

The Status of Nuisance Wildlife Policy in the United States

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Abstract: The need for Nuisance Wildlife Control (NWC) is changing with the increase in urban population in the United States. A survey of the states and territories of the United States in regard to NWC was assessed. A comprehensive model emerged for a system of private operators. The key elements are education, administrative oversight, sensitivity to animal welfare and human needs, and development of private enterprise while maintaining wildlife agency control.

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Nuisance wildlife control is a subject of much concern. It is being talked about not only on the farms of rural America, but also in the cities and on the neighborhood corners of suburbia. These same neighborhoods were wood lots, fields, and prime wildlife habitat not so long ago. The main change in the neighborhoods is the arrival of people, and the only time wild animals are a nuisance is when people are involved (Howard 1990). A beaver pond in a wilderness setting is a thing of beauty, but the same pond in your driveway or flooding your septic drain field is not quite as pretty.

The situation in North Carolina serves as a good example of what is occurring nationally. The population of the state of North Carolina was 5 million people in 1970. In 1980, it was 5.8 million. The population is 6.65 million now (1993 estimate), and it is projected to exceed 9 million by the year 2020 (Campbell 1994). The unprecedented growth of 1.6 million humans in the past 20 years will be nearly doubled in the next 20 years. The same projection foresaw the majority of growth occurring in the current metropolitan areas. With this increase in people, the most of whom probably will be living in wooded subdivi-

sions, an increase in the problems associated with wild creatures is bound to occur.

In 1991 the North Carolina chapter of The Wildlife Society (NCTWS) established an ad hoc committee to assess the methods of nuisance wildlife control employed in the state. The committee found current procedures adequate for protecting the wildlife resource, but lacking in responsiveness to the needs of the citizens and burdensome to agency personnel (Bromley et al. 1995). The committee felt that with appropriate guidance, the private sector could provide the needed services more efficiently. With the evident need to design a proactive policy, NCTWS and the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) decided to conduct a survey of the other states and territories of the nation to find out how nuisance wildlife control was being handled.

Methods

To obtain information on wildlife damage policy, we mailed a 1-page questionnaire to each state and territorial wildlife agency director, accompanied by a 1-page memorandum signed by the NCWRC executive director, Charles R. Fullwood. We asked if landowners were allowed to shoot or trap animals which damaged property and if landowners were allowed to designate an agent to conduct the same activities. We asked if a permit was required for a landowner or their agent to shoot or trap nuisance wildlife. We asked if their state declared any bird or animal as a pest (all protection removed) by law or regulation and for a list of the species if any. We asked if their state licensed nuisance wildlife control businesses, and if so what the fees for a license were. We asked for the qualifications required for a nuisance wildlife control operator's license, specifically if a wildlife related degree is required, or whether any special courses, license testing, bonding, or a basic trapper's license were required. We requested a copy of their state laws, regulations, and any procedural material pertaining to nuisance wildlife control to be forwarded for our review. Upon receiving the responses, we performed a content analysis and reviewed all input to categorize the full range of policies and regulations the various states and territories have established. The more elemental responses (yes/no) to parts of the questionnaire permitted frequency or percentage expressions to be tabulated. Consistency among the policies was assessed particularly for biological, social, and economic implications. Patterns were sought in the policies of states, across regions, and nationally.

Results and Discussion

Forty-six of the 53 states and territories surveyed responded (87%). Several questions were directed at how nuisance wildlife were handled. Forty-four states or territories allowed landowners to shoot or trap an animal damaging property (96%). Thirty-nine allowed a designated agent to shoot or trap an animal dam-

aging property (85%). A permit was required of a landowner to shoot a nuisance animal by 33 of the respondents (72%). Thirty-two required a permit for a landowner to trap a nuisance animal (70%), and only Massachusetts allowed live-trapping of a nuisance animal. Thirty-four required a permit for an agent designated by the landowner to shoot a nuisance animal (74%). Thirty-two required a permit for a designated agent to trap a nuisance animal (70%), and, again, only Massachusetts allowed live-trapping. Thirty-nine (85%) declared at least 1 species as a pest by law, or they legislate no protection for nuisance animals which in essence accomplishes the same thing. Starlings, English sparrows, and blackbirds fall into this category most often with coyotes and armadillos showing up occasionally.

