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OPENING REMARKS - SEVENTEENTH VERTEBRATE PEST CONFERENCE

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Proc. 17th Vertebr. Pest Conf. (R.M. Timm & A.C. Crabb, Eds.) Published at Univ. of Calif., Davis. 1996.

It is my honor and my pleasure to greet you this morning, and to welcome you on behalf of the entire Vertebrate Pest Council.

You have come from throughout California, from across the United States, and from many corners of the world to gather here for the purpose of sharing information, expertise, and wisdom in dealing with vertebrate pest problems. Our common purpose is to find yet better methods for preventing and resolving situations in which wildlife comes into conflict with humans. The Conference's mission remains one of education. We learn from each other, and we strive to find better ways of applying our knowledge to real-world problems.

In recognizing that the value of a conference such is this often lies as much in the informal interaction as in the scheduled presentations, the Council this year has structured the Conference to provide you a number of opportunities to meet your fellow participants. I invite you to the complimentary buffet reception this evening beginning at 6:30 p.m., and also to tomorrow evening's wine tasting at the Wine and Visitors Center, which is adjacent to the Red Lion Hotel. For those of you able to stay an extra day to enjoy northern California, I am pleased to let you know that there is still space available on the Friday sightseeing tour. Details are available at the VPC registration desk.

The wildlife conflicts which occur in northern California are as diverse as its agriculture and biotic communities. Those of you on yesterday's field trip saw some of our challenges—from blackbirds to mountain lions, from rodents to coyotes. Those of us who live in the north coast area of this state enjoy not only the diversity of our surroundings, but we are also often challenged by the array of conflicts between people and wildlife.

I wish to thank those members of the Council, whose names are listed in your program, who took responsibility for the many aspects of this year's program. The conference is truly a joint effort, and we all benefit from the committee chairpersons' thoughtful and careful planning.

Let us know what we can do to make your experience here more valuable. Again, on behalf of the entire Council, welcome to the Conference.

OPENING REMARKS - SEVENTEENTH VERTEBRATE PEST CONFERENCE

THE FUTURE OF WILDLIFE DAMAGE MANAGEMENT—AND WHY I WANT TO BE A PART OF IT

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Proc. 17th Vertebr. Pest Conf. (R.M. Timm & A.C. Crabb, Eds.) Published at Univ. of Calif., Davis. 1996.

Welcome to the 17th Vertebrate Pest Conference; THE conference for those of us who work in the field of vertebrate pest management. Actually, I prefer the term wildlife damage management to either animal damage control or vertebrate pest control, but as long as one takes a broad perspective on the definition of wildlife, there is really no difference except perhaps in perception. I do not mean to suggest that the name of the Vertebrate Pest Conference should be changed. It should not be changed. However, I do suggest that no matter what umbrella term you operate under, we are all in the same business.

Speaking for myself, I am very pleased to be involved with wildlife damage management. Explaining why is what I hope to accomplish during this opening address for the 17th Vertebrate Pest Conference.

The premise behind my remarks this morning is really quite simple. No matter what we choose to call it, working with vertebrate pests in a nuisance, damage, or human health or safety context is a "growth industry." We have opportunities and challenges not available to some segments of the wildlife management profession.

As an Extension Wildlife Specialist, I have had the opportunity to interact with the public at many different levels over the past 18 years. That experience, plus more recent work with the Wildlife Society's Wildlife Damage Management Working Group (WDMWG), The National Animal Damage Control Association (NADCA), and the various wildlife damage conferences including the VPC, has allowed me to develop a list of opportunities and challenges for your consideration.

Perhaps an obvious question at this point is how can I be so positive and upbeat in the face of government gridlock, downsizing and stagnant budgets? The answer lies with the following observations, in no particular order of significance.

