Hogs gone wild

WILLIAM H. CLAY, Deputy Administrator, USDA/APHIS/Wildlife Services, STOP 3402, Washington, DC 20250-3402, USA


William H. Clay

WILDLIFE DAMAGE management professionals deal with very few animals that pose as many conflicts or threats as those caused by feral hogs. Whether it's crop damage, livestock predation, environmental degradation, or disease transmission, feral hogs play a substantial role. Earlier this year, headlines in major newspapers and other media outlets highlighted the latest incidence of an *E. coli* outbreak in California; more than 200 people across the United States became sick, and 3 people died as a result of eating fresh spinach contaminated with this bacteria. The source of the outbreak was traced back to feral hogs in California.

Domestic pigs that have escaped and are now free-ranging animals are usually referred to as feral hogs. However, some feral hogs may also be hybrids or crosses with Eurasian wild boars. Feral hog populations have increased significantly in many states. They have large litters, essentially no predators, and are extremely adaptable to numerous habitats and food items, all of which has played a substantial role in their increase. First introduced into Florida by Spanish explorers, free-ranging hog populations are now thought to be as high as 4 million animals throughout the country, and they now thrive in >39 states. Wildlife Services (WS) personnel deal with feral hog conflicts on a daily basis. The WS take of feral hogs continues to increase substantially each year. In 2001, our personnel took over 5,389 hogs from 10 states. By 2005, those numbers had increased to >13,437 hogs taken in 19 states. Last year, in Texas alone, our personnel took 14,507 feral hogs—more than the total amount that we had taken throughout the entire country the year before! As 1 county extension specialist in Texas stated during a recent television interview, "There are 2 kinds of ranchers in Texas—those that have feral hogs and those that are about to get them!" The methods WS most commonly uses to remove feral hogs are aerial gunning, snares, live traps, and field shooting.

Feral hogs are one of those animals that you either love or hate, and that in itself presents considerable challenges in attempting to deal with the problems they cause. Most hunters like them and consider them a formidable hunting challenge. Most landowners, especially farmers and ranches, view them as a real menace that causes damage to fences and deer feeders, kills young livestock, and eats farm crops. Wildlife managers often see significant destruction from feral hogs to natural resources, whether it be to native plants, wildlife, or both. Feral hogs and automobile collisions are becoming more frequent, and several human fatalities have occurred recently as a result of these collisions. Some state wildlife management agencies classify feral hogs as nongame animals with no regulatory protection whatsoever. In other states, they may be classified as a game animal with distinct seasons and bag limits. At least 14 states allow them to be hunted if the hunter possesses a current hunting license.

As feral hog populations and resulting conflicts continue to increase, so does the interest in ways to manage the problems. Most of the national wildlife conferences conducted in the United States each year now routinely include information or papers presented on feral hog management issues. The Twelfth Wildlife Damage Management Conference in Corpus Christi, Texas, in April 2007 devoted an entire session to this topic.

In addition to livestock predation and environmental damage caused by feral hogs, a growing threat is transmission of diseases, primarily pseudorabies or swine brucellosis. Several other diseases also may be carried or transmitted by feral hogs. Swine brucellosis has been reported in wild hog populations in at least 14 states. The disease can be spread to domestic

hogs if feral hogs are introduced into local herds either intentionally or if they enter pastures or pens containing domestic hog herds. Another disease of particular concern to the commercial hog industry is pseudorabies. Despite its name, this disease is not related to rabies; it is actually a herpes virus, that does not affect people. However, pseudorabies can greatly affect the economic viability of the domestic hogs industry if the disease is transmitted into local domestic herds from feral hog populations. If that happens, the disease can directly restrict trade with other countries. In domestic hogs, clinical signs of the disease range from unapparent to fatal. Adult feral hogs that do recover from pseudorabies can develop latent infections and spread the virus indefinitely; that is why they pose a significant threat to the hog industry.

The WS' National Wildlife Research Center Field Station located in Kingsville, Texas, is currently conducting research on ways to control overpopulations of feral hogs, and researchers are looking at innovative ways to reduce the threat and presence of feral hog diseases. Currently, there are 12 WS research studies on hogs. These include electric fencing to inhibit feral hog movements, identifying potential chemical attractants, evaluating effective baits to deliver pharmaceuticals to feral hogs, looking at the incidence and risk of feral hog interactions with domestics swine, looking at the economic implications of research to control feral hogs, and several others.

With the feral hog population estimated to be >4 million in the United States—and the number is growing—it's extremely unlikely that they will ever be eradicated completely. I firmly believe, however, that there is still much we can do to effectively manage this issue. The problems and conflicts caused by these animals did not happen overnight, and they won't be solved immediately; it will take time, resources, continued research, and a collective effort from all of us if we are to be successful. ✷

The role of knowledge in developing people skills

Ben C. West, Associate Professor, Jack H. Berryman Institute, Box 9690, Mississippi State, MS 39762, USA

As I noted in the last issue of *Human–Wildlife Conflicts*, wildlife professionals have historically been lambasted for poorly-developed people skills (West 2007). Moreover, I suggested that full development of any skill relies on knowledge, practice, and feedback. To become a top-notch golfer, for example, one must intellectually understand many things, including rules of the game, layout of golf courses, biomechanics of swinging a golf club, situational advantages and disadvantages or different sized clubs, and many other things. However, to have that knowledge is not enough to be a great golfer; one must also apply that knowledge to the game through practice, again and again. Finally, without feedback, one would never know whether improvement was occurring and would thus never be able to refine his technique to become better. Knowledge, practice, and feedback are absolute requirements for the full development of any skill.

Ben C. West

To develop better skills for dealing with other people, one must also rely on these 3 facets of skill development. In the wildlife profession, we often make the mistake of not engaging any of these 3 components fully when trying to become better at dealing with people. But, I believe the