

Exposing and Framing the Ethical Blind Spots in Wildlife Damage Management Exploited by Animal Protectionists

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ABSTRACT Animal rights and animal protection activists have long been critics of traditional wildlife management and its damage management counterpart. They claim that wildlife personnel have over-relied on lethal control of overabundant species. Lethal control, they argue, only resolves a problem for the short-term and therefore diminishes the need for people to change their behavior to achieve long-term success. Because effective nonlethal techniques are available, wildlife managers should be encouraging and even compelling the adoption of these techniques. Wildlife managers have endeavored to blunt the criticism by encouraging the use of these techniques. Insofar as those suffering the damage are satisfied, this new approach is to be welcomed. However, wildlife managers have not considered the consequences (both intended and unintended) of these alleged nonlethal management strategies. The consequences of this oversight affect ethics and philosophy. In ethics, wildlife managers must consider that the employment of nonlethal techniques raises questions of justice to the poor and disadvantaged who frequently cannot afford the costs of implementing nonlethal control. For example, the geese evicted from a wealthy community may take up residence in a poor one whose residents lack the financial ability to hire someone to haze the geese. In philosophy, wildlife managers should consider how the exaltation of nonlethal control would undermine the public's support for consumptive uses of wildlife. In other words, if nonlethal control is so effective, why do we continue to have deer hunts? I will conclude the paper with suggestions as to how wildlife managers and wildlife damage management professionals should frame the debate so that consumptive wildlife management is duly protected.

KEY WORDS animal protection, ethics, politics, public relations, wildlife damage management

For the past several decades, animal protectionists (AP) have increased their political and cultural influence through a variety of creative tactics to achieve their goal of ending what they consider to be humanity's cruel treatment of animals (HSUS 2006). Specifically, they oppose the use of lethal control as the default method for the management of wildlife and have wielded political influence to compel wildlife agencies to modify their practices. Agencies have responded to the pressure by initiating or enhancing training requirements (hunter and trapping education), enacting regulations for wildlife control operators (WCO), and adapting agency rhetoric. I applaud agencies for recognizing this hostile turn in the political landscape by endeavoring to establish policies to reduce the likelihood of negative events that are

inevitably used by AP to advance their anti-use agenda. Yet, while training and improved regulations are welcome, I am concerned that agency efforts to defend traditional human-wildlife relations have lacked effectiveness. I believe the reason for this lack of success stems from a failure in proper strategy. In short, wildlife agencies have emphasized political tactics to the neglect of employing an overall strategy to defend the use of lethal methods to manage wildlife. Wildlife agency personnel and WCOs must become more astute in how they educate and defend their decisions to an uninformed public (Schmidt 2007). In fact, I believe that some agency pronouncements have actually aided AP in their efforts to end science-based wildlife management in the United States. In this paper, I will offer suggestions regarding how agency personnel

should present and frame their view in response to the claims of AP groups. For if wildlife managers hope to continue the tradition of responsible and sustainable wildlife management, then it is imperative that they enhance their ability to defend the tools and methods employed in managing wildlife.

WE'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE

Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, wildlife managers must recognize that the culture that supported the North American model of wildlife management is no longer present. Urbanization, reduction in outdoor activities, decline in Judeo-Christian values, and the growth of animal rights ideology have all played a role in creating an intellectual atmosphere where consumptive use of wildlife is, at best, tolerated as a necessary evil. As values changed, people's perceptions of the facts also changed. I suggest that recognizing the practical, political, and scientific implications of this cultural change is the most difficult challenge confronting wildlife managers.

At its core, the debate between AP and wildlife managers rests on competing views of nature. For AP, nature is that part of reality that works just fine without human interference. If there is a conflict between humans and animals, humans bear the majority (typically the vast majority) of the blame. Therefore, humans must do everything possible to minimize their interference with the natural order in nature because humans are the fly in the ointment. In contrast, many wildlife managers view nature not only as a place of visual beauty but also as a resource to be used and enjoyed for recreation, nutrition, and clothing, provided the use is performed in a renewable way. Wildlife managers recognize that humans have done much harm to the environment but they also understand that the environment is not

morally neutral, as nature has and does pose a threat to humans as well. One need only consider the impact of the black plague to understand that fact (McNeill 1998). Furthermore, many wildlife managers believe that humans are part of the environment and thus any view that wants to separate humans from nature or treat humans as an invasive species is fundamentally artificial and unscientific (contra Hadidian et al. 2007 p.224). Finally, humans have an important role of being environmental ballasts, capable of adapting our behavior to help put the environment in proper balance to the benefit of the entire ecosystem.

