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Managing Wildlife Damage:

The Mission of APHIS' Wild- life Services Program



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Wildlife, a Valuable Resource

Wild animals are an important part of our environment, and for centuries they have served our needs in a number of ways. Historically, many species were used for food, clothing, or adornment. But in those earlier years, wildlife was seldom managed. Some species, such as the passenger pigeon, became extinct; and other species, like the bison and beaver, became seriously depleted.

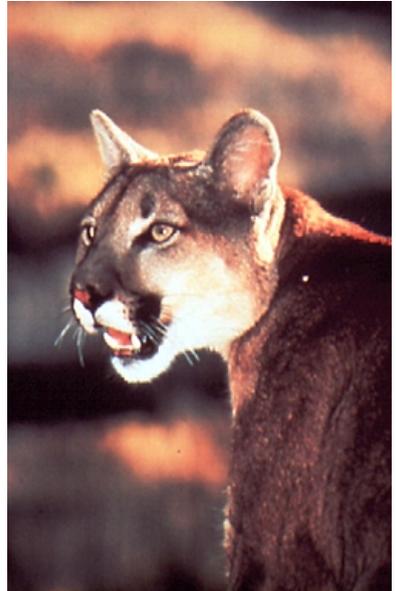
Today, wildlife continues to provide people with a variety of benefits. Wild animals contribute to our enjoyment of outdoor recreational activities such as camping, hiking, photography, and hunting. The knowledge that abundant wildlife exists is important for many people. Diverse wildlife species are major components of a healthy environment; beavers, for example, can create aquatic habitats beneficial to fish and waterfowl.

Wildlife is receiving increased attention as people develop a broadened environmental consciousness. Wildlife is now recognized as having esthetic as well as practical value and is managed by the Federal and State Governments to ensure future abundance. In some instances, however, this abundance has led to conflicts between human and wildlife interests, as the following examples illustrate.

- People admire the industrious beaver. However, beaver dams may cause flooding that damages valuable timber stands, roadways, private property, and farmland. In 1999, three beavers cut down several irreplaceable cherry trees

at the tidal basin in the heart of Washington, DC. In the Southeastern United States, beavers cause an estimated \$100 million in damage annually to public and private property.

- Mountain lions are regarded as regal animals symbolizing wilderness, and as a result of conservation efforts, their populations are thriving across much of the West. In California and Arizona, lion predation on livestock—sheep, cattle, and horses—has increased. There are also occasional encounters between lions and people. In July 1997, one lion attacked and killed a 10-year-old in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park, and another badly mauled a 4-year-old



As mountain lion populations increase, so do conflicts with people and livestock.

in the Mesa Verde National Park, also in Colorado. In 1994, two women were killed by mountain lions in California—one while jogging along the American River and the second while birding in Cuyamacca State Park.

- The mournful howl of a coyote symbolizes the wild West for many people. However, coyotes can inflict heavy economic damage to producers of domestic sheep, goats, and cattle. In 1994, sheep and goat producers lost an estimated \$23.2 million due to predation. In 1995, cattle producers' losses to predators were worth \$39.6 million. Coyotes alone

caused \$11.5 million in sheep losses, \$1.6 million in goat losses, and \$21.8 million in cattle losses nationwide. Even in Eastern States, where coyotes were relatively unheard of a decade ago, incidents of predation on livestock are increasing.

- Wildlife can adversely affect public safety and health. Commercial and military aircraft sometimes collide with birds and mammals during taxiing, takeoff, or landing. According to Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) officials, approximately 2,400 collisions between civilian aircraft and wildlife were reported from 1991 to 1997. More than



Each year, coyotes cause millions of dollars' worth of losses to sheep, goat, and cattle producers.



WS has joined with the FAA and the U.S. Air Force in an effort to reduce bird-aircraft collisions at airports.

2,500 bird strikes were reported by the U.S. Air Force during that span. Eighty percent of aircraft-wildlife collisions are believed to go unreported. In all, these collisions cause millions of dollars' worth of damage. The potential for human injury and death is increased significantly when wildlife is not kept away from airports and runways.

- Wildlife-borne diseases of significant concern to humans include rabies, bubonic plague, and histoplasmosis. These diseases can be carried, reservoired, or transmitted by wildlife to other wildlife, domestic livestock, and people. During 1996, the U.S. Public Health Service's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 7,124 cases of animal rabies in 49 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Of these cases, nearly 92 percent were in wildlife. Rabies prevention costs between \$230 million and \$1 billion a year in the United States.

