

The Ethics of Wildlife Control in Humanized Landscapes

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ABSTRACT: The 21st century is witness to an unprecedented and rapid growth of human settlements, from urban centers to wilderness vacation resorts. Concurrent with this has been the growing tolerance and acceptance of many wild animals and humans for one another. This has created an expanding 'zone' of human-animal contacts, some number of which invariably result in conflicts. While the vast majority of our interactions with wild animals are undoubtedly benign, it is the conflict between wildlife and people that draws particularly close attention from the public. Animals viewed as vertebrate "pests" range from the small to the large, the timid to the fierce, and the benign to the dangerous. With respect to all is the issue that bridges both environmental and social concerns— what is the 'right' thing to do about resolving conflicts? Wildlife agencies in North America continue to stress traditional approaches to managing wildlife problems by focusing on regulated hunting, trapping, and poisoning. Yet contemporary human-wildlife conflicts have scientific, political, and moral dimensions that are not well addressed by those traditions. Controversy and polarization arise from differing ethics of how we ought to live with non-human animals. Wildlife protection interests argue that many common and current wildlife control practices, such as the drowning of "nuisance" animals, are ethically ungrounded. A practical ethic guiding our response to human-animal conflicts is, they argue, therefore needed. This ethics should inform "pest" control policy and management, as well as articulate a vision of our place in a mixed community of people and animals. This paper explores this need.

KEY WORDS: animals, animal welfare, ethics, practical ethics, wildlife control, wildlife management

Proc. 22nd Vertebr. Pest Conf. (R. M. Timm and J. M. O'Brien, Eds.)
Published at Univ. of Calif., Davis. 2006. Pp. 500-504.

INTRODUCTION

Although damage caused by wildlife to human interests has engaged our attention from time immemorial, it is only recently that a formal discipline of wildlife damage management has emerged (Conover 2002). In the United States, attention turned to both the scientific and practical aspects of wildlife control not long after the Civil War. This came first in the form of academic pursuits aimed at determining the feeding habits of different wildlife species and how they helped or harmed agricultural interests. Soon an emerging federal bureaucracy, the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey, took to the field with large-scale predator and rodent control programs that were anything but academic (Robinson 2005). For a long time, both federal and private sector efforts focused on the simple expedient of killing as many predators and other animals thought injurious to crops and livestock as possible. Wide-scale trapping and poisoning programs took both target and non-target species in numbers sufficient to allow the assumption that the "control" was making a difference to the interests of producers. The indiscriminate killing, however, resulted in challenge and criticism from both professional as well as lay sources (Shaw and Schmidly 1994, Olsen 1971). With the environmental revolution of the 1960s and 70s and the rise of awareness on animal welfare and protection issues (e.g. Singer 1975, Midgley 1984), the ethical underpinnings of these programs, and by association all wildlife damage practices, were brought sharply into public debate. Schmidt (1989a,b) and

Schmidt and Salmon (1991) raised the question of animal welfare, damage control, and ethics and called for a dialogue on the issues. That dialogue has been engaged in Europe and Australasia (Harris 1985, Feare 1994, Kirkwood *et al.* 1994, Fisher and Marks 1996, Eggleston *et al.* 2003); in North America it essentially has not.

This paper seeks to achieve two aims. The first is to challenge the quietude that exists around the idea of discussing ethics in wildlife management, particularly in North America. The second is to help set a broader dialogue on the ethics that ought to guide the research, policy, and implementation of wildlife control. The context for this discussion is the urbanizing and globalizing world, where human domination of environments threatens everything from individual animals to the ecosystems that sustain entire communities of living things. Our objective is not to claim any moral high ground or to aver that one or another of the many forms of ethics should be practiced and followed in pursuit of any truth. It is simply to open discussion and play the next hand in the game, intending if nothing else to rekindle a flame that seems almost extinguished.

HUMANIZED LANDSCAPES

Although there is a strong argument to be made that none of the earth's ecosystems remain unaffected by humans some, such as the agricultural and urban, are clearly dominated by our actions (Vitousek *et al.* 1997). Societies have turned virtually all the world's arable land (and more) over to human use and now absorb a hugely