1. NADCA has become a revitalized force in wildlife damage management. NADCA leadership has increased membership and broadened the organization's perspective. Various NADCA committees now work with career placement, continuing education, position statements, and other professional activities. The recent merger with the Nuisance Urban Wildlife group further strengthens NADCA.
2. The genesis of the WDMWG has been a big step forward for our subdiscipline within The Wildlife Society. Membership is growing, and working group sponsored technical sessions at the TWS Annual Conference have elevated the profile and positive recognition of wildlife damage management.
3. The creation of the Berryman Institute for Wildlife Damage Management at Utah State University is a huge step toward bringing wildlife damage into our college and university curricula where it belongs. Students are now exposed to wildlife damage management principles and policies in schools that had no such program a decade ago. The Institute has increased the stature of wildlife damage management through its research, awards program, and the profile of its staff, people like Mike Conover and Robert Schmidt, at meetings across the country.
4. The nuisance wildlife control business, NWCO's as its practitioners are called, has exploded, especially in eastern states. New York State alone has over 1000 NWCO's and the largest franchise company, Critter Control, has about 100 offices nationwide. Attendance at training workshops for NWCO's hosted by the University of Kentucky in Lexington and by Wildlife Control Technology outside Chicago, both within the last two months, has been large, enthusiastic, and suggests a strong demand for such opportunities.
5. Wildlife damage management is on-line with the e-damage, electronic bulletin board. On a daily basis, information is sought and given on a wide range of problems, policies, and procedures.
6. There are now three major conferences devoted to our field; the Vertebrate Pest Conference, the Great Plains Wildlife Damage Conference, and the Eastern Wildlife Damage Conference. They are all well attended and a fantastic opportunity for wildlife damage professionals from academia, government agencies, and the private sector to come together, share ideas and expertise, and build productive networks. In a recent issue of Wildlife Control Technology, Robert Schmidt shared a vision of an even larger, national conference on wildlife damage management.
7. The active role of USDA-APHIS-ADC has been a force in wildlife damage management well beyond the day-to-day operations of their own programs. ADC employees have a high profile at national meetings such as this one. The Denver ADC facility is a key source of new technology, and working under memoranda of understanding with various state agencies, ADC is the primary contact for wildlife damage in states like my home state of Wisconsin.
8. Sources of information are readily available, current, and complete. The 1995 edition of the Handbook of Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage (University of Nebraska) is an excellent example. The Humane Society of the United States is working on a new manual on Euthanasia which should be especially useful. The WDMWG is working on a

review of wildlife translocation and surveys and other data collection efforts are underway.

9. Finally, although I am sure the list could be expanded, there is encouraging news about new products and techniques. Various types of contraception still hold great promise, methl anthranilate has emerged as a tool in the escalating battle with urban flocks of Canada geese, and perhaps recent work in New York with invisible fences will help keep some apples out of reach of growing deer herds. Every little bit helps, and I am confident this bit of positive news will be expanded by many of the authors presenting material here at the VPC.

Those represent some of the observations that lead me to conclude that the future is good for wildlife damage management. I think we can solidify that future if we seize a few of the opportunities that are laid out before us. Let me offer several examples for your consideration.

I believe one of our greatest opportunities is to assume a broader role in wildlife conservation. Some "traditional" wildlife managers are anxious over real or perceived erosion of support for consumptive activities such as hunting and trapping or a loss of identity as title changes such as "conservation biologist" or "landscape ecologist" become more commonplace. At the same time some of our colleagues are apprehensive about their programs, those of us who deal with often overabundant species could find ourselves in a position of increased demand and profile.

In a recent essay in "Conservation Biology," Robert Garrott and others explored the problems created by overabundant and expanding native species (Garrott et al. 1993). These problems included the spread of infectious diseases and parasites, alteration of plant and animal species composition, and even local extinctions caused by interspecific competition. Examples cited included the impact of introduced red fox on endangered Light-Footed Clapper Rails and California Least Terns here in California, predation by California sea lions on endangered steel head runs in Puget Sound, and the widespread impacts of white-tailed deer herbivory on ecosystem diversity and rare plants. The authors listed numerous native species that have been able to capitalize on anthropogenic landscape changes including raccoons, Canada geese, beaver, white-tailed deer, red winged blackbirds and others. Thus, these native species are implicated in ecological problems as well as more traditional damage to crops, structures, or human health.

Noted entomologist and conservationist E. O. Wilson made a parallel case for problems caused by exotic species in a recent issue of National Wildlife Magazine (Wilson 1996). Wilson concluded that the introduction of exotic species represents one of the four apocalyptic horsemen of extinction and, in fact, one of the worst. Exotic species can change ecosystems and overwhelm indigenous species, leading to reduced biodiversity.

In both cases, the message is clear; one key way to attain conservation goals for the preservation of biodiversity is to control the deleterious impacts of exotic or overabundant native species. Not because they are damaging crops or threatening human health, but because they are affecting other species.

Garrott went on to chastise the public and the conservation community for avoiding these issues because "actions required to correct these situations entail the killing of animals." Animal population reduction has been described in the conservation literature as "repugnant," "odious," and "nasty." As a result, some contemporary conservation issues are not being addressed, species are suffering, and the problems caused by exotic or native species are aggravated. If most wildlife managers or conservation biologists are unwilling or unable to address conservation dilemmas that involve population control, who better to step in and fill the void than the wildlife damage management community. We have the skills, the experience, and the network to make a real contribution. By doing so we add ecological damage control to our list of goals, establish an important link to the contemporary conservation community, and we improve recognition and support for wildlife damage control in general.

