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Dealing with the Issues of the Urban Coyote: One County's Experience

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ABSTRACT: Behind dire wolves and saber-toothed cats, coyotes rank as the third most commonly found mammal in the La Brea Tar Pits proving they have been residents of Los Angeles County for thousands of years. There has probably always been some degree of human-coyote conflict, but to many current residents, the situation seems to be getting worse. The Los Angeles County Department of Agricultural Commissioner/Weights and Measures is one of the last public agencies in the County attempting to manage coyotes in certain situations, which is proving to be challenging, given the changing nature of public opinion on coyote control issues and the public's general knowledge of wildlife. I discuss how the Los Angeles County, Department of Agricultural Commissioner/Weights and Measures attempts to meet the expectations of the public in the light of these changing attitudes.

KEY WORDS: California, *Canis latrans*, coyote, human-wildlife conflict, Los Angeles County, trapping, urban coyote, urban wildlife, wildlife management

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INTRODUCTION

The coyote (*Canis latrans*) or its ancestors have been in the area now known as Los Angeles County for a considerably long time, with the oldest specimen found dating back to 46,800 years; it is conceivable they may have existed here as much as 100,000 years ago after the Pacific Ocean receded at the beginning of the last Ice Age. Coyotes are the third-most-common mammal found in the La Brea Tar Pits in Hancock Park after dire wolves (*C. dirus*) and saber-toothed cats (*Smilodon sp.*), so there is little doubt about their having been here long before our current urbanization of the area (Giles 1960, Gill 1970, La Brea Tar Pits and Museum 2016).

The Los Angeles County Agricultural Commissioner/Weights and Measures, originally the "Horticultural Commission" (hereafter, "Department"), was founded in 1881 and was established in part to *control or reduce the spread of established animals...and pests detrimental to agriculture, ornamental landscaping, or the environment through biologically sound and efficient control methods* (LA County Code 2.40.040) (CCR 2016). The Department's photo archives are full of taciturn inspectors performing pest control work, everything from using carbon bisulphide to control ground squirrels in the Palos Verdes cliffs to an iconic inspector on horseback in the rolling hills of Whitter with saddlebags full of treated grain, a rifle, and leghold traps.

Although rodent and predator control had been performed in prior years, serious steps toward coyote management for human safety were initiated after the death of a three-year-old girl in Glendale, CA in 1981, attacked by a coyote. Fifty-five coyotes were removed, within 80 days, within a 1/2-mile radius from the location of the tragic incident (Howell 1982). It was in response to that fatal attack that the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors issued a predatory animal control policy directing the Department to do three things:

- Along with the Department of Animal Care and Control, develop and distribute educational information on coyotes
- Provide training on coyote management to any city

that requests it

- Provide "direct suppression" of bold urban coyotes in unincorporated areas of the County and contract cities on a complaint response basis.

Our current policy was derived from that directive, and it still provides the guidelines that shape our policy today.

THE DEPARTMENT'S PROGRAM

The Department's implementation of this 1981 mandate from the Board of Supervisors has evolved over the years to the present program described here. Almost immediately, the Department developed an informational brochure explaining how to avoid conflicts with coyotes. The latest iteration of the brochure, (which is now published in three languages: English, Spanish, and Mandarin) stresses that coyotes are a common mammal found throughout California. It gives information about general coyote biology, offers tips to avoid interacting with coyotes, and suggests methods of hazing should one encounter a coyote at close proximity.

The actual suppression of coyotes falls to the Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Division of the Department. Typically, the Division receives a call from the public or another agency about a coyote concern. It is assigned to one of the IPM Division's biologists for investigation. After investigation of the complaint, if it is determined that a coyote meets the criteria of a "bold urban coyote" we can, in unincorporated parts of the county and in nine contract cities (currently), remove that animal if we can find a suitable trapping site that meets our criteria. Coyotes are never removed simply because they are seen in an area or for the purposes of general population reduction. There is no attempt to eradicate or manage coyote *populations*; we are only targeting specific coyotes to eliminate the aggressive behavior of the particular coyote(s) in an area, with the aim to prevent an escalation of behaviors that could lead to a human injury or death (Smith 2007).

