

Developing Training Standards for Wildlife Control Operators

Raj Smith, Department of Natural Resources, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

Paul D. Curtis, Department of Natural Resources, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

Scott Hygnstrom, College of Natural Resources, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
Stevens Point, WI

ABSTRACT: Wildlife have always threatened peoples' comfort, safety, crops, domestic animals, and other property. Historically, wildlife and predator control were largely regulated by fur trapping and hunting laws, especially if an individual was protecting his or her property. Current laws that regulate problem wildlife are rooted in environmental conservation law. Enforcement of these regulations and laws regarding the capture and disposition of wildlife are conducted by game wardens or environmental conservation officers, whose primary mission is to enforce hunting and trapping laws. Under the Public Trust Doctrine, stewardship of wildlife is a government responsibility. State wildlife agencies have insufficient staff, however, to respond to the increase in human-wildlife conflicts created by rapid urbanization. Consequently, the profession of Wildlife Control Operators (WCOs) has emerged as a viable industry to manage negative wildlife interactions and conflicts. Thus, consistent training standards are needed for WCOs so that both wildlife and consumers are protected under Public Trust responsibilities. The National Wildlife Control Training Program (NWCTP) was created to provide a uniform standard for demonstrating core competency and understanding of integrated wildlife damage management (IWDM) principles.

KEY WORDS: licensing, standards, training wildlife control

Proceedings of the 18th Wildlife Damage Management Conference.
(J.B. Armstrong, G.R. Gallagher, Eds.). 2019. Pp. 57-61

INTRODUCTION

The application of methods to resolve conflicts from vertebrate species that cause problems or damage property is called wildlife damage management (WDM), (Witmer 2007). A wildlife control operator (WCO) is a professional trained to solve problems from wildlife damage and nuisance wildlife situations, usually for profit. The

commercial wildlife control industry has increased dramatically during the last 2 decades (Braband and Clark 1992, Curtis et al. 1993), and has adopted the concept of a basic training program and a standard code of ethics (Schmidt 1993).

A fundamental question to ask is what constitutes a wildlife pest? Animals are in most cases protected by law. Even if they can

be lethally removed, it should be done only to resolve an unacceptable amount of damage or risk. It is important to recognize that any animal perceived as a pest to one or more persons may, at the same time, be either desirable or of neutral value to someone else. There is no such thing as good and bad animals (Schmidt 1992). Whether an animal is beneficial, neutral, or undesirable depends entirely upon one's values, attitudes, and the specific context of the interaction.

DISCUSSION

Squirrels in the attic, skunks in the basement, and pigeons on the porch all require some type of intervention to lessen the human-wildlife conflict. This is not the type of conflict that can be resolved by recreational hunting or trapping, or by typical wildlife management interventions. Technically, what is required is integrated wildlife damage management (IWDM) or vertebrate pest management, which uses the same ecologically-based, multi-method approach as traditional integrated pest management (IPM) to solve human-wildlife conflicts (Curtis et al. 2015). Wildlife control operators (WCOs), or animal damage control agents (ADCAs), are specially trained to perform IWDM. The public has an expectation that a WCO will resolve the conflict humanely, ethically, and safely using cost-effective and environmentally-friendly methods (Braband and Clark 1992). The National Animal Damage Control Association adopted a position statement promoting the development of training curricula that included consumer protection, humane treatment of animals, and effective and practical solutions to wildlife damage situations (Conover 2002).

Satisfying the public expectation that a WCO will act competently requires that we have some level of quality as a standard or norm. Barnes (1997) recommended that state wildlife agencies require applicants to

receive training before receiving a WCO license. A training program should provide a basic framework for handling wildlife damage situations, including methods for dealing with the species most often responsible for conflicts. Some standards exist for professionals who manage wildlife (Schmidt 1993). Federal and state laws regarding wildlife species must be obeyed, as well. Laws and regulations for hunting and trapping and use of firearms exist to protect human and animal safety. Building codes are intended to prevent shoddy or inferior workmanship. Vehicular and traffic laws must be followed so that workers, equipment, and animals can be transported safely. If toxicants are used, operators must follow pesticide application laws and understand the importance of personal protection equipment (PPE).

Nearly all wildlife control professionals share some common issues. Most WCOs work outdoors, except when dealing with an animal inside a structure. Dealing with environmental hazards is a common issue. All WCOs must have broad knowledge of wildlife, including the ability to identify species, biology and habitat, pertinent laws and regulations, as well as damage prevention and control measures. They must have both the knowledge and ability to humanely dispatch an animal and properly dispose of the carcass. Also, WCOs must always keep in mind their personal safety, the safety of the clients and their domestic animals, and take care to prevent the spread of zoonotic diseases.

All WCOs share some common personal traits as well. They should be physically fit, have good manual dexterity, and have the ability to solve problems with good judgement and analytical thinking. In addition to knowledge of wildlife and environmental biology, they must have skills in trapping and animal control. Work in urban environments requires carpentry and

building maintenance skills, as well. To get to and from the job, a WCO needs a valid driver's license.

Understanding what skills and abilities WCOs have in common allows us to develop and design training standards. All WCOs should be knowledgeable of IPM problem-solving methodology, safety and personal risks, how zoonotic diseases are transmitted, and wildlife species and the associated damage they cause. All WCOs should be trained to inspect and solve human-wildlife conflicts and know how to implement control measures to resolve the existing conflict, and hopefully prevent, future human-wildlife conflicts. All WCOs must know the laws and regulations of the local community in which they are working, act professionally and ethically, and be competent at humanely dispatching animals and properly disposing of carcasses.

