



WDFW Strategic Initiative –

Living with Wildlife

As Washington's human population rises and development continues to encroach further into wildlife habitat, people and animals are increasingly coming into conflict. These human-wildlife conflicts involve encounters with raccoons, coyotes and numerous other animals, as well as potentially dangerous species, such as bears, cougars and moose.

In the past two years, nearly 30 percent of Washington residents have experienced a problem with wildlife, according to a 2008 Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) survey. These conflicts range from black bears that have been fed by humans to cougar attacks on pets and livestock.

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Currently, WDFW's Enforcement Program is responsible for responding to wildlife conflicts. While this approach is appropriate when human health and safety is threatened, the majority of interactions do not pose a safety risk to people. To effectively address these non-safety issues, the department needs to adjust its response to human-wildlife conflicts.

The current reactive, short-term response, often involves lethal removal of the problem animal and financial compensation for property damage. By shifting to a proactive approach, WDFW's enforcement officers can focus their efforts on other department priorities and better serve the public.



Raising awareness to reduce conflict

Conflicts that do occur between humans and coyotes can often be avoided. Many problems between humans and wildlife can be resolved once people stop feeding the animals – intentionally or inadvertently.

Conflicts with wildlife often occur near homes and can involve animals ranging from raccoons to bears. At the same time, adaptable species are becoming more established in urban areas.

For example, in north Puget Sound, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's (WDFW) regional office in Mill Creek fields between 20 and 30 calls weekly about coyotes, with the majority coming from King County residents.

Although WDFW enforcement officers respond to wildlife encounters that threaten human safety, there are few, if any, coyote-control methods that can be used in urban and suburban areas. As a result, urban coyotes have become a fact of life in Seattle and many other cities in the state.

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Bears can become accustomed to humans and increasingly aggressive when they are allowed access to food – garbage, pet food or birdfeeders. WDFW officers euthanize dangerous animals such as bears and cougars that have clearly lost their fear of humans.

The link between feeding and problem wildlife encounters was illustrated in 2006 in an Olympia neighborhood, which experienced a rash of raccoon attacks on cats and dogs. The raccoon problems ceased when residents in the area stopped feeding the animals.

As these wildlife encounters continue to rise in urban areas, a centralized technical assistance network to help the public is essential. By establishing this network – made up of trained volunteers, county extension offices, private businesses and licensed wildlife rehabilitators – the department can provide and / or facilitate a timely response to citizens to resolve these issues without the need of enforcement officers.





Agricultural damage from elk and deer

While city dwellers must learn to live with nuisance wildlife, rural farming operations face damage from elk and deer.

WDFW is legally obligated to pay for damage caused by foraging elk and deer to commercial agricultural and horticultural crops. From 2004-07, farmers claimed an average of \$440,000 a year for deer and elk damages. During that time, the department paid \$150,000 a year, the maximum amount allowed under state law.

While wildlife can cause damage, landowners also can impact the habitat animals need to survive. A balanced, equitable approach is necessary to share the responsibility in addressing elk and deer damage issues, with financial compensation from the state as a last resort. However, the current remedy allowed under state law is limited and places primary financial responsibility on the state's Wildlife Account for the payment of damages.



To provide a more pro-active response to these conflicts, the department needs to increase landowner assistance and awareness by expanding its Wildlife Conflict Specialist Program, which is designed to address landowner elk and deer damage issues.

In the past, WDFW has tried to minimize agricultural damage by hazing elk, fencing, increasing the number of elk hunting permits in some areas and establishing controlled hunts for specially trained hunters.

To provide a more pro-active response to these conflicts, the department needs to increase landowner assistance and awareness by expanding its Wildlife Conflict Specialist Program, which is designed to address landowner elk and deer damage issues. Adding wildlife conflict specialists, who act as dedicated field staff as well as liaisons with local governments and landowners, the department could focus on long-term solutions to elk and deer damage problems.

A preventive, education-based effort also will allow WDFW's enforcement officers to respond to other priorities, such as species protection and fishing and hunting rule enforcement.



Wolves re-appear in Washington

In response to the expected return of wolves to Washington and potential state management responsibility in the future, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is developing a state wolf conservation and management plan.

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In recent years, as gray wolf populations re-established in neighboring Idaho and southern British Columbia, increasing numbers of individual wolves have dispersed into Washington. Resident wolf breeding pairs or packs had not been found in Washington, however, until July 2008 when a single pack with pups was discovered in Okanogan County. As wolf activity continues to increase, it is anticipated that breeding wolf populations will form in the northeast and southeast areas of the state, as well as in the Cascade Mountains.

In response to the expected return of wolves to Washington and potential state management responsibility in the future, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is developing a state wolf conservation and management plan. A citizen Wolf Working Group is advising the department in developing the plan. After the draft plan is submitted for public review in 2009, it will be presented to the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission for final consideration.

In order to manage wolves as they re-establish in Washington, funding is needed to radio-collar resident wolves and monitor their numbers, movements and use of Washington habitat. Public outreach and education also is needed to assist residents living and recreating in and near wolf habitat. Additional resources are needed to help livestock producers reduce the potential for wolf-livestock conflicts and respond to those that do occur. This pro-active approach will further wolf conservation while helping Washington citizens co-exist with wolves.

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