Many people do not realize that everyone is adversely affected by the actions of wildlife at one time or another. Every consumer pays more for commodities when supplies are decreased or damaged by wildlife. However, the total value of the damage is extremely difficult to estimate on a national scale. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) and other researchers have previously documented annual predation losses to selected commodities across the United States. Annual losses include more than \$140 million worth of blueberries, apples, grapes, corn, and sunflowers, and more than \$14 million worth of catfish and trout. NASS estimates that wildlife-caused damage to U.S. agriculture (excluding forestry) is worth between \$600 million and \$1.6 billion a year.

Responsible Management of Wildlife Damage

Maintaining a balance between human and wildlife needs requires sensitivity. In addressing the conflicts between wildlife and people, wildlife managers must thoughtfully consider not only the needs of those directly affected by wildlife damage but also a range of environmental, sociocultural, and economic factors.

Wildlife is a valuable public resource. Federal and State Governments are responsible for maintaining healthy, stable wildlife populations. Accordingly, when wildlife causes damage, government has an obligation to manage that damage. Wildlife damage-management responsibilities and authorities fall to different agencies depending on the species, type of problem, and location. The U.S. Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has

primary responsibility for managing migratory birds and federally listed threatened and endangered species. State wildlife management agencies have primary authority for the management of nonmigratory birds and all other species of wildlife not federally listed as threatened or endangered. Legislation authorizes USDA to provide assistance upon request of State Governments, private individuals, and other Federal agencies to control and prevent damage and disease caused or carried by wildlife. Cooperative agreements provide for the management of various species, including management for the purpose of reducing and preventing damage caused by wildlife.



Fish-eating birds represent a major threat to the profitability of aquaculture operations.

The Role of Wildlife Services

Wildlife Services (WS), a unit of USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), assists in solving problems that are created when species of wildlife cause damage to agriculture. WS personnel also assist with wildlife problems involving urban or natural resources as well as threats to human health and safety.

WS is committed to the well-being of the environment and wildlife and acts as a protective buffer between wildlife and people. Failure to provide solutions to wildlife damage sometimes leads angry individuals to take actions that are ecologically and biologically damaging. Professional wildlife biologists and technicians employed by APHIS' WS program can sometimes prevent such unwise reactions. By providing a biologically sound, economically efficient response coupled with education to individuals experiencing damage, WS benefits individuals, the public, wildlife, and the environment.

WS is a Federal cooperative program that responds to requests by persons and agencies needing help in managing wildlife damage. Its field operations are conducted in accordance with all Federal and State guidelines and in cooperation with wildlife management professionals from Federal and/or State agencies. In all instances, WS programs are conducted to ensure no negative impact on wildlife populations.



Canada goose populations have increased dramatically in recent years, causing damage to real estate—from golf courses to swimming pools.

WS helps reduce wildlife damage to

- Agricultural crops—grain, sunflowers, vegetables, fruit, and nuts;
- Livestock—cattle, sheep, goats, swine, horses, and poultry;
- Commercial forests and forest products;
- Aquaculture—cultivated trout, catfish, bait fish, and marine shellfish and lobsters;
- Natural resources—wildlife, wildlife habitat, water quality, and rangelands;
- Urban and industrial property—private homes, public buildings, airports, golf courses, and reservoirs;
- Public health and safety—preventing bird strikes at airports and controlling wildlife-borne diseases; and
- Threatened or endangered species—such as the whooping crane, California least tern, Aleutian goose, San Joaquin kit fox, and roseate tern.

How WS Does Its Job

Most of WS' efforts are conducted on private land, but work is done on some public lands as well (less than 10 percent of federally owned land).

Cost sharing is an integral component of the WS program. Supervised primarily by WS personnel, most field activities are funded in part by Federal, State, or local agencies; industry groups; or individuals requesting wildlife damage-management assistance. When requested, WS provides help through technical assistance and direct control.

Technical Assistance

Technical assistance involves providing advice, recommendations, information, or materials for use in managing wildlife damage problems and helping threatened and endangered species to thrive. WS employees also help identify the responsible wildlife species and determine the extent of the damage. WS may provide recommendations concerning habitat modification, cultural practices to reduce the likelihood of wildlife damage, behavior modification of the troublesome wildlife species, or ways to reduce specific wildlife populations to control the amount of damage they cause. WS personnel may suggest

lethal or nonlethal techniques to resolve wildlife damage problems. Such assistance always takes into account environmental factors and relevant laws and regulations. WS sometimes recommends that regulatory agencies issue permits to allow resource owners to deal with wildlife problems.

Direct Assistance

Some problems caused by wildlife species are too complex or difficult for any one individual, group, or agency to solve. For example, dealing with thousands of birds roosting in an urban neighborhood is beyond the capabilities of most individuals. Likewise, capturing coyotes, bears, mountain lions, or other large animals that are preying on livestock usually requires specialized equipment and skills. In these instances, WS provides field personnel to help whoever is experiencing the problem. Direct assistance is usually provided when the resource owner's efforts, such as habitat modification or husbandry practices, have proven ineffective and technical assistance alone is inadequate. WS staff consider practical methods for resolving wildlife damage problems and take action by implementing the most strategically appropriate measures.