Defining "bold urban coyote" is not an exact science; however, for the purposes of the program, the following behaviors may be considered as being indicative of bold urban coyotes:

- Aggressive/threatening behavior towards a person including attacking, biting, scratching, lunging, charging, growling, and stalking
- Hanging around a yard, playground, or other public place, especially if children are present, and appearing unafraid of people
- Pet killing/attacks in the pet's yard or of a pet on a leash
- Pet stalking

In most cases, livestock depredation in rural areas is not considered as having been perpetrated by bold urban coyotes, and before any suppression in a situation such as this, it needs to be approved by the Program Deputy. The two main methods that we employ for coyote suppression are trapping and shooting.

MANAGEMENT

Trapping

What is trapping? To the Department, and for the purposes of this discussion, “trapping” means any method employed to “catch” an animal and unless otherwise specified, includes leghold traps, cage traps, and snares.

Selection of Trapping Sites

Out of the Department's experience with trapping over the years, a protocol has been developed for identifying areas that lend themselves to trapping. One of the major concerns when performing trapping is the safety of our trappers. With that in mind, and in deference to the sensibilities of the public, traps are only placed out of public view and in areas where an animal can be euthanized with the minimum risk of injury to the trappers. Unfortunately, many times the areas the coyotes prefer to use for access to a neighborhood do not meet our “out of sight” criteria and therefore cannot be used. This creates situations where a well-placed trap may indeed catch an offending animal, but can't be placed; this is often perceived by the public as a lack of response to their concerns. Written permission from the landowner must be obtained if traps are set within 150 yards of any structure that is used as a permanent or temporary residence (14CCR §465.5(g) (3)) (CCR 2016). This permission can be somewhat problematic to obtain in urban areas where there may be a number of residences within 150 yards of a trapping location, any one of which could refuse to allow the trap to be placed.

Trap Selection

The mainstay of the Department's trapping program prior 1998 was the padded steel-jawed leghold trap. Use of cage trapping and the Novak leg snare had been explored in 1989 as a possible replacement or augmentation to the trapping program; however, after a year-and-a-half of field trials using cage traps, Novak leg snares and legholds in four geographically different unincorporated areas of the county, it was determined that the success rate of leghold traps was so superior that the use of legholds was the preferred method (Wightman 1989). After passage of Proposition 4 in 1998, which banned the use of steel-jawed leghold traps (padded or not) except for use by government officials where it is determined the padded steel-jawed leghold trap is the only way to protect human

health and safety, the Department sought out other trap designs that would allow it to continue to provide the services we were required to perform.

Our efforts to find alternatives to leghold traps led to testing of a variety of different traps including the Collarum®, Excel, Godwin, Belisle foot snare, and a design that Kings County modeled on a USDA Wildlife Services design. Each trap was tried in various locations throughout the County and evaluated. Although all the designs tested had their merits, the two that work the most reliably for the program are the Collarum® (Wildlife Control Supplies, LLC, East Granby, CT) and the Belisle foot snare (Les Entreprises Bélisle, Blainville, Quebec, Canada) (Figure 1, Figure 2), often times used in tandem with each other.

Length of Trapping Period

How long a trap remains in an area depends on several factors. In general, an area is trapped for a two-week cycle. The kinds of things are evaluated and used to make a

Figure 1. Collarum®, an alternative to the leghold trap for capturing coyotes (photo from Wildlife Control Supplies, LLC).

Figure 2. Belisle foot snare for capturing coyotes (photo from Wildlife Control Supplies, LLC).

determination to continue or terminate trapping can include: the number of animals trapped; if problem coyotes may have been removed from the area by other means, such as by being hit by a car; or that the undesirable behavior that prompted the trapping has discontinued.

Trapping Review

In many cases, it isn't always clear if the "right one" was caught. In other words, although an attempt is made, it's not always known if the animal(s) we have removed are the actual ones causing the reported problems. However, it has been our experience that once an animal(s) has been removed from an area, the unwanted behavior stops. This is mirrored in the findings of Timm and Baker (2007), who conducted one of the most comprehensive studies relative to problem urban coyotes, where it was revealed that it may not always be necessary to remove the actual animals causing the problems, because trapping and removing one or more out of a local population seems to re-install the fear of humans in the animals that remain.

