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Dale Rollins

*Texas Agricultural Extension Service, San Angelo, TX*

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# COYOTES: A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

DALE ROLLINS, Associate Professor and Extension Wildlife Specialist, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, 7887 N. Hwy. 87, San Angelo, TX 76901

**Abstract:** Predators and predator management in general are always controversial topics. As with most controversies, both ends of an emotional continuum vying for the attention of the nonvocal, uncommitted majority. To provide unbiased information on the controversy surrounding coyotes (*Canis latrans*) in Texas, the Texas Agricultural Extension Service produced a 23-minute video in 1991. The video addresses both "sides" of the coyote "coin" while providing factual biological information on the topic. The video has been quite popular, and has received both state and national awards.

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The relative and absolute merits of coyotes and coyote management will be cussed and discussed during this conference. As with most emotional debates, neither end of the emotional continuum is likely to change its position(s) significantly. However, both sides plead their case to the 80 percent of so of Americans who comprise the non-aligned, nonvocal majority. Their voting power will ultimately decide the direction of coyote (i.e., predator) management.

Educating this segment of society (i.e., largely urban, middle-aged and youth audiences) requires more innovation than the traditional Extension "factsheet." In 1991, the Texas Agricultural Extension Service (TAEX) produced the video "*A Matter of Perspective*" as an attempt to educate both urban and rural audiences on the issues surrounding coyotes and their management in Texas.

## Video production

From the outset, I decided that the message of the video should be unbiased and be based on biological information, not simply rhetoric. However, when addressing such emotional topics, one cannot, and probably should not, divorce emotion from the message entirely. Thus, my goal was for the completed video to have a foundation of science, but adequately embrace the emotion of both "ends" of the argument.

Scripting for this video was a difficult task. I had my own personal biases to put aside. Further, being stationed in San Angelo, the "sheep and goat capital" of Texas, and working with a predominantly agricultural clientele (i.e., sheep and goat ranchers),

my writing position was tenuous at times. I hoped to incorporate not only the statistics of each argument (e.g., financial losses to coyotes), but to also provide the non-aligned viewer with the perspectives involved at each end of the continuum.

*"Where you stand on an issue usually depends upon where you sit." -- Anonymous*

I knew that one side (the ranchers) would insist that I show video of a coyote attacking a lamb and similar gruesome scenes to drive home their premise that coyotes are bloodthirsty, insatiable killers. Similarly, I knew the other side ("environmentalists") would argue that a coyote in a steel leghold trap should be seen, jerking violently while chewing at its restrained paw to demonstrate the perceived inhumaneness of some control practices. However, I chose to exclude such inflammatory scenes that would do more to incite than educate the viewing audience. If I could keep both "sides" equally upset, I figured that I was in just about the right position!

## Taping and production

Once the script had been written and reviewed by at least five technical reviewers, it was time to bid the project out for production. Bids for the project ranged from \$9,000 to \$27,500. The successful bid was from Texas Farm Bureau, so I arranged a planning meeting with their video producer Mr. Gary Joiner. Initially, I was concerned that the bid from Texas Farm Bureau was too low, and that the production would wind up as a "stuffy" corporate-type production that lacked the emotion that I wanted. However, after meeting with Mr. Gary

Joiner, TFB's video specialist, I was convinced that he had the talent and where-with-all to make the video what I had pictured in my mind

We began the project only a limited amount of stock video of coyotes. Therefore, we (Joiner, his cameraman Tab Patterson, and me) spent three days in Kent, Dickens, and Shackelford counties calling and videotaping coyotes in August 1991. Despite the hot weather, we were able to get sufficient coyote footage, including some outstanding scenes of a coyote "challenging" me (the caller) at a distance of about 50 feet from the camera. This scene is used at the opening sequence of the video.

Once the field taping was completed, Joiner and Patterson began editing and producing the video. Now it was time to secure the narrator. From the outset, I had Mr. Rex Allen in mind for the narrator. My reasoning was that Rex Allen's voice offered instant recognition and credibility (per his experiences with Walt Disney nature films) to both rural and urban audiences. I was able to secure his telephone number and contacted him directly, telling him what the project entailed and its purpose. After some negotiations, he agreed to narrate the film, much to my elation.

Once completed, the total running time of the video was 23 minutes, about six minutes longer than what we had planned initially. However, Joiner and I agreed that the story didn't really drag anywhere, so we decided to stay with the 23-minute length.

### **Audience response**

Since 1991, the video has been shown to an estimated 40,000 Texans. Additionally, it has been broadcast on at least one national and one state cable TV program with potential audiences of over 400,000 viewers. Response to the video has been exceptionally positive, even from those viewers at the far right and left of the coyote controversy. The video was awarded the "Outstanding Marketing Video" from the National Agricultural Marketing Association in 1992, Outstanding Video Feature by the Texas Chapter, The Wildlife Society in 1992, and the *Outstanding Communication in Wildlife Damage Management* by the Berryman Institute (Utah State University) in 1994.

I have personally shown the video to some 3,000 viewers since 1992, ranging from civic groups

to sheep and goat ranchers. It has been especially interesting to gauge the responses from urban viewers, who were the intended target of the video.

Indeed, several analogies were used in the script itself to give an urban perspective on a very rural situation (i.e., predation). For example, in one instance a rancher describes his stock losses to coyotes as that of a burglar's victim. While urbanites are insulated from losses to predators, they can relate well to burglary and theft. Similarly, another scene relates the nuisance aspect of coyotes (a rural problem) to urban dwellers by showing dogs digging in garbage cans (an urban problem).

Video as an educational format does pose one problem relative to more traditional "slide talks" in that video projectors are uncommon, sometimes unwieldy, and expensive. A traditional TV (eg, 21 inch screen) and VCR can be used for small audiences (e.g., < 40 people), but a projector is needed for audiences > 100 viewers. Likewise, a good audio system is necessary to adequately address larger groups. However, given these caveats, a well thought out and visually appealing video can serve as a very effective instructional tool.

### **Conclusion**

I believe that "*A Matter of Perspective*" has achieved its objective of providing unbiased information on an emotional, controversial topic of which there seems to be no shortage in the wildlife management world. Other species/topics that I've considered doing a sequel on include mountain lions, endangered species, and hunting in general. Copies of the video are available for \$20 per copy from TAEX, 7887 N. Hwy. 87, San Angelo, TX 76901. I welcome any comments or criticisms from those viewing the video.

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