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BLURRED IMAGES: AND THE FUTURE OF WILDLIFE DAMAGE MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT: The paper points out a number of perceptions that blur and damage the image of wildlife damage management and their importance to the future. Some of the reasons for the perceptions are suggested and a number of steps suggested to improve the public image. It concludes on a note of optimism for the future.

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It is a privilege and honor to have the opportunity to keynote and participate in this Conference. I appreciate the conference planners making it possible.

I want to discuss some of the images of wildlife damage management and why they are so important to the future.

As I attend meetings, travel and visit people with various interests, including those in wildlife damage management, I hear a wide range of viewpoints. I do not know whether it is because I am retired but still active and independent, or perhaps associated with the Berryman Institute. But, for whatever reasons, I have become privy to a wide variety of perceptions, often shared in confidence.

Some of these shared thoughts are interesting and surprising; some are irritating and frustrating. But, all are important and useful. All contribute to the image of how some people view wildlife damage management and how they see those who either have responsibilities for it or who are its practitioners. It is a blurred image, and I would like to share it.

For purposes of this discussion, wildlife damage management broadly includes all forms--coyotes, geese, deer, fish, field rodents, mice, rats, and yes, even cockroaches.

And, I include all of the practitioners--federal, state and private, including the manufacturers of toxicants and tools. It is much easier, conceptually, to talk about federal and state programs because they are readily identified entities and easy targets. But, in the public mind, everyone involved in animal control is part of the same fraternity. And, too often there is a collective judgment on the entire field.

Obviously our first priority must be our individual and program image. But I think we must also actively concern ourselves with the perceptions of the field as a whole.

First, let me make my own view very clear. I am very supportive and optimistic for many reasons that I have stated before and do not need to repeat. The blur in my vision is public opinion; and, the certain knowledge that public opinion has always been the Achilles heel of animal damage control.

It certainly is not original to stress the importance of public relations. It is, in fact, an old hat cliché. But it has special importance to us--first, we must recognize it, and more importantly, we must do something about it.

Public opinion is a survival issue for wildlife damage management. We can develop improved policies, develop

new technologies and improve program administration. But, if we fail to enjoy public support, it will all be for naught.

Never before has the public been so concerned and sensitive to the well being of wildlife--of all animals. Anyone or any program that does not recognize this sensitivity and attempt to deal with it is courting disaster regardless of program merit. In this day and age, public sensitivity is just as real as the damage we seek to alleviate. I sometimes have the feeling that some personnel, especially the younger workers, believe "... that this too shall pass" Well, it will not. The public sensitivity is no passing fad.

We are all aware that there are some extremist organizations that devote most of their considerable funds and energies to public campaigns to halt control or management. Others are philosophically opposed. I am not talking about strategies for dealing with these organizations, except to make the point that it is obviously important not to give them ammunition.

What I am talking about is that we, and by we I mean all of us individually, are engaged in a contest for the public mind--the vast segment of the public that is not committed to a view but will, in the final analysis, determine the future.

So, what are some of the shared images or perceptions that caused me to reflect and resulted in this discussion?

Not long ago I attended a meeting where a high ranking official was berating APHIS and wildlife damage management in general--and in not very diplomatic terms. Without going into detail on his complaints or his motivation, I knew he was not correct.

The thing that was disturbing was not the unwarranted criticism and charges, but that they came from an official having great responsibility and were made before other officials who had authority and responsibility for resource management.

That single incident alone is not important. The group did not buy the line and the official has since departed.

But, I am sure that doubts were raised and that hard-won cooperation was weakened. And it reminded me that similar comments will continue to be made by other detractors before other influential audiences or groups. And, regardless of merit, they are erosive, and like the ripple effect, they spread. They tarnish or blur the image.

Some other paraphrased comments to which I have been privy:

- Yes, private, state and federal direction is responsible, but those who actually do the work are either not getting the word or do not pay any attention. Policy and direction are just window dressing.
- The workers are just pawns of agriculture and other interests suffering damage or problems.
- The practitioners of control have no concern for the environment nor any understanding of ecology--they are interested only in control--mostly killing.
- The responsible officials are not honest; their facts cannot be believed.
- There is no real interest in any methods except lethal control; non-lethal and alternative methods are a farce; the objective is killing.
- The program remains one of coyote and blackbird control.
- The work is done secretly; the public is never permitted full access.

