

Urban Coyote Problems and Efficient Control Methods

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ABSTRACT As coyote (*Canis latrans*) conflicts with human interests grow across the United States, wildlife control operators (WCOs) have begun to service the coyote control market. But coyote control poses great risks to wildlife control operators as it is fraught with challenges ranging from animal welfare issues to public relations. Greater awareness, training, and sensitivity on the part of service providers can go a long way to decrease public misperceptions of coyote control methods. This paper reviews the key qualities that characterize successful coyote control companies.

KEY WORDS *Canis latrans*, coyote, human dimensions, shooting, trapping, urban wildlife, wildlife control operators.

As coyotes (*Canis latrans*) have expanded their range (Thurber and Peterson 1991), an increase in human-coyote encounters has been reported (Curtis et al. 2007). The trend of media reports has been increasing on a monthly basis over the past few years throughout the United States (Lexus Nexus Academic search 5/19/2011). Wildlife control operators (WCO) seeking to respond to customer complaints about coyotes need to understand the intellectual climate surrounding the public's view of coyotes as well as obtain the necessary training and tools needed to handle coyote complaints professionally.

Since 1980, I have resolved coyote complaints and recorded over 1,000 coyotes complaints from Texas and Oklahoma. What follows is a description of the elements I have found to characterize effective companies involved in urban coyote control.

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE WCO CONTROL SERVICES

Companies seeking to provide effective coyote control need to have 3 basic traits. First, they must commit to continued professional development. Second, they must be able to communicate the facts concerning coyotes and their control in an effective manner to their clients and public. Third, they must use the best management tools while avoiding less effective or more risky tools.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development is the foundation of successful wildlife management companies regardless of the species being managed. All other qualities are based on the information, skills, and attitude gained from submitting one's company to continual improvement.

Customers and the wider public are increasingly demanding more expertise from those who service their needs.

WCOs should expand their knowledge and skill base in three key areas. First, they must become very familiar with the life history of coyotes. Second, they must become skilled technicians in the employment of tools used to control coyotes. Finally, they must master the ability to communicate their expertise to nonprofessionals.

Professional development is not a single event, it is an ongoing process. Fortunately, a variety of resources are available to assist WCOs in gaining more expertise. I have listed a few resources by category to highlight a portion of the vast amount of material available that presents the most updated information on coyote control.

Examples of Conferences, Seminars, and Workshops:

- National Wildlife Control Operators Association Annual Convention
- Wildlife Control Technology Annual Seminar
- University of Nebraska-Lincoln Urban Coyote Management
- Fur Takers' College—Fur Takers of America
- Urban Coyote Control Training Program by the Oklahoma Wildlife Control® Limited Liability Company)

Suggested Publications:

- *Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage*. Editors, Scott E. Hygnstrom, Robert M. Timm, Gary E. Larson. 1994. University of Nebraska-Lincoln. 2 vols.
- *Wildlife Control Technology*, R.J.E. Publications Cortland, IL 60112
- Proceedings of the Vertebrate Pest Conference
- Proceedings of the Wildlife Damage Management Conference
- *Best Management Practices: Trapping Coyotes in the Eastern United States* (see: http://fishwildlife.org/files/EasternCoyote_BMP.pdf)
- *Best Management Practices: Trapping Coyotes in the Western United States* (see http://fishwildlife.org/files/WesternCoyote_BMP.pdf)

Even after gaining familiarity with the information contained in these resources, professional WCOs must learn to adapt that information to the nuances and characteristics of the coyotes in their location. Failure to make adjustments will result in diminished ability to control coyotes.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

In the simplest terms, communication involves the transmission of ideas from one person to another. For communication to be effective, it must be understood by the recipient in a way that is both accurate to its factual basis and appropriate for their apprehension and moral sensitivities (Hulbert and Capon 1972). The process is complex and fraught with difficulties. We suggest, however, that a negative response is not sufficient evidence that the communication was ineffective. We define effective communication as the transfer of factual information in a manner that is respectful of the dignity of the listener but does not attempt to mislead the listener. This principle does not mean that one must say everything one knows. For instance, a child may inquire about the final disposition of the coyote. We would argue that the WCO could simply defer the question to the child's parent. In like manner, we would never suggest the WCO tell a lie, no matter how well-intentioned it might be. A second element of effective communication is to advocate for the truth and refute error. While WCOs should not be looking for arguments, it is important that they understand how to respond to common myths. In light of those principles, we believe the

effective WCO must learn, whenever possible, how to handle potential conflicts in advance.