Of course, some of this is already underway. Cowbirds have been controlled to aid recovery of the Kirtlands' warbler and other species, great horned owls have been locally eliminated to provide secure hacking sites for peregrine falcons, coyotes have been controlled in black footed ferret reintroduction areas, and brown tree snake control programs are based on ecological problems. But there are many more opportunities for us to contribute. Our traditional clients and problems will not diminish in importance or frequency, and this notion of ecological damage control could be a major focus for our collective future.

I believe another opportunity involves education; education of future professionals through our colleges and universities; education of the public on problem avoidance and acceptable, viable solutions; and education and training of the rapidly growing private sector in wildlife damage management. In all cases, both the wildlife resource and the profession will benefit.

As an Extension specialist, education is my focus and wildlife damage has always been fertile ground. Concentrating on the public for a moment, I view a wildlife problem as a "teachable moment." The client rarely knows much, if anything, about the species involved, the cause of the problem, or possible solutions. By explaining the behavior of the animal and reviewing solutions, I am usually able to help them help themselves or find someone who can. But more importantly, it is possible to affect their attitudes toward the animal and the problem. Thus, a simple physical change in the situation or a change in their behavior may solve the problem and move toward "peaceful coexistence" and tolerance. I believe this is especially important in the urban environment. Opportunities are admittedly different in a large scale agricultural or industrial situation, but always take a moment to educate the client about their problem and the implications of various control alternatives through consultation, a brochure, fact sheet, or whatever works for you.

Education and training of and for private sector professionals is also very important. For one thing, the number of species involved, the laws, and the diverse control tools and strategies make wildlife damage management a complex field. Also, I believe there is

more and more incentive for states to license or certify private wildlife control practitioners in a more systematic and in depth way than has been done to date. Minimum standards and training for the private sector will protect the wildlife resource and the citizens who need assistance. It does not need to be contentious or burdensome to either the regulatory agencies or the private sector. I hope that either NADCA or the WDMWG or both can play a role in establishing guidelines for minimum competencies that could be adopted easily, leading to consistency among states.

I would like to switch gears to a discussion of several challenges in wildlife damage management, which could also be viewed as opportunities. Several challenges deal with human dimensions. For one thing, as professional wildlife managers, we are trained to think primarily in terms of viable animal populations. For the most part, this is exactly opposite of the way most people think and react. To us a captured raccoon on a residential roof is a possible rabies vector or a nuisance waiting to ply its trade elsewhere and it is insignificant in the bigger population picture of such an abundant species. However, to the homeowner and family members, it is an individual animal whose well-being is of concern. In working on a position statement on the issue of nuisance wildlife translocation for NADCA and TWS for the past two years, it has become quite clear to me that a broad ban on nuisance wildlife translocation would be clean and neat, but unacceptable to many people and very difficult to enforce. Because of this, I now believe that any position statement we create must be flexible enough to accommodate species-specific issues and judicious use of translocation under guidelines that minimize the problems associated with translocation and maximize the survival chances of the released animal.

Related to this are broader concerns over animal rights issues. Wildlife Damage Management programs come under frequent attack, especially when animals are killed. Examples include mountain lion control, fish-eating birds around aquaculture facilities, wolf control to protect ungulate herds, and many others. In some cases, it would appear that some segments of society are more concerned about the animals involved than about the health or livelihood of their fellow citizens. This may very well be the case for some people, but I believe they represent a manageable challenge.

The solution lies not with the individuals who criticize wildlife damage control, but with the majority of the public who are simply uninformed. The key is public recognition of the need for a wildlife control program in the first place, coupled with recognition that the populations of the targeted animals are not dramatically affected. Or, if they are, that they should be as in the case of abundant exotic species or overabundant native species where population reductions may be desirable. If we can successfully convey the need for control to the public, then when faced with barriers to programs created by what we and an informed public would perceive as unreasonable demands to spare animals at any cost, the public must stand up and say "enough is enough," we need the help, let the program proceed.

I believe we all realize that non-lethal methods are preferred over lethal, all other factors being equal. However, we also realize that there are circumstances of urgency, efficacy, and practicality wherein lethal control is the method of choice. If we conduct a project in an efficient, humane way, guided by our professional code of ethics, we should be on solid ground. The emphasis of our actions should be on problem solving, with de-emphasis of killing and "control."