Shooting

Shooting can be another very effective tool for the removal of a coyote in an area that does not lend itself to trapping. Generally, there are three situations when direct shooting may occur: 1) when a coyote presents itself as a target of opportunity, for example one is sighted while a trapper is out setting traps or responding to a call; or 2) when responding to a call of an animal hanging around a yard; and 3) calling coyotes into shooting range using a predator call. This can pose quite a challenge, due to the fact that in Los Angeles County there is not much rural area anymore, and even in urban areas where it still is possible to shoot, the Department's policy prohibits attempting to shoot a coyote if there is even the slightest risk of a mishap occurring.

When shooting, we primarily rely on bolt-action .22 rifles; however, for longer-range shots, in areas where it is safe to do so, we have the option of using a .17 Remington cartridge in a scoped bolt-action rifle. When using an electronic call, we use pump-action 12-gauge shotguns with either 00 buckshot or #5 3" magnum turkey loads.

The Department's Response to the Public

The Department receives calls from many different segments of the community, including city and county agencies seeking assistance or advice on coyote issues. However, most inquiries come from the general public, and these are often a referral from the Los Angeles County Department of Animal Care and Control. The response to these calls varies based upon the individual merits of the call. Often, general information on coyote behavior and ways to avoid creating a habituated coyote are discussed. If the caller requests it or it seems prudent, a biologist is sent to assess an individual's home or the site of the complaint. That way, we can offer tailored advice to suit the actual situation the caller is facing. If, in the opinion of the biologist, a situation warrants coyote removal, and it is in a situation where we can do so, a trapper is assigned to take a look at the area to see if a trap could be placed in the area. During calendar year 2015, our biologists responded to more than 500 calls regarding coyotes.

As a general rule, coyote complaint calls fall into several groups:

- Someone has seen a coyote in their neighborhood and they want to report it.
- Someone has seen a coyote in their neighborhood and they fear for children or pets in the area.
- Either the caller or their neighbor has lost a pet to coyote depredation.
- Someone had a close encounter with a coyote that put them in fear of their safety (very rare).

Almost always, the individuals who call want something done about the coyotes they are reporting. In the case of people who have lost pets, they often want "revenge" for the loss of their pet and demand that we immediately remove the animal by lethal means. The other trend, which seems to be emerging over the last few years, is the perception on the public's part that coyotes are vicious animals that constitute an immediate threat to humans, particularly children, even if the observed animal is just minding its own business and passing through the neighborhood.

Challenges to the Program

Public Perception

One of the realities of dealing with coyotes is the fact that seemingly large segments of the population have a great distaste for any kind of control work that results in the killing of animals. A few years ago, when rumor had it that a family of coyotes had taken up residence in an unoccupied home in Glendale and media attention publicized that our Department might do control work at the property, our office staff received a myriad of phone calls, from literally all around the world, condemning the proposed action. It even included one individual who claimed that they would take their own life if even one coyote was harmed.

The general public and many city officials have a very limited knowledge of coyote biology, and when they share information, it is often not correct. Many callers are surprised to learn that coyotes are common mammals, as they often believe or have been told that they are an endangered species, or at the very least are rare in Los Angeles County. After explaining that coyotes are non-game mammals that can be taken at any time, the caller often claims they were told otherwise, and that they are either a protected species or they cannot be trapped legally.

There is also the misconception that nuisance wildlife, such as coyotes, can simply be relocated somewhere else so as not to pose a problem. Often the public responds that they don't want an animal euthanized, but simply relocated. When dealing with these calls, time is always taken to explain that there are many good reasons why relocation is not an option, including the following:

- If the animal is causing problems in your neighborhood, why put it into someone else's backyard where it will again become a nuisance?
- When a habitat can sustain a coyote, there is likely already one there, so relocating an animal into an unfamiliar area (another coyotes' territory) will often lead to one of the animals not surviving.
- You may be moving diseases or parasites from one population to another.

- It is illegal to relocate wildlife in the state without a permit from the CDFW.

In the Department's experience, the public also has developed a greater sensitivity, either pro or con, to coyotes being in their neighborhoods. Many of the people that call us express a great fear for themselves, their pets, and especially children in the neighborhood after observing a coyote in their area, even though there is no aggressive behavior exhibited by the animal. Paradoxically, many members of the public are so concerned about the welfare of individual problem coyotes that they want a "no kill" solution – either relocation or some other way to scold the animal – essentially "ruin" its self-esteem, so as to discourage it from any depredations on pets or attacks on people.