The upshot of understanding the conflict between these competing views is apparent when wildlife managers attempt to defend hunting to prevent deer from starving. Many AP respond by arguing that the deer should be fed until the crisis has passed or call for expensive contraceptives to prevent population growth. Wildlife managers may shake their heads, perplexed as to why the AP argument is even gaining a hearing. Some wildlife managers may even think that if enough research could be performed, the anti-hunting AP and public would ultimately come to their senses.

Unfortunately, both attitudes are fundamentally misguided for two basic reasons. First, facts are understood only within a larger ideological framework. For example, a theist and an atheist both agree that the sun warms the earth. However, a theist sees a star created by an intelligent God, an atheist sees the star as a fortunate result of random events. Facts are interpreted in light of the prevailing ideological construct and thereby give facts their meaning. Secondly, as much as we would like for the public to be informed, the reality is that people do not have time to research all the pros and cons regarding a policy decision. Some people decide which

policy they will support based on a very small amount of information. The challenge confronting wildlife agencies is how to explain their position succinctly and clearly enough to both capture people's attention and to convince them to support their cause. As can be expected, no easy solutions exist. There are no magic words or phrases that will help the public make the right decision. However, as we will see there are approaches available that in time, will help the public eventually "get it."

FRAMING THE ISSUE

Psychologist and neuroscientist, Drew Weston, argues that people make decisions based on emotions more than reason or cold-hard facts (Weston 2008). I think he is onto something. It appears that AP have been appealing to emotions for years and have begun to really gain some political points. Note how AP arguments against wildlife management fall into four main categories: 1) the innocent animals, 2) the panicky homeowner, 3) the blood thirsty, slovenly, profiteering wildlife control operator (WCO) (adapted from Harker and Bates 2007), and 4) the fair-hearing. These arguments are multi-faceted and like an amoeba morph into different forms depending on the context and situation gaining the AP's attention at the moment. These arguments are well known to wildlife managers but to bring less familiar readers up to speed, they will be quickly described below. The point to note, however, is how these arguments appeal to the emotional side of our thinking.

In the innocent animal argument, AP endeavor to humanize wildlife, explaining that they are majestic and experience emotions comparable of those had by human mothers. Our conflicts with wildlife, they contend, occur because humans have manipulated the populations or habitat (or both), thereby causing an environmental imbalance. The argument is that animals

should not suffer the death penalty when humans have created conditions for them to exploit. The bottom line is that personalizing and humanizing animals allows AP to create a bond between the voter and AP's policy.

AP employ the panicky homeowner argument to raise suspicion that much wildlife damage management is motivated by the irrational fears of property owners. AP downplay the significance of the wildlife damage by either putting it into statistical context (Rutberg and Naugle 2008) or undermining it as being only an aesthetic problem (Hadidian et al. 2006). They reject any killing of wildlife that cannot be justified as a compelling need. Killing of wildlife, they contend, should be done only when absolutely necessary. Here, the AP create the "bad guy", the "enemy" that needs to be restrained in order to protect the "innocent" animal portrayed in previous argument.

The next argument criticizes how WCOs resolve customer complaints. At its core lies the AP's assertion that the vast majority of problem wildlife can be managed in a nonlethal way (Hadidian et al. 2007). Although property owners may need to be patient and persistent, AP contend that nonlethal techniques will work if given the chance. The penultimate argument says that wildlife agencies must consider the desires of all the state's citizens, even those who do not contribute financially to the continuation of wildlife programs. Agency officials must reach out and ask for the input of all the stakeholders, particularly those of the various AP groups.

Fair-hearing refers to AP complaints that governmental officials 1) make rulings without full transparency, 2) make rulings without involving all stakeholders input equally given that wildlife is a public resource, and 3) make rulings that too frequently involve killing when less injurious methods are possible. The fair-

hearing argument has been discussed elsewhere (Vantassel 2008) so it will not be handled here.

Support for these arguments derives from a view of the world that I call the "Edenic vision." Because people think that killing animals implies a lack of harmony, people can be drawn to the notion that détente with nature is actually possible. The Edenic vision speaks to the emotional longing for peace and harmony with nature that is sought by many humans.

Setting the Context

As noted above, we change minds by addressing hearts. Specifically, we must give the public a vision of human-wildlife relations that provides an alternative vision of the world that is capable of capturing their hearts and minds. At its root, we must relate a story that shows the public that regulated hunting, trapping, fishing, and wildlife damage management are in harmony with nature and that rejection of these activities is actually causing imbalance in the natural order of things. This does not mean that we ignore the facts. As Aristotle taught, persuasion involves three elements, ethos (moral integrity), logos (logic), and pathos (emotions) (Borg 2007). Wildlife managers have the facts, but those facts do not convince the public because AP are able to blunt their force with competing "facts." (A term I use loosely here).

