

TORONTO STAFF REPORT

January 8, 2003

To: Board of Health
From: Dr. Sheela V. Basrur, Medical Officer of Health
Subject: Coyote Response Strategy

Purpose:

This report provides a coyote response strategy for the City of Toronto.

Financial Implications and Impact Statement:

There are no financial implications resulting from this report.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that this report be received for information.

Background:

At its September 24, 2001 meeting, the Board of Health (BOH) requested that the the Medical Officer of Health (MOH) report back on the City's policy concerning the response to coyotes, the use of tranquillizers in the trapping of coyotes and the policies of other municipalities with respect to coyotes.

Comments:

Coyotes have become an integral part of most urban environments throughout North America. Coyotes are very intelligent, adaptable and opportunistic animals. They enter the city through green spaces such as ravines and hydro right-of-ways, and quickly find an ample supply of food and shelter. The increased naturalization of much of our parkland also provides a good environment for coyotes to live in, greatly increasing the potential for human and/or pet to coyote contact and conflict.

Toronto Animal Services (TAS) has received some telephone calls from residents who are concerned about the proximity of coyotes in their communities, particularly with respect to the safety of their families, pets and other people.

To identify an appropriate and effective coyote response strategy for the City of Toronto, twelve North American cities where coyotes are of concern were canvassed. Efforts to eliminate the coyote population from some cities in the United States have proven to be futile. Coyotes, like any other wild animal, will increase their litter sizes when a void has been created as long as the environment is sustainable. The cities that have tried elimination have found that the coyote population expands to its former level after just a few breeding seasons.

A more effective response is therefore learning to co-exist with coyotes where there is no proven safety threat posed by specific coyotes. Significant public education efforts must be included in such a strategy. However, in the few instances where there have been coyote bites to people, the prevailing response is to shoot and kill the suspect coyotes in the geographical area where the bite occurred.

When removal of a coyote from an area has been determined as the appropriate response, various removal methods have been attempted. One such method is the use of a humane box-trap. This is not normally successful because healthy coyotes are too intelligent to enter such traps. It is possible to capture a coyote in a leg-hold trap placed by a licensed trapper. However, for reasons of safety of the public and their pets, leg-hold traps are not being considered for use within the boundaries of Toronto. Capture of a sick or debilitated coyote is sometimes successful using available equipment such as the box trap or catch pole and would be attempted as a first step where capture is indicated. A sick or debilitated animal is sometimes easier to approach and less likely to flee.

Another method of removal is through the use of a tranquillizer injection unit. However, this method has been determined to be ineffective and potentially unsafe since tranquillizers that are currently available take effect within a period of about 10-20 minutes from the time of successful injection. During this time, a coyote is able to escape into a ravine or similar area, making it very difficult to follow the animal. The injected coyote, which becomes sedated, may escape to an area where an unsuspecting person or animal can encounter it. This creates a dangerous and uncontrolled situation, since tranquilized animals often become even less predictable. The other possibility is that the dart could fall out or miss the coyote and land in an area where it cannot be immediately found. Again, this creates a danger to any animal or person that comes across the dart. Tranquillizer injection units are generally lacking in accuracy and tend to be more useful in open areas that are not heavily inhabited by people.

In Ontario, the Fish and Wildlife Act does not permit the relocation of some types of wildlife, including coyotes. Therefore, a captured coyote would either have to be released back into the original area it was captured from or be humanely euthanized. Furthermore, if a live coyote that was considered a threat was successfully captured, it would be irresponsible to relocate it elsewhere.

The TAS Coyote Strategy:

When TAS receives inquiries and complaints about coyotes, an appropriate level of response is initiated based upon the information received and the degree of potential impact on the community. Regardless of the coyote issue presented, education and information regarding coyotes and dealing with wildlife in the urban environment is provided as a fundamental part of the strategy. Where there have been coyote bites in other urban centres, these have been associated with coyotes that are being fed by people and have, at least in part, lost their natural fear of humans. It is therefore important to increase public awareness of the problems caused when a coyote is being either deliberately fed or has regular access to food such as garbage. Other education components include actions people should take if they encounter a coyote, how to prevent pets from being at risk, and how to deter a coyote from a private property or yard.