Techniques Recommended by WS

Whether or not a particular action is appropriate or practical depends on a variety of factors, including the species causing damage, the type of damage and its geographic location, and laws and regulations. In general, three types of actions can be considered for resolving instances of animals damaging a resource.

One approach is to move the resource away from the animal causing damage. Moving sheep out of a pasture to reduce the likelihood of predation by coyotes and moving beehives to an area away from marauding black bears are examples of this approach.

A second possibility is to exclude an animal from the resource. Using scare tactics to keep birds away from crops and electric fencing to keep predators away from livestock are examples of this technique.

The third possibility is to relocate or remove the animal causing the problem. Snaring and removing a bear from a sheep allotment and trapping a coyote that has been

killing calves are examples of this approach.

Often, the most effective strategy to resolve wildlife damage problems is to integrate the use of several methods or approaches, either all at once or in turn. This is known as integrated pest management (IPM). WS uses and recommends IPM to reduce damage by wildlife while minimizing any harmful effects of the management measures on humans, nontarget wildlife, domestic livestock, and the environment. IPM may incorporate husbandry techniques like shed lambing, modifying habitat (e.g., removing bird roosting cover adjacent to crops), or using trapping, snaring, or shooting methods.

WS personnel use and recommend the best methods available, but some of the methods currently used in wildlife damage management are not new. For example, cage and leghold traps have been used for hundreds of years. They continue to be important in wildlife management for situations where



Beavers cause damage through the flooding of property, roads, crops, and forests.

no other alternative is available. Leghold traps can be modified with padded or offset closures to make them more humane for target animals and to facilitate the release of nontarget animals back to the wild with little or no injury.

In selecting management techniques for specific damage situations, WS professionals consider the species responsible for the damage; the magnitude, geographic extent, duration, and frequency of the resource loss; and the likelihood of the conflict's being repeated. In choosing a management technique, WS specialists consider the biological and legal status of the target species and potential nontarget species, local environmental conditions and possible environmental impacts, and the practicality of available management options.

The WS program does not exterminate native wildlife species because such efforts are contrary to WS policy, are biologically unwise and impractical, and are often illegal.

APHIS spends millions of dollars each year on research to develop and improve techniques for reducing wildlife damage. Most of this research is conducted by APHIS scientists at the National Wildlife Research Center, which is headquartered in Ft. Collins, CO. In January 1999, the Center opened its new principal administrative and laboratory facility, the Wildlife Science building, on the Foothills Campus of Colorado State University in Fort Collins. The Center also has nine field stations throughout the United States. Major research activities include developing data to support Environmental Protection Agency registrations for pesticides and materials used to control vertebrates; developing non-chemical management techniques; evaluating the effectiveness and safety of new and existing management methods; studying the biology and behavior of wildlife species that cause damage; assessing wildlife damage; and providing scientific information on wildlife damage management to the WS program, other governmental agencies, and the public.



Research activities include tracking bird movements by means of radiotelemetry.

The Benefits

The efforts of APHIS' WS program often result in higher economic returns to those producing livestock or other products. For example,

- Beaver damage management activities conducted in North Carolina throughout 1997 averted the impending loss of an estimated \$3.9 million worth of damage to forest and agricultural resources, waterways, and highway infrastructures. The benefit–cost ratio of WS' intervention was 5.8 to 1, or \$5.80 saved for every \$1.00 spent.
- Beaver management in Kentucky and Tennessee costing \$55,000 over an 18-month period saved timber resources valued at \$1.5 million.

Resources protected from wildlife damage benefit the public in the form of lower consumer costs and the continued availability of a range of commodities. An effective wildlife damage-management program makes it possible to use fewer acres to produce sufficient food resources for the Nation. This also

allows for reduced use of fossil fuels, fertilizers, and pesticides.

An environmental impact statement (EIS), written in accordance with the procedures established by the National Environmental Policy Act, indicated that the WS program has no nationally significant adverse impact on wildlife species diversity or abundance. Furthermore, the EIS indicated that the program provides substantial benefits to certain threatened and endangered species, has a positive impact on protecting selected natural resources, and promotes the maintenance of human health and safety.

Additional Information: For further information about WS, contact your State's office of USDA, APHIS, WS, or write to, USDA, APHIS, WS, 4700 River Road, Unit 87, Riverdale, MD 20737–1234. Wildlife Services also maintains an informational Website at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ws>