

## MY EXPERIENCE: SETTING UP AN URBAN CAMPAIGN OR TRAPPING PROJECT FOR URBAN COYOTE MANAGEMENT

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**Abstract:** I discuss my personal experience in urban coyote (*Canis latrans*) management, including the following elements: 1) necessary liaisons and alliances (who are they?); 2) choosing methodology (pluses and minuses of each option); 3) necessity for target selectivity and minimal time at site (knowing when to quit, and ways to know); 4) public contact and on-site education for all concerned; 5) inter-agency contact and communication (remaining allies through the thick of it); 6) media communication; 7) following up actively after incidents or control work; and 8) examples of train wrecks and successes.

**Key words:** *Canis latrans*, capture techniques, coyote, human dimensions, media relations, public relations, suburban and urban coyotes

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I want to thank everyone involved in inviting me to participate in this symposium. Opportunities such as this where we can all get together, meet one another, make new friends, and share ideas, collectively makes us better.

It feels like everything's been said already today by earlier speakers. But I would like to relate some of my own experience in working in some pretty high-pressure areas in urban areas in California.

Who would have thought, maybe 25 years ago, that coyotes (*Canis latrans*) by number would be the #1 wildlife public safety concern nationwide?

In areas such as many in Southern California, you have urban, suburban, and semi-rural areas, with corridors between them, allowing coyotes to thrive. Each home or set of homes represents a different set of ideas and opinions of how we should deal with wildlife. Some people are conservationists. Audubon people are all for control people, because they know of the fine work that Wildlife Services and private

contractors have done in endangered species protection. You also have other "really well-informed sources" in Hollywood, like Doris Day. Pam Anderson is a big PETA representative; they have money, they have power, and unfortunately, they are very uneducated and they do not have any field experience. They have passion, and concern, and they have their preconceived ideas: image is everything.

I like to consider us all to be "capture specialists." What happens to an animal after we capture it is not dictated by us; it is dictated by regulatory agencies and the people whom we are working for. Our job is to get the animal caught; after that, a decision is made whether to let the animal go, put a collar on the animal, relocate the animal, or euthanize it. The anti-control people (the people fighting use of traps) use photos of animals in traps, or coyotes hung on fenceposts, to communicate negative images about those of us who do control work. These negative images can cause people to be opposed to the work you and I

do. What they do not want to show you is what groups they belong to also do, for example, a photo of a human society holding facility for the rendering truck. Barrels full of dead cats and dogs that do not match the carpet and drapes anymore, or that people do not want to feed any more. That is OK, but if you and I want to go out and remove a problem animal, it becomes an issue. There is a lot of hypocrisy here.

Coyotes are handsome creatures, for sure. They are clever. It would be a boring world to me if there were not coyotes to chase around. They think their way through life, and anyone who has spent a lifetime, like a lot of us have, chasing coyotes around, knows how intelligent and clever they are. I am fortunate to be able to go to a lot of places and catch a lot of different kinds of predators. Everyone wants to know what is the most difficult animal to catch, the most romantic story. It is a two-dollar coyote that has lived through everything, that can be the most difficult to trap. But when people find these animals in their yard, some consider that kind of a "blessed experience." As Claude Oleyar was saying earlier, we have *Animal Planet* and the *Discovery Channel*, and there is good and bad that comes from such programming. Some people will say that coyotes are mousers, and they control all the mice, or they control all the rabbits, and they control all the ground squirrels. And so they are wanting to co-habitate with them, until it affects them personally. These prey items in yards also attract coyotes, which are willing to eat one of those little "pom-pom" dogs very readily. All of a sudden, their opinions and attitudes changes drastically.

All it takes is one person in a big area to start causing problems. I saw one situation where a woman was putting out a bucket of chicken necks every day for "her" coyotes. It was the best drop bait you have ever seen. It was really easy to trap those

coyotes that had been coming there every day for a long time, to and from, for that chicken bucket! And you do not tell the people when you begin to do a control campaign, if you can at all help it. As we all know, the news media loves drama, and they will jump on wildlife stories such as ours. The minute there is a coyote attack on a human, the media will come to you, and they will want to know a lot of things. In dealing with the media regarding these high-profile incidents, you have to be a consummate professional. While the older I get, the crankier and less patient I find myself in dealing with people, but we can use such situations to convey the fact that we are conservationists, and we use our unique knowledge of wildlife to solve problems. I resent the fact that collectively, we are portrayed as being cruel people. I am a nice person. I am an animal welfarist; I like to hunt, and I like the outdoors. But if we convey to the media that "I don't want to talk with you" and we run for our pickup truck, then they will think we do have something to hide. Do not handle the media yourself unless you are comfortable doing it, but if you are, develop your canned answers for all the predictable questions. For example, what kind of equipment do you use? What injuries does it cause to the animals that are captured? You need to be well-versed in your responses. Take the time to educate the public, with the help of the media. We need to do a lot of that, because what people are learning elsewhere is all wrong.