Professionalism is critical to the performance of any occupation. While it is possible to create training standards for WCOs who perform IWDM, teaching people to be professional is more complicated. Honesty and ethics, business management, liability and insurance coverage, customer service, quality work and craftsmanship, good record keeping, and abiding by the law are hallmarks of a good professional. A basic training program cannot teach these traits but they can be emphasized. Professionalism may be best learned by apprenticeship, leadership, and participation in trade organizations. Schmidt (1993) developed a basic code of ethics for WCOs to promote professional and responsible behavior.

Standards of competence inevitably require verification by testing. Testing should cover the common traits and functions of WCOs. All WCOs should be able to detail common hazards in the environment; demonstrate knowledge of wildlife biology, ecology, and probable damage; explain how to use and implement damage prevention and

control methods; demonstrate knowledge of wildlife diseases; and use of PPE to protect both the WCO and client. At a minimum, WCOs should also be tested for knowledge of federal and state laws and regulations regarding wildlife.

Agreement on training and occupational standards for WCOs would be a huge step forward for the industry. Many states operate with an eclectic combination of laws and regulations designed for recreational hunting and trapping, with caveats for managing nuisance and problem wildlife. Knowledge of these laws and regulations is a basic requirement of WCOs and the wildlife control industry. Regulations regarding training and occupational standards for WCOs are different from those required for the management and recreational enjoyment of wildlife. Training standards exist to make sure that WCOs can competently perform the work of wildlife damage management. While most customers believe that all private WCOs should be properly trained, many staff members who work for government wildlife agencies receive little formal training in WDM. State wildlife agencies have regulatory authority and oversight of this industry, and the trend toward licensing or certification of commercial WCOs is increasing (Curtis et al. 2015). Regulations differ in every state, and no consistent standards exist for training WCOs. The National Wildlife Control Training Program (NWCTP) was developed to provide a uniform standard for demonstrating core competency and understanding of basic IWDM principles (Curtis et al. 2015). WCOs should be licensed to ensure knowledge of state-required mandates for the performance of wildlife control; to ensure basic knowledge of methods used in WDM; and to provide governance and enforcement of wildlife regulations under the Public Trust Doctrine (Smith 2011, Decker et al. 2013).

While WCOs should at the very least meet minimum standards for certification and/or licensing, homeowners and other stakeholders would like to see guidelines for professional wildlife capture and removal. Wild animals may be unpredictable and people may not understand that handling nuisance pets (e.g., feral cats or stray dogs) may encompass a completely different set of state laws and regulations. The public wants all animals to be treated humanely, and there is significant public pressure for non-lethal control measures. Many urbanites do not have the skills to deal with wildlife problems on their property, and consistent guidelines would support them as well. Relocation of problem wildlife is a popular public response and is illegal in many situations. Professional standards for wildlife control may also increase the public awareness of laws and regulations regarding the taking and disposition of wildlife.

The market for vertebrate pest control services is very small when compared to the insect pest control industry. Far more government, academic, private industry, and trade organizations exist for Pest Control Operators (PCOs). As a mostly unregulated industry, WCOs have fewer options for joining trade organizations or getting training resources. In many states, fur trapping organizations are the primary form of professional communication and training. Politically and historically, enforcement of game laws and regulations occur mostly at the state level with many differences between states. Academic research in the field of vertebrate pest management is small. Few trade schools have training programs for WCOs. State Wildlife agencies are often understaffed and overworked. It is not clear where the leadership will come for implementing training and occupational standards for WCOs.

Standards are important. Lethal removal of problem wildlife is serious

business. Most people are uninformed about the activities of wildlife control professionals and IWDM methods. Discussion of standards and norms among multiple agencies, private industry, individuals, and stakeholders is necessary and should be ongoing. Most WCOs want high quality training to increase their competency and efficiency in the field. State wildlife agencies promote wildlife conservation and management, and many states are now discussing regulations and training for private WCOs. The Wildlife Society promotes certification for wildlife management professionals. However, this has largely been focused on wildlife agency staff, consultants, and academics, not the for-profit wildlife control industry. The National Wildlife Control Training Program (NWCTP) is a cooperative venture of concerned professionals interested in WDM. The NWCTP uses a standard curriculum for WDM and develops national standards for the private wildlife control industry. The NWCTP presents information through an Integrated Wildlife Damage Management (IWDM) perspective, which includes the timely use of a variety of cost-effective, environmentally safe, and socially acceptable methods to reduce human-wildlife conflicts to a tolerable level. This approach balances concerns about safety; the humane treatment of wildlife; practicality; landowner rights; the protection of wildlife populations and habitats; and ethical, legal, financial, and aesthetic issues. The NWCTP was created by extension wildlife specialists at land-grant universities, partnering with government agencies and private organizations to support national standards for the control of wildlife and prevention of wildlife damage. We see this as a first step in promoting national certification standards for WCOs. The NWCTP program staff are interested in expanding program collaborations with biologists from state and federal wildlife agencies. For more information on the

NWCTP, visit:
<http://WildlifeControlTraining.com>.

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