environmental Defense Fund was born, interestingly, in Dr. Murphy's neighborhood on Long Island. EDF's first great task and achievement was to nail down in the law the scientific case against DDT, which by the mid-sixties was overwhelming even though the control entomologists in USDA and elsewhere had developed such a bias--they had become so enchanted with DDT and so fraternal with its manufacturers--they could not see the facts before their faces.

Dr. Murphy and associates lost their case. The U.S. Supreme Court declared it moot in 1959, because the DDT had long since been applied and the gypsy moth presumably was eradicated.

Dr. Murphy and associates were right, even though the courts held them wrong. DDT has been banned. Chemical broadsides have been virtually abandoned as a weapon against the gypsy moth, and this European import, which has been periodically defoliating hardwoods in the Northeast for a half century, is being brought under control by ecological methods. It is being cut down to size by large-scale introductions of its natural insect and fungal enemies which have always kept it from being more than a minor pest in European woodlands.

Last year, responding to public hysteria which they helped stir up and eager to try a new technology on a massive scale, animal-damage control agents dumped tons of tergitol on great blackbird roosts on the Fort Campbell Military Reservation in Kentucky and at the Army Ammunition Plant near Milan, Tennessee.

Assessments of the results are conflicting, but although as many millions of birds were not wiped out as had been predicted, several hundreds of thousands were killed, and any unbiased authority on the population dynamics of the icterids and the starling will tell you it probably had no effect on the populations a year later.

I told you about the DDT operation against the gypsy moth because there is a direct parallel between it and the bird-control operations last year in Kentucky and Tennessee.

Both were simplistic, technological assaults upon an ecological problem.

Spraying blackbird roosts with a non-selective avicide is as doomed to failure as the simplistic chemical attack against the gypsy moth.

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And it is going to get the control agencies into disrepute even quicker because millions of people don't like to see birds killed needlessly. Just as there are millions of people who don't like to see coyotes killed needlessly.

There are two publics whose opinions you are going to have to take into account--and if you don't they will take you in hand.

The first is the professional leadership and generally well-informed membership of the conservation organizations such as the one I work for.

We are far too sophisticated, my friends, to buy the argument that coyotes are going to destroy the sheep industry, or to accept the figures of the woolgrowers by which they seek to prove that coyotes and eagles are killing more lambs than they are losing through sheer mismanagement and poor husbandry.

We are too sophisticated to buy the idea, ever again, that population reductions carried out over wide areas by mechanical or chemical methods are the answer to wildlife problems that are almost always local and temporary in nature.

And please don't try to tell us again that killing off foxes or skunks can prevent or ameliorate the incidence of rabies in wild animal populations when there is not a shred of credible evidence to confirm it.

Nor do we want to see control bureaucracies spring into action with a quick-fix, technological solution before anyone has researched the ecological factors that produced the problem. We've all been down that blind alley too many times.

The other public is the mass of ordinary citizens--sensitive human beings--who through the medium of television can witness for the first time in history the killing of wild animals, whether done for sport or for control purposes. Formerly they could only read about it in cold print--and there is an enormous difference.

There is no way you can make killing animals look pretty on film. There is no way a man can look heroic gunning down an eagle, or clubbing a cowering coyote, or killing a wolf which comes off looking more like a friendly dog. Even a great grizzly or polar bear collapses like a punctured balloon when hit by a high-powered rifle from a safe distance. And if the bullet doesn't hit just right the obvious agonies of the wounded animal quickly turn the sympathy of the viewer from hunter to victim.

Poisoning appears even more despicable on film or television, particularly if the pictures show animals dying or contorted in death.

So the lesson in all this, some of you may conclude, is to shun photographers and stay off television. But you can't really avoid publicity and public scrutiny if your funds come from public sources. You have to publicize and promote the problems and boast of your successes in order to get your appropriations.

I've been talking about television, but cold print can be devastating itself if accompanied by photographs. The animal protection organizations that have long criticized predator control programs as excessive, inappropriate, or unnecessary have learned they can go to the newspapers with advertisements showing and denouncing steel traps and poisons and get in return a flow of new members and funds. More funds for more such advertising.

