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THE URBAN-SUBURBAN CANADA GOOSE: AN EXAMPLE OF SHORT-SIGHTED MANAGEMENT?

by Michael R. Conover 1/

During the last 30 years, Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) populations have become established in many urban and suburban parts of North America. Most of these scattered populations were established when live geese were released in these areas or nearby rural areas by individual hunters, sportmen's groups and game agencies. The birds quickly found lawns in urban-suburban areas an abundant source of nutritious grass for grazing and discovered people willing to provide supplementary handouts. The resident goose populations thrived; in Connecticut alone their population has increased to 9,000. However, the increased populations contributed little to the hunter's take because the geese usually remained in urban-suburban areas where limited hunting occurred.

As resident goose populations increased, water companies, homeowners, park managers and golfers began to complain about both the numbers of birds and their fecal material which was deposited everywhere. Unfortunately, there are no easy ways to alleviate the problems. We have found that the chemical repellent, Mesurol, can keep geese away from areas where they are unwanted, but this repellent is expensive. Geese can also be discouraged from using areas if the landowner is willing to drain ponds, replace grass with an unpalatable ground cover such as pachysandra, or use many bushes and hedges to landscape their lawns. For the most part, however, landowners feel the "cures" are worse than the problem. In Connecticut, we also found that resident Canada geese are forced to the Long Island shore

after inland waters freeze in mid-winter. Hence a special goose hunting season in mid-winter was initiated to try to harvest these birds, but hunters do not take enough of them to control the populations.

The urban-suburban geese illustrate two problems in wildlife management and wildlife damage control. The first is that the costs and benefits of a wildlife population are borne by different groups in society. In the case of resident flocks of Canada geese, their assets still outweigh their liabilities for the citizens of Connecticut. The beneficiaries are mainly hunters and people who like to watch or feed the geese, but these people do not bear the costs. Those accrue to landowners, golf courses, and water companies. Hence these geese evoke strong but mixed emotions among our citizens, and this makes any decision on how to manage their populations controversial.

The second troubling aspect of these urban-suburban goose flocks is that this is a problem of our own making. The birds are in urban-suburban areas because man released them in or near these areas. Unfortunately, this problem is not unique. Many of the exotic animals which wildlife managers or other well-meaning people have released into the wild have become pests. Nevertheless, exotic animals are still being released in part because not enough thought is given to what sort of problems the animal may cause later. What is needed is a system of accountability so that the people who benefit from the releases will compensate those that are injured by them. Perhaps the organization that wants to release an animal into the wild should be responsible for any damage caused by the descendants of the released animals. Because the exotic populations often cross into other states, perhaps approval of the federal government should be required before any exotic or extirpated species or subspecies is reintroduced into the wild.

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