There are two other areas in which we could improve our public support base. The first deals with perception versus reality. Particularly in the arena of agricultural animal damage, some control programs or requests for assistance are initiated because species are perceived as a problem when they are not. For example, in Wisconsin a growing population of wild turkeys was viewed by farmers as a major threat to a variety of crops. That perception was fueled by word-of-mouth and rumor. After all, turkeys are large, diurnal, gather in large flocks, and spend considerable time in crop fields; they had to be doing something! There are certainly circumstances (unharvested corn over winter grapes, etc.) where turkeys can be a serious problem; however, most field inspections of complaints turned up another culprit or no damage at all. In cases such as these, perception has to be managed as if it were reality; but, if perception and reality are brought together by education, some problems may go away.

The other area deals with a caution about gadgetry and exploiting public fears. In cases involving the two taxonomic groups people seem to fear the most, bats and snakes, or in cases with very difficult solutions such as moles in a well manicured lawn, it can be rather easy and tempting for the less scrupulous in our society to capitalize on the situation. For example, in one case in Wisconsin we encountered a bat control service whose technicians would, for $500, spread a few pounds of naphthalene in an attic and on the way out the door remind the client to seal up all bat access points in a couple of weeks. I suspect we could all recount stories of miracle gadgets with incredible claims to solve many frustrating pest problems while causing no harm to children, pets, "good" animals or the environment. Until such gadgets are subjected by law to the same kind of efficacy testing and registration that chemical products are, problems will continue. Bad experiences with unethical practices like the $500 bat control or with gadgets that cannot deliver promised results spread like wildfire; success stories do not. We need to police our own ranks and make sure these kinds of practices are exposed. If a selected control technique has only a 50-50 chance of success, tell the client up front and explain why. At the same time get the word out to your colleagues on new developments, new applications of old techniques, and things that work for you. The profession and our clients will benefit. That kind of sharing is one of the great benefits of gatherings such as this one.

At the outset of this presentation, I mentioned the development of new tools and techniques. While that certainly is good news, we must also be careful to protect tools we already have. Chemicals in particular are under constant scrutiny. For example, Fenthion, primarily used in bird control perches, is apparently in trouble because of growing numbers of reports of secondary poisoning, primarily of raptors. An especially damaging situation

occurred in New York only a month ago, when a farmer (in clear violation of the Fenthion label which called for burial or incineration of dead target birds) spread Fenthion-killed starlings in a field with his manure spreader. A hunter then discovered dead crows and red-tailed hawks in the field. The resulting story in the New York Times (January 29, 1996) was very damaging. Two weeks later I found out that Wisconsin will not issue Fenthion use permits until the secondary poisoning issue is cleared up. The point is, we must know our tools inside and out, do everything humanly possible to prevent misuse, and defend safe, useful products whenever they come under attack. This gets back to my comment about educating the public about the need for damage control activities.

Finally, just a couple of additional thoughts. Virtually all wildlife management programs and land use decisions have wildlife damage implications, especially in the urban/suburban environment. We need to work toward communication and team building so we, as wildlife damage professionals, are in the loop at the outset of such decisions. If we are proactive rather than reactive, I believe we can avoid some train wrecks at some places; not all, but some. For example, urban Canada goose and urban deer problems are widespread and very complex. Where such problems are just beginning, successful control or problem resolution is much more likely than when the problem reaches crisis proportions and all interest groups are strongly sensitized and polarized. Local government teams, citizens' task forces, and other groups should all have wildlife damage management professionals on board as resources and part of the decision making process.

A final area in which we can be proactive is the potential challenge of friction between the growing NWCO industry and Cooperative Extension, USDA-APHIS-ADC, or other public agencies. I have no solid evidence that this has or will occur, but using Wisconsin as an example, I do believe it is possible. Over the past few years, I have averaged about 1,500 wildlife nuisance or damage calls per year. A relatively new nuisance hotline, an 800-number, toll-free service operated and staffed by USDA-ADC biologists, has handled over 8,000 calls. To the extent that clients are empowered to solve their own problems through consultation, print materials, or other technical assistance such as my free live-trap loan service, potential customers are lost to NWCO's. I and ADC biologists do frequently make referrals to local NWCO's when a client cannot or does not want to deal with a problem on their own. Nevertheless, I think we should be aware of this concern.

In conclusion, I repeat my opening contention; the future of wildlife damage management looks very good. On balance, the good news and the opportunities overwhelm the challenges and even the challenges contribute some vitality to our field. I hope I have set a positive tone for the next several days. Keep up the good work and enjoy the conference!

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