Certainly none of these assertions are new; and obviously there are sound answers to each. Why then do they persist and what can be done about it?

First, I wonder if everyone, and I mean everyone, really appreciates his or her role both in causing public relations problems and in improving the image. I wonder if everyone, and again I mean everyone, realizes that a single incident in Arizona, North Carolina or downtown Denver impacts the entire field of wildlife damage management--that we are all tarred by the same brush.

I wonder also if field personnel, especially, do not have the feeling that public relations, liaison and the politics of dealing with the "antis" is the business of supervisory, public relations and administrative offices and officials--that their job is control and only pleasing local constituents. I wonder how many field personnel are aware, or even informed of the very significant changes and advances in the field as a whole.

And, why is the problem with our image so persistent, so pervasive?

First of all, animal control is the point issue for the antagonists of management and use including fishing and hunting. And, it is such an easy target because it frequently involves the killing of animals, some of which are highly valued by society. The public has grown increasingly sensitive to wildlife and to environmental concerns. With the advent of the animal rights movement, that concern has been elevated to a national--an international issue. Also, we are living with the hangover of the past. And unfortunately, collectively we have made some mistakes.

So much for this negative litany. What can we do collectively to improve our collective image?

Obviously, all depends on sound policies and sound responsible professional work at all levels, conducted in accordance with the highest ethical standards. There is no substitute. As Bob Schmidt has observed, those in wildlife damage management must hold to an even higher code of ethics than those involved in other resource fields because we are subject to greater scrutiny--emotional scrutiny.

It is absolutely essential that all personnel receive and understand policy and administrative directives and that these are not optional suggestions. There must be compliance accountability.

It is also important that all field personnel be informed of changes in wildlife damage management, of advances and problems. To be effective emissaries, they must be cognizant of the field as a whole. I wonder how many are aware of the brown tree snake problem; of the fact that ungulate and bird damage now outstrips that caused by coyotes and rodents; of work with immunocontraception; of the whole new field of urban problems and the need for new resolutions; and of the very significant advances in methods.

I suggest localized training sessions to review policy problems and advances; and, to make certain that every worker feels that he or she is part of a very broad and complex field. Unfortunately, field personnel cannot attend these conferences and get the exposure to the very fine work being done all over the nation, as evidenced by the program for this Conference. But, they need to know.

I think public relations should be in the job description and plan of work for every worker. I am not talking about news releases, speeches and TV appearances for everyone. I am, however, talking about keeping the local press, the conservation organizations, local elected officials and others informed on the work--not just the constituents. Developing a liaison and confidence with the opinion molders can be useful--before, not after problems develop.

To repeat: in planning or conducting any program, it is just as important to recognize the public sensitivity and plan accordingly as it is to plan the operational phase and select the methods. A good rule of thumb might well be to conduct each operation as if it were to be shown on the five o'clock news.

Obviously it is frequently necessary to employ lethal methods that are not always acceptable to some segments of the public. It is in these situations where it is imperative that the public be informed on the need, the options and the safeguards--the why and how. The public needs to understand that the determination to use lethal methods is the result of a long decision making process which has considered alternate non-lethal means.

All workers, especially state and federal, must be aware of requirements for openness with the public and for public involvement. Supervisory personnel should counsel field personnel on how to comply in dealing with the "photo op antagonists."

I have suggested that there are some blurred images of wildlife damage management and that these can become critical to the future of the entire field. I would like to give equal emphasis to my own optimistic view that the field is working from a sound basis for many reasons; that we have unparalleled opportunity for real progress.

To sum up: the field of wildlife damage management has some image problems. As a matter of fact, I believe that the image and acceptance of the program is better than ever in many quarters--in professional, management, academia and cooperator circles. There are, however,

some blurs or tarnish to the public image that need attention.

It will take the planned, overt work of everyone in the field to correct these. This will require sound policy, good administration, professional performance; and well-

informed, sensitive personnel to articulate the rationale and describe the broad national program. Image and public relations, under the best circumstances, will never be easy. But, it is our Achilles heel and deserves our best effort. So, let's get on with it. Thank you.