I think it will be instructive to any of you who haven't seen it to peruse a copy of DEFENDERS, the magazine of the organization Defenders of Wildlife. Look particularly at the article and photographs beginning on page 409 of the issue for October 1975, the article entitled "Witness to a Killing." I advise you not to take such organizations lightly. Defenders of Wildlife is growing in members and influence. It is reasonably well financed. It has a highly professional staff headed by a man who has a Ph.D.

in wildlife ecology, and it has some first rate scientists on its board of directors.

There is no doubt that a profound if gradual change has taken place in the attitudes of the American people toward wildlife. Wild animals are no longer regarded by the great majority of people as either commodities to be used or menacing enemies and pests to be subdued or destroyed. The old agrarian attitudes are disappearing even faster than the proportion of farmers to urbanites is diminishing.

Victor B. Scheffer of Seattle is a professional biologist of long government experience, a charter member of the Wildlife Society, recipient of the Department of Interior's distinguished service award, and award-winning author. He has been teaching at the University of Washington since his retirement from federal service a few years ago. In his latest book, A Voice for Wildlife (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1974), he tells how his students in zoology objected to using ordinary mouse traps (which kill) to catch small animals for study. "So, instead, we set out a string of live traps and after watching our captives for a while released them to scurry away through the sagebrush."

"A small affair," he comments, "but thought provoking."

Identifying his own views with the attitudes of the younger generation, whom he calls "the new conservationists," Dr. Scheffer says the old slogans, "conservation through use," "preservation of species through cropping," and "maximum sustainable yield of the wildlife resource," are seen to be, not wrong, but incomplete. "They lack humanity. They fail to include the effect of killing upon the feelings of people."

So what do I suggest for your guidelines, if organizations like the National Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife, the National Wildlife Federation and EDF claim they also know about wildlife ecology and can read the law--and maybe help make it--and if a nosy public may pull you up short if it perceives too much killing? The answer is to do what the true professional knows he should be doing anyway provided you can keep your administrators from getting carried away with their own concept of Bureau mission and you can keep from mesmerizing yourselves with your own propaganda. (Your Bureau chiefs are more likely to be politicians and empire builders than professionals.) For example:

(1) Don't exaggerate animal damage problems, either to yourselves or to the public. A professional ornithologist who applied to the National Audubon Society for a grant to study the blackbird roosts problem opened his proposal with this hyperbole:

"Current blackbird and man associations are bringing about severe social conflict in the U.S."

Come now, dear sir! In a nation that knows something about social conflicts, the blackbird problem is like a flea on the tail of an elephant.

The point is, try to keep your perspective.

(2) Make use of your opportunities to educate--to put down the old myths and prejudices about wildlife. I was more than mildly astonished to learn by your workshop program that the State of South Dakota has a Reptile Control Agent. He will be telling you Wednesday about snake control. I mean no reflection on Mr. Steve Thompson, who I am sure is an able young man and may even like snakes, but I sincerely hope he is one of a kind in the U.S.A.. Perhaps he takes the place in South Dakota of the Jaycees with their obscene "rattlesnake roundups" in Oklahoma and Texas.

Steve Thompson, I hope you will never play on the unreasoning hatred of snakes that so many people have acquired in childhood--and there may be times when you are tempted to do so--but instead you tell your clients the scientific facts about reptiles.

(3) Most animal damage problems are but symptoms of more complex ecological or environmental displacements. Work at being honest enough intellectually to admit it when you don't understand the roots of the problem. Call for research, and until the research is completed be as tentative and cautious in your treatments as a physician who doesn't know whether his patient has bubonic plague or infectious hepatitis.

(4) Most animal damage problems are temporary and local and yield readily to temporary and local treatment. Don't make a big thing of them. Just because raccoons are raiding one farmer's sweet corn, don't rush to press and to Farm Bureau with a call for a county-wide war against raccoons.

(5) In all cases seek to use biological and cultural methods of control rather than chemical and mechanical means. This will minimize killing and win you nothing but applause from your two publics.

(6) When you have to use the direct methods, as indeed you will from time to time, let it be your professional goal to kill or otherwise remove the minimum number of animals to solve the problem. This also will win you nothing but applause from your publics (as well as from the farmer or householder who called for help.)