

THE CO-EXISTING WITH COYOTES PROGRAM IN VANCOUVER, B.C.

ROBYN E. WORCESTER, Stanley Park Ecology Society, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

ROBERT BOELENS, Stanley Park Ecology Society, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Abstract: When coyotes first arrived in Vancouver, BC they brought surprise, myths, and concern to the public as they grew comfortable in our city parks, golf courses, and neighborhoods. The Co-existing with Coyotes (CWC) program was created in 2001 and is based on the recommendations of a research project about public perceptions on urban coyotes. This program aims to reduce conflict between coyotes, pets, and people by providing information to both targeted and general audiences as well as providing a direct response to individual coyotes that are starting to, or are displaying, behavior of concern. The general public is reached through an information phone line, the distribution of brochures and posters, website resources, and permanent signs in parks and green spaces. Specific audiences are taught through the 'Coyotes 101' school program, interpretive walks, and presence at public events. Program staff coordinate with public agencies to locate, evaluate, and use non-lethal deterrents whenever possible with problem coyotes. The CWC program has begun its 7th year of operation and has played a key role in reducing conflict between people and coyotes in the greater Vancouver area.

Key words: Co-existing with coyotes, education program, non-lethal deterrents, urban coyotes, Vancouver B.C.

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The Co-existing with Coyotes (CWC) program represents a balanced approach to urban coyote (*Canis latrans*) management that considers non-lethal techniques to be the first option for dealing with coyotes in the city. Coyotes first arrived in the city of Vancouver in the 1980s, although they had been in the Greater Vancouver area since the 1930s. Conflicts arose when the coyotes became comfortable in urban spaces, they started attacking pets, and later by biting children. Vancouver is a large city with over half a million people and is located in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD), which is home to over 2 million residents. When citizens became concerned for the safety of their children and pets, it became clear that the

Provincial government had limited resources and techniques to deal with coyote problems in the city. Phone calls from the public were sent to agencies that were unable to provide adequate information, such as the SPCA and Animal Control, which deal mainly with domestic animals. The results of a research survey conducted in 1997 in the greater Vancouver area showed that although opinions were divided on the issue of urban coyotes, there was a clear need for consistent and accurate information. The CWC program was created in 2001 to meet the needs for information sharing with the public and long-term management of urban coyotes.

STANLEY PARK ECOLOGY SOCIETY

The Stanley Park Ecology Society (SPES) is a non-profit organization that runs the CWC program. A full-time staff member is employed to carry out all the activities of the program, including cooperating with the Provincial government and City wildlife staff to deal with problem animals. The position is funded by the British Columbia (BC) Ministry of Environment, The City of Vancouver, and SPES. Although the BC Ministry of Environment is responsible for wildlife management, they have limited resources and limited techniques for dealing with animals in urban environments. The CWC program is made possible by their funding support.

CO-EXISTING WITH COYOTES HISTORY

Coyotes were the topic of much debate when they started causing problems in the GVRD, and the media was happy to report incidents of dangerous coyotes, which fostered fear and misunderstanding in the community. This negative attention contributed to the desire for a survey of public attitudes to see how the problem could best be dealt with. Masters student Kristine Webber undertook this survey and research into the ecology of urban coyotes at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver in 1997. The survey showed several interesting results. First most people had a neutral or positive attitude towards urban coyotes and felt urban wildlife enhanced their quality of life. Many people also stated that they were willing to change their lifestyle to accommodate wildlife activity (Webber 1997). Second the majority of respondents to the survey supported non-lethal approaches to address urban wildlife issues. This attitude challenges wildlife managers to consider non-traditional techniques to gain public

support. However, respondents also supported lethal control when public safety or the animal's welfare was a concern. "Relocation" was also a popular solution, but this may reflect the public's perception that this is a humane solution, and these attitudes can be considered as an educational opportunity (Webber 1997). Third the survey participants were unclear about who was responsible for problem wildlife. Opinions were split on acting wildlife management agencies between the City, the Province, and the SPCA (Webber 1997). It is important for the public to have a clear idea of who to contact for wildlife issues for economic, social, and public safety reasons. Overall, the survey identified that coyotes were a concern to the public, an educational approach was favored, the public has specific concerns about coyotes, and there are gaps in the public's knowledge about coyotes (Webber 1997). It was from these findings that the CWC program was based.