So how should wildlife managers begin to develop a pro-lethal control marketing program? The most important element in the program is for the participants to have a clear commitment to the goal. If you do not truly believe in the moral rightness of the consumptive use of wildlife and the rightness of lethal control then there is no use in trying to become a spin doctor. For sooner or later you will slip and reveal your true beliefs, typically at the most inopportune time. I believe that a key reason

behind the success of the AP philosophy stems from a decline in commitment by wildlife agency personnel to the consumptive use of wildlife (Muth et al. 2006). This is why wildlife agencies need to be extremely careful when they recommend non-traditional techniques to resolve wildlife issues. For in doing so, they are unwittingly agreeing with the AP view that killing of animals constitutes a moral and environmental tragedy. It also runs the risk of undercutting property rights. For if people are convinced that lethal control is morally and environmentally wrong, then landowners will soon lose the right to kill animals on their land.

Strategic Imperative: Watch Your Language

The overall strategic goal of your public announcements is to characterize sporting men and women in a favorable and positive manner. The group that controls the language controls the debate. Failure to watch the terms you use will result in the defeat of your ideas before you even get a chance to finish your thought. Words carry ideological baggage. Whether you agree or not, the fact is words are powerful and continuing to use the language of AP runs the risk of it being interpreted by hearers that the AP's view is the correct one.

The first step in reversing the gains of the AP movement is to avoid making any more mistakes. Let me provide four examples of terms that are regularly misused by wildlife agencies when discussing human-wildlife interactions: 1) nonlethal, 2) too many deer, 3) live-trap, and 4) lethal control does not work.

You may think that these terms have not harmed consumptive wildlife management but consider how they are heard by the audience. As stated above, the term nonlethal is frequently heard by many members of the public as a technique that is

effective and free of causing harm to the animal and the larger environment. I have written elsewhere why the claim of nonlethal is highly questionable (Vantassel 2008). But let me expand on it here. First, where is the research that proves that nonlethal techniques are actually nonlethal? How do we know that animals driven away from their preferred location do not suffer higher morbidity and mortality? Second, when we say nonlethal, I would ask, nonlethal to whom? Driving a flock of geese away from a wealthy neighborhood and forcing the geese into one whose residents cannot afford goose control is not necessarily nonlethal. Poor people, who frequently lack adequate health coverage, now have to contend with the risk of injury due to slips on excrement covered sidewalks.

Let us consider the phrase, "too many deer." I suggest using this kind of language raises the question of why do we have too many? AP say we have too many because wildlife agencies have artificially raised the numbers to increase hunter success. I contend that saying we have too many deer is the moral equivalent of saying we have too much money. The mere statement that we have too many deer insinuates that deer are not a valuable resource. Deer abundance should be converted to lack of hunters and a lack of appreciation for nature. This in turn would cause people to ask why do we lack sufficient hunters? At this point you can explain that we lack hunters because landowners refuse to allow hunting and because we have lost our connection to the land which holds that deer are valuable.

I contend that the phrase "live-trap" is the most notorious example of how words can undermine support for consumptive use of wildlife. To many, live traps are good because the name suggests the traps are harmless to the animal and the public. But this term has had a profound and lasting

effect of biasing the public's understanding because when they hear "live-trap" they immediately envision cage or box traps. The flip side of that perspective is that the public thinks that any trap that does not look like a cage or a box must be a kill-trap. AP have exploited this confusion to great effect in their marketing campaigns against trapping. But when wildlife agencies use the term "live-trap" in their literature and press conferences, they unwittingly agree with the AP assessment of trapping. Is it any wonder that AP have been so successful in convincing the public to hate trapping?

The last pitfall wildlife agencies should avoid is what I call the "doesn't work" argument. AP and the public at large regularly tell me that trapping and lethal control does not work because the animals come back. Aside from the factual error, (i.e., killed animals do not come back), the problem with this perspective lies in its utter misunderstanding of natural systems. Rather than explain it, I simply ask, "Why do you mow your grass? It does not work?" The response I get is amazing because for a few brief seconds, the listeners understand natural systems. Many people may not like dealing with wildlife damage because they do not value wildlife's usefulness. Thus for them, they do not want to keep trapping every year because the raccoon is a pest, not a resource. Bottom line, wildlife damage management is a tragic event, not because killing animals is wrong, but because we are killing animals in a manner that does not underscore their value. Thus the killing is for pest control, not for utilization and recreation.