Public Perception.

The public holds a number of misunderstandings regarding the causes of human-coyote conflicts. This misunderstanding is demonstrated by the frequent appeal to various myths employed to oppose the use of effective tools and methods. WCOs must become familiar with these myths and learn how to answer them when talking with potential clients.

Myth #1.

“The coyote is just being a coyote.” In fact, most people do not know what a coyote truly is, how it adapts and behaves in an urban environment, or how aggressive and relentless they can be when trying to obtain food or territory. The misconception is fueled by movies and television shows that depict coyotes as playful and carefree in fields of flowers. These sources persuade some people to assign human behaviors and emotions to these predators.

Myth #2.

“The coyotes are a problem because we have moved into their territory.” In many cases, humans are not displacing coyotes, nor are we encroaching on their habitats. Rather, our actions attract them into the urban environment. There is currently more undeveloped property in the United States than there is urban development.

In addition, the public may become confused by the misleading comments made by animal protectionists about the nature and effectiveness of the tools used to manage coyotes (Fox and Papouchis 2004). WCOs must learn to factually educate those who question and challenge their actions (Green 2007). They must avoid addressing issues of values and world views, not because such conversation lacks importance (Vantassel 2009) but because it consumes valuable business time. Rather, they must simply state the facts and refute statements that mislead the customer. For instance, we have heard many people suggest that foothold traps result in amputations. One simple way to refute that claim, is to ask why trappers would go through all that work just to collect feet? Showing clients the equipment and explaining how it works can also alleviate misconceptions, and reinforce your argument concerning its humaneness when correctly used.

Greater awareness and sensitivity on the part of WCOs can decrease significantly public misperceptions regarding coyote control methods. We propose a methodology for responding to coyote complaints, which has been effective for our company in resolving human-coyote conflicts while simultaneously reducing public complaints.

Using open trash cans without lockable lids provide a readily accessible food source for coyotes, by drawing rodents, fox, and coyotes themselves. Continued use will bait the coyotes into an area where these actions occur. "If you feed them, they will come."

Debris piles left unmoved or unkempt in backyards provide shelter for coyotes. This shelter is close to food sources, and more desirable in most cases than what nature can provide. "If you build it, they will come."

Lawn irrigation systems provide more than enough runoff water that will sustain coyotes, as will fish ponds. Combine the water source with the overabundant food sources provided via the trash cans, along with the debris piles that provide shelter, and people have created a sustainable habitat for coyotes within their neighborhoods. Coyotes will eventually make use of it. "If you provide drink for their thirsts, they will come."

PROFESSIONAL TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

WCOs must balance the demand to resolve the problem with the desire to minimize negative publicity. Therefore, in selecting tools and techniques for the control of coyotes, WCOs must consider the risk against the benefit of the tools available. While recognizing the unfairness of the animal protectionists' claims against tools of coyote control (Vantassel 2009), we do believe that some tools are better than others in terms of humaneness, user safety, and effectiveness. The use of foothold traps for instance, has been a long standing staple of those controlling coyotes, and currently still is. However, in the urban environment, the foothold trap, be it padded or non-padded, is not the most effective tool, and it's certainly not the most socially accepted device in a service provider's arsenal of equipment. On the other hand, we have found that the Collarum® device provided by Wildlife Control Supplies of East Granby, CT, to be a more effective method of coyote control in an urban environment, and much more readily accepted by the citizenry, who may view the device in use.

By understanding the behavioral and seasonal characteristics and diets of coyotes, the service provider will have a better understanding of the equipment that needs to be used in an urban environment.

In contrast, those devices that pose significant risks or are subject to public misperceptions need to be avoided for social acceptance in an urban environment. Such devices include cyanide guns (M-44), body-gripping devices, suspended hook and cable devices, and small diameter neck snares at crossing points. Such devices are less target specific and can cause irreparable harm to a nontarget animal. In addition, some of these devices are too inhumane; given alternative options available, their use runs the risk of creating negative publicity.

In conclusion, it is paramount that the service provider is an effective, efficient, and knowledgeable professional at all times, while providing urban coyote control services. The coyote crouched in the brush and debris is not the only species that has eyes on your activities.

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