Governmental Issues

Animal control officials in general do not see issues relating to coyotes as part of their services provided to the communities they serve, and in most cases they strictly concern themselves with cats and dogs. All do provide general information about coyotes; however, they provide no additional services regarding coyotes or nuisance wildlife. This interpretation of their role in animal welfare can range from being unsupportive of coyote control efforts to being outright hostile to the use of control measures to deal with coyote issues. This lack of support leads to the Agricultural Commissioner/Weights and Measures Department as the only public entity in the County left to deal with the removal of aggressive urban coyotes.

Another issue with animal care agencies is the lack of enforcement of feeding ordinances. In Los Angeles County, animals are covered under Title 10 of the County Code, 14 CCR § 10.84.010, which states: "Except as otherwise provided for herein, no person shall feed or in any manner provide food to a nondomesticated rodent or a nondomesticated mammalian predator" (CCR 2016). This offense is a misdemeanor and, unfortunately, is rarely if ever enforced. In all fairness to animal control agencies, it can be difficult to "prove" who is feeding coyotes in a neighborhood unless the feeding is done in the presence of their officers. These agencies do not have the budget or manpower to simply stake out each area in the county where this may be occurring. To further complicate matters, in areas where feral cat colonies are permitted, even though the feeding is being done for the cats, coyotes will take advantage of the free food, in consuming both the food left for the cats as well as the cats themselves.

Trapping/Trap Placement Issues

Lack of access to areas suitable for control work can be a major problem when trying to place a control device in an urban area. It has been the Department's experience that coyotes travel in areas in a routine way, often favoring paths that keep them obscured from view. Flood control channels in particular are a favorite route of travel. So there often is a "hunt" for a spot that will be out of sight of the public to prevent trap vandalism and other issues. In areas where there is a suitable location for trap placement, the problem still remains of securing permission to place traps. This is often in an area controlled by cities or other

entities that, for reasons of their own, oppose coyote control. This often leads to placing traps in areas where they may not be in the best location to get results, or placing no traps at all. Experience over the years suggests that coyotes cannot be lured or enticed to areas they don't already frequent.

The use of cage trapping is considered by some to be more "humane," and therefore an easier way to gain permission to use in an urban setting. Yet, in our year-and-a-half-long trapping trial in 1989, cage traps proved to be ineffective. When the aim of coyote removal is protection of public safety, quick removal of a problem animal is the goal, and cage traps take much longer, if successful at all. We have used cage traps with some success for the capture of very young coyotes, but another drawback is the high rate of vandalism to the cage trap itself, or the intentional release of a trapped animal, ostensibly by a concerned individual, making it virtually impossible to re-capture the animal.

Anyone who has ever set a gopher trap and wound up with a sprung trap and no gopher, over and over again, knows that even after following all of the time-honored instructions on placing a trap, it requires a certain skill that is only attained through practice and intuition. Trapping coyotes is one of these refined skills, bordering on an art, and recruiting personnel that can attain that skill is a challenge. Also, since coyotes are usually euthanized by use of a firearm, and not all employees have the ability to use a firearm, it further complicates matters.

Lack of a Regional Plan

As coyotes do not respect geopolitical boundaries, the need for a regional approach to coyote management is essential. Often, coyote management only occurs when some localized event, such as citizens' complaints of multiple pet depredations in a neighborhood, or a human/coyote incident, occurs. This often leads to high-profile media coverage, with many public policies being influenced by the "court of public opinion," with little regard for science-based input. Many governmental officials do not want to anger the very vocal segment of the population that advocate that no control be undertaken, or to be cast as the "bad guy" that sanctioned the removal of coyotes. Any plan that is crafted will need to be flexible enough to assess each encounter with coyotes on a case-by-case basis, yet firm enough to establish action points where reasoned steps can be taken to mitigate potential risk to the public. Any plan that does not include a component for the removal of aggressive, habituated animals is flawed. Just like any other integrated pest management plan, if we eliminate an effective tool from our IPM tool box, we will have fewer options at our disposal to deal with the problem. Without a regional plan to address the various issues of urban coyotes, the challenges being experienced today will only continue. My greatest fear is that we will eventually have another human fatality that might have otherwise been avoided.

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