

Letter on Proposed Coyote Management in Massachusetts

JONATHAN G. WAY¹

¹Eastern Coyote Research; E-mail: jw9802@yahoo.com.

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Summary/Comments

This is second letter in successive years (2006/2007) I wrote to state about coyote management. None of the suggestions/requests have been acknowledged despite having over 20 peer reviewed publications relating to coyotes. Sadly, the state increased the coyote hunting season despite many people opposing it, including myself. Supposedly, the hunting season was not increased for anything but to increase the opportunity for hunters to kill more coyotes and to reduce complaints (which is impossible to quantify and would probably be based on the division of fisheries and wildlife receiving less calls/complaints from homeowners). I publish this shorter version (compared to 2006, of which much is repeated in Eastern Coyote Research Publication 2 on Wildlife Watching) of the letter here to show that the state has repeatedly ignored its own scientists pertaining to wildlife management to satisfy the interests of a minority of hunters who even target coyotes. The way the state currently ignores our research is akin to how scientists were silenced about global warming during the Bush administration.

The Letter

31 May 2007

Chairman, Fisheries and Wildlife Board
c/o Wayne MacCallum, MassWildlife
1 Rabbit Hill Rd, Westborough MA 01581

Dear Chairman of F & W Board,

I would like to thank you for your time in reading my comments regarding coyote management in Massachusetts. I have severe reservations about the implementation of a more liberal harvest (kill) of coyotes in our state. I have spent the past ten years intensively studying the behavioral ecology of this species in technical programs that have lead to a Master's degree from the University of Connecticut Storrs and a Doctoral Degree from Boston College – both related to the study of coyotes in eastern Massachusetts. I am now conducting research through affiliations with Boston College and Barnstable High School,

where I am presently teaching Ecology and Environmental Science. Our collaborative research team includes fellow scientists and students from Barnstable High School, Boston College, the Urban Ecology Institute, and UMass Amherst. We have published over 14 peer-reviewed articles (over 20 by 2009) on the ecology of eastern coyotes, as well as many newspaper and magazine articles. My book, *Suburban Howls* (Dog Ear Publications), is a 300+ page account of my decade of research with coyotes and was published this spring.

Coyote Ecology

Our data indicate that coyotes typically live at low densities because they are highly territorial, meaning that in their chosen territory they actively displace other coyotes besides their own group. This component of their behavioral ecology acts to limit their population size and regulates their own densities in local areas. Our data indicate that typical sizes of winter coyote packs are 3-4 adults that live in about 10 square miles of land. These packs give birth to an average of 5 pups in the spring, which disperse to other locations still leaving 3-4 adults the following winter. Pup mortality is usually high due to natural and human causes.

I personally do not advocate, nor in my opinion do research data support the need for, increasing the coyote hunting season in Massachusetts from the current 4-month unlimited-take season. I believe it would be unproductive for the following reasons;

1) Random removal of coyotes from local populations can have the unintended consequence of increasing local coyote densities. We have discovered that the death of just a breeding coyote in a given area can cause an influx of transient coyotes looking for breeding opportunities into the formerly guarded territory and result in multiple breeding pairs, and thus, multiple litters.

2) Hunting programs deflect attention and resources (monetary and other), away from proven ecological and educational interventions in local communities of the Commonwealth.

3) Hunting is usually conducted after the fact (e.g., after a coyote kills a dog in an area). Research throughout the country has shown that recreational hunting (and trapping) actually increases the wariness of coyotes making them difficult to control when the need exists to actually locate and kill a trouble-making animal.

Hunting promotes a temporary reduction in coyote density, which then spurs more coyotes to breed, ultimately increasing reproduction and coyote population density. Thus extending a hunting season could have exactly the opposite effect in coyote numbers. Our data indicates that when territorial coyotes are killed, transients quickly settle in and occupy those vacant territories. Thus, in a local area, recreational hunting usually does not reduce population densities, but potentially increases them. This is now well-known in wildlife management circles.

Ethics

While hunting will not ultimately impact coyote numbers (because of their reproductive potential and colonization ability) I believe it will have an impact on animal suffering. I provide many individualized accounts of coyote behavior in my book and how their deaths affected individual packs. As scientists, managers, and educators, I believe we need to inform the public that the management of coyotes is complex and enhanced by combining non-lethal strategies with limited hunting seasons and to encourage people to cherish having these animals around as they are sentient, intelligent, and ultimately valuable members of the ecological community.

I believe that our precious public resources would be much better spent on providing our citizens with objective research and education on coyotes. The state of New York recently granted Cornell University over \$400,000 of public support to study coyotes. The research program will replicate much of the research that our team has done and published. I have proposed the creation of an Eastern Coyote Discovery Center, a museum and educational center devoted to coyote research and management. Although I am working with local municipalities and private entities, funding from the state would certainly be one way to achieve these goals. From my perspective, the Commonwealth has historically focused too narrowly on limited strategies and is ceding the leadership role on urban coyote management to New York State and to novel programs under development in Rhode Island.

Bold coyotes are very common, and rarely dangerous, in our western national parks where hunting has not been allowed for decades. More people need to understand that a coyote trotting through a field or yard should not be considered a dangerous animal. It might be bold, but being bold is far from being a threat.

Recommendations

I would like to submit the following recommendations to guide future coyote management:

1. Because we have documented coyotes giving birth in mid-March, the Massachusetts coyote hunting season should end no later than mid-February, instead of the end of February as is currently the law. Thus, revising the Massachusetts coyote hunting season from November-January would be appropriate.

2. There should be a bag limit of 2 coyotes per year per hunter in Massachusetts. Although a relatively arbitrary number, it does amount to a typical-sized social group of coyotes, certainly a significant number for a local area. This limit would ensure numerous recreational opportunities for the fraction of people who hunt coyotes, yet would also provide wildlife watchers with plenty of chances to observe others within intact ecosystems.

3. Both baiting and hounding (using dogs to hunt coyotes) should be banned. In 1996, voters made these practices illegal for bobcats and bears; the same should hold true for all predators.

4. The centuries-old law that allows anyone to kill a predator near ones' livestock should be changed to a statute that is more balanced. Proper husbandry techniques should be mandatory for livestock owners. In collaboration with organizations like the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' Living with Wildlife program, non-lethal alternatives should be required before lethal options are considered.

5. None of these strategies and laws will be effective, however, unless education is at the core of the mission for eastern coyote conservation.

- Pamphlets and brochures, along with scientific documents, need to reach diverse audiences.
- Private and state organizations need to use the latest scientific findings to communicate coyote ecology and behavior, and their place in all environments, ranging from rural to urban.
- Money needs to be set aside to accomplish these goals.

I hope that the result of this review will assure that both research and education become priorities for the future management of coyotes in the Commonwealth AND THAT HUNTING OPTIONS ARE NOT LIBERALIZED, AS PROPOSED. One thing is certain, no matter what is decided, coyotes have already colonized all of Massachusetts and they are definitely here to stay, regardless of increasing or decreasing hunting! So I would stress that rational management indicates that a more liberal hunting season is not the solution. It doesn't make sense for biological, practical, ethical, or even monetary reasons.

Thank you for your time. Respectfully,

Jonathan Way, Ph.D.
Email: jw9802@yahoo.com