In response to questions about how the states and territories managed wildlife damage control operators, 21 (46%) had some type of licensing of nuisance wildlife control. The types of private nuisance wildlife control operators varied greatly from state to state. California licensed trappers with a general trapping license as a means of nuisance wildlife control. Mississippi licensed nuisance wildlife control businesses only in coastal counties for the control of alligators. South Dakota only licensed pilots for aerial-hunting in their coyote control program. The qualifications required of a private nuisance wildlife control business also varied greatly. Eleven of the 21 had no prerequisites for a license, 3 required basic trapper's license, and 2 required trapper certification. Two required a pest control operator's license, but 1 of those, Michigan, only required it for 1 category of operator and the other, Minnesota, was in the process of changing its requirements for situations where no pesticides were used. Minnesota also required special courses, license testing, and bonding for licensing. Louisiana required a four-year degree in wildlife management, special courses, a trapper's license, and 3 years experience with a governmental agency handling nuisance wildlife. The fees for a nuisance wildlife control operator's license ranged from no fee (16 of the 21), \$25 in 1 case, \$50 in 2, \$62.75 in 1, and \$100 in the final and costliest case.

Five states expressed an interest in developing a private nuisance wildlife control program. Pennsylvania reported running their program under the broad authority of their Game Commission director, thus bypassing the legislative system. New Jersey Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife officials reported favoring the licensing of wildlife businesses, but an inability to interest their legislature. Several of the 21 with such programs currently in effect noted that their programs were not in the final stages as of yet because of either events such as the mid-Atlantic rabies outbreak or reassessment due to dissatisfaction with their current policy. The question of how to finance such a program was brought up more than once in the responses.

The purpose of the survey was to supply biologists in North Carolina the information needed to develop a program of private nuisance wildlife control. Several states have policies which are good and could work in North Carolina, but flaws were found even in them. Patterns emerged in a few state programs

and across regions. The mid-Atlantic states and the industrial sections of the midwest are experiencing the effects of urbanization on wildlife management, and 10 of the 21 states with licensing programs are in these 2 regions. Certain elements contained within some state systems stood out as exemplary. The combination of these elements form a comprehensive private nuisance wildlife program. Statutory, education, and administration factors all need to be addressed.

The vital elements of such a program are statutes which legalize the operations involved and provide regulatory authority. Rather than listing specifics in the legislation, we recommend that state wildlife agencies be empowered to establish rules for nuisance wildlife control operators. Legal counsel will be needed in each state to resolve conflicts between the new legislation and existing laws.

The state wildlife agency should establish a system to efficiently train, certify, and monitor nuisance wildlife control operators. License holders should satisfactorily complete a special course on nuisance wildlife management administered by the agency and taught by wildlife education specialists. Although it was felt that a 4-year degree in a wildlife related field would be welcome, it was decided that currently such academic programs did not provide all of the information needed to handle the entire spectrum of nuisance wildlife control. Objectives of the training should include indoctrination of the operator in the needs, values, and techniques of nuisance wildlife management. Educators should stress the importance of solving conflicts between humans and wildlife instead of eliminating the animal. Operators should be encouraged to inform their clients of wildlife benefits. According to its final environmental impact statement, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) animal damage control program "provides a balance between human and wildlife needs and serves to reduce the frustration of individuals adversely affected by wildlife" (USDA-APHIS 1994:1-4). Methods of capturing an animal should be described. The operators should be aware of their responsibilities in complying with local laws (i.e., firearms restrictions); federal laws concerning migratory birds and endangered and threatened species; and the humane handling, care, treatment and transportation of wildlife (USDA-APHIS 1985). Restrictions on the disposition of a captured animal (release on site, transport and release, or euthanize) should be clearly spelled out to best protect the welfare of the animal and to ensure the maintenance of public health. The methods of euthanasia should be prescribed. The proper methods of disposal of dead animals should be strictly controlled to protect groundwater and discourage the spread of disease.

A program which licenses operators must be matched by an administrative commitment to oversee nuisance wildlife management activities. Principal components of the system should include the following: (1) maintenance and public distribution of a list of licensed operators; (2) a license renewal system; (3) administration of a continuing education and information program to keep operators current; and (4) maintenance of an information database compiled from annual operator reports. In addition to the basic commitment to educate opera-

tors and maintain a satisfactory program, the agency may require additional qualifications for operators, such as bonding to protect the public from abuse, and a completion of the state hunter and trapper education courses.

Because of the increasing sensitivity of the public to animal welfare issues, the inability of most Americans to personally deal with nuisance wildlife problems, the increasing intrusion of development into wildlife habitat, and the rapidly increasing urban wildlife control industry (Barnes 1995, Curtis et al. 1995), each state wildlife agency which has not already done so, eventually will have to evaluate the applicability of their laws and regulations pertaining to nuisance wildlife. A policy should protect wildlife from inhumane treatment, provide reasonable and up to date control options for homeowners and control operators, and permit development of private enterprises while maintaining wildlife agency control.

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