The second step is to use every opportunity to put AP in a non-favorable light. It is critical to show that sportsmen and sportswomen are victims of a well-funded smear campaign (inspiration for ideas here came from Montoya 2008). I suggest that wildlife managers emphasize

cultural differences and inquire why AP do not respect and affirm diversity.

The third step is to cast a vision of what real harmony in nature means, namely the cycle of life and death. As a society we have learned to appreciate the role that upper-level predators play in the environment. Now we must re-teach the public that humans are the ultimate top predator in the environment. I do not have a specific narrative to proffer as a roadmap for this re-education program. But it is a subject that wildlife agencies need to make a top priority, before it is too late. We cannot rely on the old maxim, if we have to explain it you wouldn't understand. We already know the public does not understand and, they vote. In the meantime, we need to repeatedly speak of positive elements of wildlife management such as the revenue generated, renewable resources, environmental protection, environmental appreciation, food produced, and jobs created, to name a few.

SPECIFIC TACTICS

If you agree that wildlife managers must be more thoughtful and proactive in describing and defending responsible wildlife management, then what specific tactics should be implemented to begin disrupting the AP ideology that is taking root in our society?

1. Recapture the ideological high-ground. When AP want to ban foothold or other restraining devices, have a press release or better yet, a press conference asking the press corps why the AP wants to ban livetraps? Ask the press why AP want to stop helping endangered species, protecting private property, and expanding land conservation efforts to improve our natural environment? These verbal tactics will insightfully show how anti-environmental the AP are.

2. Personalize the effects of wildlife damage and the costs to consumers for adopting AP policies.

- a. Wildlife agencies must counter the unending claims and photos of alleged animal cruelty with the factual stories of human and environmental devastation caused by AP policies. Massachusetts, Washington State, and Colorado should be poster children of the foolishness of AP legislation and policies.
- b. Demonstrate how community restrictions on recreational hunting and trapping negatively impact landowners, the species, and the larger ecosystem, and particularly remove protections from endangered species.
- c. Remind the public that banning and restricting wildlife management means that less money will be available for education, alleviating poverty, and environmental protection. Elk Grove California claims that it spends \$75,000 a year to clear culverts blocked by beavers (<http://www.egpublicworks/beavers.asp> - accessed 21 April 2009). Encourage government and quasi-government agencies to add a wildlife damage expense line in their billing to regularly remind people about the costs of wildlife damage management. If the AP argue

that their suggested control methods do not cost much, simply say that the government welcomes their taking on the financial and legal responsibility to implement those methods.

3. Reach out to advocates for the poor and tell them that restricting wildlife management programs and tools will reduce available funds needed to help the poor.
4. Vigorously defend science-based wildlife policy by working to diminish the authority of animal control agencies. Let me be clear. More and more of the organizations are challenging wildlife regulations and statutes on the basis of cruelty (Hadidian et al. 2007). One key way to brush back these activists is by aggressively enforcing trapping regulations. Many of these groups trap cats with unregistered traps. Why are they allowed to do so?
5. Separate sport-trapping regulations from wildlife damage management regulations.
 - a. Fur-trapping is different than animal damage control and your regulations should reflect that difference. The rationale is simple. You need to protect fur-trappers from the strong possibility of a negative occurrence in the WCO field.
 - b. Enact strict requirements for WCOs to protect the agency and other WCOs from "The Big Mistake" (Schmidt 1994). WCOs have a great deal of contact with the

public. Exacting regulations and training help reduce the political damage that inevitably comes with an bad incident in wildlife damage management.

- c. Do not allow wildlife control operators in your state to be regulated through the department of agriculture (which controls the Pest Control Operators). Although California, Texas, and Florida have begun to do this, it is a huge mistake for two reasons (Robb Russell, Wildlife Pro Network, personal communication). First, transferring wildlife control to the pest control division undermines the wildlife agency's claim that hunting and trapping are important to manage wildlife. Transferring wildlife management to the department of agriculture suggests, albeit subtly, that wildlife are not a valuable species but are actually a pest. Second, wildlife agencies need all the potential funding they can muster.
6. Enact policies that expand the financial benefits of harvesting and utilizing common species.
7. Regularly disseminate news information in a way that shows taxpayers and landowners how wildlife management increases quality of life and economic value.

Much more could certainly be written about how wildlife agencies can effectively defend

and promulgate environmentally sound wildlife management practices. The key is to be more proactive in resisting the slow incursion of animal rights ideology by regularly undermining its legitimacy as a viable social and environmental policy.

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