THE CO-EXISTING WITH COYOTES PROGRAM

The CWC program's mission is to promote "Public access to information and resources to reduce conflict between coyotes and people." The main components of the program are an information phone line, community workshops, school and Parental Advisory Committee presentations, collaboration with government agencies, and public education through printed media and a website. The program is managed with a two-pronged approach: 1. short-term emergency response, by removing problem animals in collaboration with government agencies; 2. long-term solution, through public education and outreach, collaboration with different organizations, and the use of No-feeding and Untidy Premises Bylaws.

Coyote Phone Line

The vast majority of the more than 5,000 people that have contacted Vancouver's coyote phone line since it started ringing in 2001 wanted two things. The first was to be able to tell someone what they had experienced, and the second was to be told what they should do about it. The coyote phone line provides accurate information (something which was not occurring when multiple agencies were answering calls), advice, and situation-specific responses, ranging from answering questions about natural history and an appropriate reaction to a backyard coyote, to an immediate on-site response. The phone line receives between 700 and 900 calls per year and also serves to monitor the City for areas where individual animals are displaying behavior of concern. Other agencies, including various branches of city and provincial governments, police and fire departments, and animal welfare groups, have all been very happy to refer coyote-based phone calls to a specific, designated line. Printed material is offered to each person who calls the phone line, along with the recommendation they distribute it to neighbors.

Printed Materials

The Co-Existing with Coyotes brochure is a quick reference point for the general public to learn more about urban coyotes and how people can coexist with them. It informs the reader of the coyote attractants present in their neighborhood, how to prepare for a coyote encounter, how to keep pets safe, the dangers of feeding a coyote, and offers contact information for questions and specific concerns. Printed material is sent to each community center, library, golf course, veterinary clinic, pet services business, elementary school, and child care facility in the City of Vancouver. The program distributes 10,000-15,000

brochures each year. Notes that report localized pet attacks, coyote feeding, and anonymous "coyote attractants on your property" are also available. There are also more than 100 permanent 60 × 75-cm (24 × 30-inch) metal signs posted on golf courses, off-leash dog parks, and areas of frequent coyote activity in Vancouver. The signs provide encounter behavior, pet safety tips, and coyote natural history, and identifying features, as well as providing contact details for additional information.

School Programs

'Coyotes 101' is an auditorium-style presentation designed to provide elementary school audiences (grades K-7) with the skills to identify coyotes (big ears up/bushy tail down), recognize urban coyote attractants in their neighborhood, and be familiar with recommended coyote encounter behavior (appear big, mean, and loud, and never run). 'Coyotes 101' emphasizes the above objectives while providing additional natural history information and engaging the students and teachers in an informative, interactive, and entertaining manner. On average 12,000 elementary school children participate in the program each year.

Community Presentations

The program also reaches several thousand people per year by attending community events and leading interpretive walks through "The Coyote Zone" (in any requested neighborhood in Greater Vancouver). These presentations highlight how easy it is for coyotes to survive in the urban environment, and how residents can and should respond.

Website

One of the most successful and complimented resources Co-Existing with Coyotes has created has been the

compilation of most of the program materials on its website (<http://stanley.server309.com/programs/urbanWildlife/coyotes/>). It hosts a comprehensive collection of resources including suggestions for coyote encounter behavior, pet safety tips, reducing neighborhood coyote attractants, blueprints for home-made deterrents, common questions, updated sighting reports, brochures in 11 languages for downloading, identifying coyote features, coyote natural history facts and sounds, coyote conflict statistics, and opportunities to ask specific or incident related questions, report sightings, share opinions, and leave stories and comments. The program coordinator receives daily emails through the website from people from all over North America asking questions or reporting sightings.

