

Law Enforcement Session

Use of Canines in Conservation Law Enforcement

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Abstract: With a canine's proven scenting ability, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission began a study and pilot program to evaluate the possible uses of specially trained canines in conservation law enforcement. This paper will briefly describe the findings during the study period and the pilot program. Details into training methods will not be discussed.

Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish. and Wildl. Agencies 44:408-411

With the expanding use of canines in many areas of law enforcement and search and rescue, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission began a study to evaluate the possible uses of canines in conservation law enforcement. Although a study was done in 1985 and made available by Lethbridge Community College, the Commission felt that a more detailed look at canine programs would assist in evaluation. Research indicated that there are many areas of canine use that have not yet been explored by conservation agencies and that few, if any, programs have been custom tailored specifically for a conservation agency.

Although canines have been used by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation since 1978, their uses have been few, with little emphasis on specialty training and tasking. Some agencies which were using canines had their units trained by urban law enforcement facilities which require canine training in areas not applicable to conservation law enforcement. The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission wanted to look specifically at training canines to meet the special needs of conservation law enforcement. It was determined that by avoiding agitation training and other forms of aggression training used by urban police departments, a "user friendly" canine could be developed that could be specialized in other areas of use. This type of training would greatly reduce departmental liability while also creating an excellent public relations tool.

A cost study indicated that the cost of maintaining a canine would be in the area of \$500 a year. Necessary equipment purchases and changes would run approximately \$600. The only other associated costs would be for the manpower for training and handling.

It was decided that 2 officers with prior experience in training and handling canines in the military and civilian law enforcement would perform all training and handling.

The Commission also realized that with no training or case law guidelines, each area of intended use would need to be carefully reviewed and areas of training involving court credibility would need detailed daily documentation.

One of the initial phases of the program was the selection of canine candidates. After evaluating 23 candidates, 2 were selected, both labrador retrievers. During the selection process several other breeds were considered and evaluated, but eliminated for a number of reasons. Because of the specialized tasks required of these dogs, the selection process was of utmost importance. A guideline similar to that used by U.S. Customs in its detector dog program was used as a guide in selecting candidates. Candidates were donated by the public and became property of the Commission.

On 1 July 1989, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission began a pilot program to evaluate the uses of canines in wildlife law enforcement. Emphasis was placed on 2 specific training areas: wildlife detection and human tracking. It was felt that a canine trained to detect wildlife could locate wildlife in vehicles and vessels much faster and more thoroughly than an officer. A canine capable of locating game would also be beneficial in recovering game of evidential value. In addition, a canine trained to track people could be an asset in checking suspicious vehicles, problem locations, and apprehending suspects who had fled a crime scene. Such a canine could also play an important role in search and rescue missions.

Training of Canines

The 2 canine candidates were initially taught basic obedience, agility, and distraction avoidance. This training developed confidence and discipline in the canines while forming a foundation for specialty training.

In specialty training each canine was started in a specific area and trained until complete proficiency was obtained before any other training or cross training was attempted. It was imperative that all training exercises be performed under a variety of different conditions to ensure consistent performances. At times remedial training was needed in areas already mastered in order to maintain proficiency while new tasks were being learned.

Training each canine in a separate task allowed different areas of canine use to be monitored early in the program. This also allowed trainers to determine the best training patterns for future canines. When the canines were completely proficient in their initial task, they were then cross-trained in the other specialty tasks.

Wildlife Detection

While training the canines in wildlife detection (i.e., deer, dove, duck and turkey) it was found that it was possible to teach each canine to be species specific.

The methods and techniques used to train for wildlife detection were the same as those used to train narcotics detector canines; however training in wildlife detection was a much faster process than narcotics detection. This is probably because of the canines' natural desire to be alert to wildlife and the fact that the odor produced by wildlife is stronger than that produced by narcotics. The canines were taught to search vehicles, vessels, structures, and open areas.

Some problems were experienced with residual odor; however, continual work in areas previously contaminated seemed to resolve problems.

On occasion canines would alert to vehicles containing wildlife at distances up to 10 meters. They could also easily detect wildlife inside a sealed passenger compartment.

Human Tracking

Canines were taught to find a human track and then follow it regardless of distractions, complexity, or crosstracks. They were also taught to alert to articles on the track that were dropped by the track layer; this can be extremely important in evidence recovery. Distances and ages of the tracks were gradually increased during the training. Under the right conditions, it was quite evident that the canines were able to follow very old tracks up to 8 hours old. The Commission felt that the need for a canine capable of running old tracks is much more prevalent in the conservation field. The canines, through distraction avoidance training, learned to track through numerous distractions. Tracking was done over a variety of terrains and under different environmental conditions.

The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission was able to have its canines tested and certified by the U.S. Police Canine Association. This certification provides a national standard against which canines are tested and assists in determining court credibility. The U.S. Police Canine Association will, after testing, provide expert testimony in court if needed.

There is no national organization which tests or certifies canines in wildlife detection, so all testing in this area had to be done in-house. However, the Commission has petitioned the U.S. Police Canine Association for such testing, and it appears that such testing and certification will be available across the nation in the not too distant future.

In addition to training in wildlife detection and human tracking, the canines were also trained in article recovery and fundamental area searches. Article recovery training taught canines to search areas and alert to articles with human scent on them. This training is useful in evidence recovery. Training in area searches taught canines to scout areas and to locate and alert to humans.

In recent months, in addition to regular proficiency training, the Commission's canines have been receiving extensive training in underwater body recovery. This training teaches canines to locate drowning victims by the scent which they give off and which rises to the surface. The Commission hopes to use such training in the future to save man-hours on such search and rescue missions.

Results

The following results and uses are from a 3-month test period between November 1989 and January 1990. This trial period coincided with Florida's 1989-90 annual hunting season. It should be noted that time restrictions prevented the canines from being used to their full potential. Since this test period, numerous other arrests have been made.

During the 1989-90 hunting season, canines were used a total of 74 times. These uses range from demonstrations to tracking and detection. From the 74 times canines were used, 26 citations or arrests and 4 warnings were issued. Though reflected in the number of uses, this statistic does not reflect the number of times canine units tracked or located persons not in violation. It was found that upon beginning a track, 93% of the time the track was ended by locating the subject. It was found that the success rate for locating violations also depended upon handler initiative or aggressive canine patrol. That is to say that the handler initiated the canine use by working problem areas or tailoring work details toward canine use. Though callouts occurred, some of which resulted in arrests, they were limited. It is believed that as the program matures, more callouts will occur. Though several cases were made by wildlife detection, approximately 80% of the cases were made by tracking.

A few brief examples will assist the reader in understanding possible uses:

- On several occasions, arrests were made when canines were used to locate illegally-taken game after officers were unable to locate such evidence.
- Arrests were made for hunting out-of-season or hunting in closed areas after vehicles were located under suspicious circumstances and the canines were used to track the occupants.
- User contacts and arrests were made when hunters were tracked and checked in situations where they could not have been checked by any other means.
- Other arrests were made when canines located guns hidden by people claiming not to be hunting or in areas closed to hunting.
- In addition to the arrests made during the test period, it is believed that the publicized presence of the canines during the 1989-90 hunting season deterred many violations.

Conclusion

Based on the success of the pilot program, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission has expanded its canine program to 7 teams. The Commission's belief in and commitment to this program is illustrated by the fact that all the teams will receive 12 weeks of specialized canine training. The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission believes that the canine is not only an excellent apprehension, public relations, and deterrence tool, but truly a conservation tool of the 1990s.