Where TAS identifies that education and information alone will not completely address the concern, then the strategy of removal of the coyote will be implemented. This more extreme action will be contingent upon determination of a bona fide health and safety risk to the public and/or for humane reasons regarding the coyote.

This includes situations where a coyote is sick, injured or debilitated, where a coyote has attacked a human or where a coyote is exhibiting behaviour which is considered a threat to public safety. TAS would implement removal of the coyote using available equipment and would seek assistance from the Toronto Police if the dispatch of a coyote is required using a firearm.

Appendix 1 outlines the details of the Education Response, Removal Criteria and Removal Methods.

Conclusions:

The TAS coyote response strategy involves investigating and determining appropriate responses including public education, information sharing, and in specific circumstances, removal of the coyote(s). Education includes strategies to reduce conflict, such as staying a safe distance from coyotes, not feeding them, and supervising family pets. Providing long-term solutions and factual information to residents should largely alleviate conflict, fear and misperceptions regarding coyotes. If it is determined by TAS that a coyote must be removed from a specific area, TAS could respond with assistance from various wildlife experts and/or the Toronto Police to remove the specific animal(s).

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List of Attachments:

Appendix 1 – TAS Coyote Strategy

Toronto Animal Services' Coyote Strategy

When Toronto Animal Services (TAS) receives inquiries and complaints about coyotes, the following levels of response may be initiated based upon the information received and the degree of potential impact on the community:

(1) Education Response:

TAS can facilitate public education efforts in some or all of the following ways:

- (a) Provision of a program that has been developed for use in elementary schools. This program teaches children an appropriate response to use if they encounter a coyote. The program teaches children not to feed coyotes and the very basic physical differences between a dog and a coyote for identification purposes.
- (b) Participation in public meeting(s) held in the community where coyote issues are a concern. Facilitating attendance of wildlife experts to give information on urban coyotes.
- (c) Provision of written information and educational pamphlets for distribution in community through various means such as newsletters, area veterinarian offices and pet stores. Access to pet owners is important as many coyote encounters include involvement of domestic pets.
- (d) Providing information on the City's web site about coyotes and wildlife in the urban environment, encountering a coyote, discouraging coyotes from approaching and some facts regarding these animals.
- (e) Public Service Announcements may be used as a tool to educate residents about coyotes on issues such as the effects of feeding coyotes in their area.
- (f) Assisting in appropriate messages for signs that may be posted in parks where there are ongoing coyote related concerns (e.g. advising the public not to feed coyotes).

(2) Removal Criteria:

Conditions under which removal of coyote(s) will be considered:

- (a) Where a coyote is injured, sick or debilitated, an investigation by TAS will determine whether the coyote can recover without assistance or whether it should be captured and brought to a wildlife rehabilitation and treatment facility or be euthanized for humane reasons. In accordance with the Fish and Wildlife Act, the recovered coyote will be located back into the area from which it was captured.

- (b) Where a coyote has attacked and or bitten a human and TAS can confirm the injuries as being caused by a coyote. This will not normally include an attack or bite on another animal as this is normal coyote behaviour and prevention as indicated in (1)(c) is the strategic response.
- (c) Where a specific coyote is exhibiting behaviour which is considered to be a bona fide threat to public safety. This will be determined through investigation by TAS and in consultation with agencies, such as the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and the Ministry of Natural Resources, Toronto Police and affected landowners.

Before removal is considered it must be reasonably determined that the specific coyote is identified. Removal of more than one coyote in the specific area may be considered where a bite has occurred.

(3) Removal Methods:

- (a) Where a coyote is injured, sick or debilitated or is considered a bona fide safety threat to the community, TAS will capture it by using equipment that is currently available.
- (b) Where removal cannot be effected by TAS, the assistance of Toronto Police will be requested in the dispatch of the coyote using a firearm. TAS will provide full cooperation, relevant information and assistance to Toronto Police in the tracking and location of the indicated coyote(s).