When you are working in an area where an incident has occurred, never assume it is a cleared area. Any kind of open space will have lots of other people using every square foot such as joggers, bicyclists, hikers, dog walkers. In a residential animal you have all the neighborhood pets that use some else's lawn, often at night, to relieve themselves.

You will not have a safe area. It is important to investigate the site thoroughly, and let the powers that be know where you are going to be operating.

Know who your allies are, and develop allies in locations where you work. It's important to have Fish & Game (or DNR), or the United States Fish & Wildlife Service on the same page as you. This is very important when you are doing any kind of campaign to remove problem animals. One warden does not interpret a regulation in the same way as another. That is a fact of life, just like all of us are different. Sit down ahead of time and go through the regulations with the local enforcement persons. I even have with me copies of regulations that cover type of equipment allowable, trap placement, and so on. I have the enforcement person look at these and initial them with me as we review the regulations. That has made a big difference for me. If you have a situation where a non-target animal is caught and someone sees it and calls 9-1-1, Animal Control will be there. The police department or the sheriff's department will respond to the scene. I had one situation where a mountain biker jerked a trap stake out of the ground, with a trapped coyote on the end of it, to save it. So then he had a coyote on a "leash," which was not happy, and the coyote bit him and ran. As luck would have it, the coyote traveled some distance and then got hung up in a fence of a property owned by a lady who was on the board of directors of the local humane society. She called the police, and the police responded and told her, "Ma'm, this guy is going to do hard time for this, because these things have been outlawed for 30 years." The humane society made a big deal out of it. Fish & Game wanted to look good, so they made a big deal out of it. So it is kind of important to do your ground work with the local agencies ahead of time, to avoid a "train wreck."

Initiate things that you can do, so that you can make your work as benign and as non-lethal as possible, for the given situation. But you also have to let the cooperators or property owners know that multiple trap checks, or covering traps during the daytime hours, will reduce efficacy and take longer to produce the desired results. You can do things that will help your situation. For example, I use sliders of stainless steel on snares, which the coyote will not bite through. The device is swiveled well, so the animal that is caught can get some distance from a fence and can circle around. This approach also works well to protect dogs or other nontargets that may be caught. Be professional, and let the enforcement agencies know you are in control of the technical aspects of the effort. Be out in the field before the hikers are out, or before other problems with passer-bys can occur. You are going to want to be on the scene before daylight. Make it so that people can get in touch with you. My pager and cell phone have saved my neck many times.

In areas that have a lot of use, back-track your coyotes to more isolated areas that have more cover, and put your equipment there rather than out in the open. You want to "steal" those coyotes. The general public is on a "need to know" basis, and they do not need to know when and where you are working and where your equipment is located.

Posting of the area is something that agencies will do, for example in a park situation, when coyotes are known to be in the area. Parks will do this to cover themselves. One thing that I always do is to take blood or serum samples from all coyotes taken, and submit it for disease screening to Fish & Game, to the University of California Davis veterinary health lab, or to the local health department. This allows me to post the area with signage that says

"Coyote Disease Surveillance in Area – All Dogs and People Stay Out." And believe it or not, this is more effective than anything else you could say. People actually stay out of the area when you do this.

When you are called out to respond to an incident of a coyote bite to a human, expedience is important. Preserve the evidence as best you can. Take photos of the victim and the injuries. Take clothing from the victim, from which you can take a DNA sample from the coyote's saliva. Examine the attack site closely, as this may

earmark the individual coyote responsible by unique tooth pattern, or a unique track, for example. You might be able to conclude your control effort when you get the one coyote with the missing toe on its foot, or the coyote that the victim saw had sarcoptic mange. In very high profile cases, certain techniques can help you get in and out quickly and with less conflict. In such instances, I sack all my captured coyotes live, so I can tell the public that every coyote taken at the site is leaving the site alive.