Problem Coyote Response

Stanley Park Ecology Society and City of Vancouver wildlife staff track, locate, evaluate, and use non-lethal coyote deterrents with consistent success in neighborhoods throughout Vancouver. Equally importantly, they also recognize that coexistence is not always an option. In an average year, program staff visit between 25 to 30 neighborhoods to provide a non-lethal response to individual coyotes there, and to train and stimulate area residents to do the same. The non-lethal response that staff provide is simple yet effective, as coyotes consistently and quickly respond to staff displaying loud and aggressive-appearing behavior. The importance and level of the volume and hostility used cannot be overemphasized. Residents who observe staff physically chasing a coyote out of the neighborhood with noisemakers as simple as a cookie tin with few stones in it, or an old broom stick, recognize that the key to deterring coyotes is appearing aggressive. Moreover, once they have seen it work, they are empowered to do the same. The coyote

is pursued as long as its whereabouts are known. If it darts into shrubbery or under a shed, the noisemakers and broom stick are used to chase it out. Once the animal is out of sight, staff spend additional time attempting to locate it, hoping to repeat the treatment. Generally, after 1 to 3 of these experiences, the sightings in the neighborhood sharply decrease or cease altogether, without appearing or starting in an adjoining area. If the pattern of increased sightings does continue, so do the use and frequency of non-lethal techniques, as well as monitoring the coyote's behavioral changes for potential removal.

Bylaws

A cooperative effort among involved agencies and government departments is essential, and in Vancouver's case, fortunately, it is the norm. When residents complain about coyotes attracted by the condition and rat habitat of a neighbor's neglected yard, the City Bylaw Office is quick to respond. The Untidy Premises Bylaw makes the property owner responsible to ensure their residence and yard are maintained at a similar level as the rest of the neighborhood. Failure to comply with the By-law carries a penalty ranging between C\$50 and C\$2000. Virtually every urban city or municipality has similar regulations and are prompt to enforce them. On other occasions, when coyote habitat (primarily overgrown or vacant lots) appeared on city-owned but undeveloped land, a work order for the removal of the bushes and maintenance of the property is promptly issued once the residents' concern comes to the civic department's attention.

Prosecuting individuals who feed wildlife is a problem. Though Section 33.1 of the BC Wildlife Act provides a minimum C\$345 ticket and maximum C\$50,000 fine and 6-month prison sentence for anyone who "with the intent of attracting dangerous

wildlife to any land or premises, provides, leaves or places in, or about the land or premises, food, food waste or any other substance that could attract dangerous wildlife to the land or premises”, it is logistically difficult to enforce this bylaw, as the people doing the feeding are discreet and difficult to identify. Thankfully, the vast majority of residents recognize the danger that feeding coyotes exposes their communities to, and react to news of feeding in their neighborhoods with shock and anger.

The CWC program has reached its 6th year and is recognized as playing a key role in reducing coyote conflicts in the city of Vancouver. As a measure of success, only one child has been bitten since July 2001, in comparison to 5 of these incidents between April 2000 and July 2001. Coyotes that bit children had either been fed by people or were found in areas where wildlife feeding was a problem. This proactive program has helped to reduce these conflicts

by providing a means for the public to become informed and participate in preventing coyote problems to occur. The balanced approach that Co-Existing with Coyotes brings continues to generate support from government and animal welfare agencies, school administrators, and members of public who have encountered an urban coyote. Most of Vancouver’s residents have a coyote story of their own to tell. They have vivid recounts of their coyote encounter, often with varying levels of emotion and opinion, of the time they saw or heard one of this city’s coyotes, and many of them now have a story of coexistence to tell as well.

LITERATURE CITED

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