Wildlife damage and animal welfare: an Australian approach

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Public attitudes to pest management and associated welfare issues are often based on incomplete or misleading information and are strongly influenced by perception and emotion. Decisions cannot therefore be made on the basis of public attitudes per se. However, the general community is demanding to be included in the process for deciding what is acceptable in terms of resource management and livestock production. This extends to pest management.”

Sound familiar? Pick a random clump, herd, or gaggle of wildlife damage practitioners at one of the national meetings and the conversation will inevitably steer in this direction. This particular quotation, however, comes from a report* issued by the National Consultative Committee on Animal Welfare (NCCAW), an advisory group to the Australian government. The report begins as follows:

“The control of vertebrate pests in Australia is an emotive subject which is continuing to cause public concern both within Australia and overseas. It has become an issue with national and international implications. For example, the Commonwealth Government receives many letters of complaint from Australians, from European counties, and from the USA about the perceived inhumaneness of vertebrate pest control in Australia. Concerns are expressed not only about control methods but whether the destruction of the animals is necessary. Public concern, albeit sometimes misplaced, no doubt provides a major impetus for Governments to review the practices they carry out and advocate. Public concern about treatment of animals can also no doubt alter the way in which countries such as Australia are perceived overseas, and affect consumer demand for some of our products. Pest managers, therefore, take account of public opinion but must also try to ensure that the views of the general community, both within Australia and overseas, are based on fact.”

*See Animal Welfare Attitudes in Australia, page 5

The NCCAW approached this task by organizing a Working Group representing a number of stakeholder organizations, whose membership included expertise in wildlife damage management, ecology and physiology, animal welfare, ethics, livestock production, and research. The Working Group held a two-day meeting, the results of which are summarized in this report.

The Working Group recognized that the major introduced species causing damage on a national basis included rabbits, pigs, dogs (dingos and feral dogs), foxes, and goats, although they recognized that other species were causing damage locally. After reviewing the extent of the wildlife damage problem and the methods utilized in Australia for managing this damage, the Working Group identified four areas in particular that should be given priority in wildlife damage research:

1. Measuring impact - to enable pest management to be undertaken on a rational basis taking into account the impact of the species causing damage and the long-term benefits as well as the costs of the management program;

2. Assess humaneness - regularly review the humaneness of all management methods, both new and old;

3. Improve existing management methods - conduct research to determine how existing conventional management materials can be made most humane; and

4. New methods - undertake research on the possibility of developing alternative management methods which are both humane and effective.

They noted that “Public opposition to some pest control operations is based partly on the assertion that the need for control has not been objectively assessed and that the welfare ‘costs’ associated with the control operation are not justified in terms of the
Vermont Citizens Find APHIS/ADC Rabies Hotline Contagious

ADC was asked by Vermont Governor Howard Dean to participate on a Rabies Task Force to identify statewide rabies management strategies for disease surveillance, population management and public education. Based on the Task Force findings, ADC proposed a cooperatively funded program between ADC and Vermont's Departments of Fish and Wildlife, Agriculture, Health, and Public Safety that uses a 1-800 “rabies hotline” approach to help meet the management and education objectives identified by the Task Force.

Two strains of rabies are currently of concern in Vermont—a strain of rabies in which the red fox is the primary vector that entered northwestern Vermont from either New York or Quebec earlier this year, and the mid-Atlantic strain or “raccoon rabies” that is expected to hit Vermont's southern borders by 1993.

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A few of the Working Group's specific recommendations included:

- ban the sale and use of strychnine
- review the humaneness of all other poisons currently in use and seek more humane substitutes
- improve target specificity of baits
- ensure the continued availability of 1080, “which is recognized as one of the more effective and humane poisons currently available”
- accelerate development of more humane alternatives to toothed leghold traps
- dogs should not be used for killing animals

Utah Man Wants Compensation For Coyote Attack

Arguing that the state owns all wildlife and is therefore responsible when “one of the animals acts up,” a 34-year-old St. Paul, Minnesota, man wants the State of Utah to pay his $2,000 medical bill. According to a report in the June 1992 National Wool Grower, the Minnesotan suffered the injuries when a coyote chewed on his head and neck as he slept at an I-80 rest stop near Green River, Utah.

The victim noticed the coyote when he arrived at the rest stop, but after it left the area, he felt it was safe to fall asleep on the grass. He was awakened by a gnawing sensation on his neck and had to seek medical treatment which included stitches and tetanus shots.

Utah State Risk Management Pool Director Alan Edwards said the state owns its wildlife by law so it can prevent illegal killing, but that it’s not a “kennel for animals.” The state is denying the plaintiff's claim.