Ch. 2: Balancing the needs of people and wildlife

Learning objectives

2.1 Name the six major questions that NWCOs should think about as they decide how to handle a job.

2.2 Define "humane."

2.3 Describe one ecological concern related to a NWCO activity.

2.4 Name one thing you can do to promote good public relations.

To use the best practices approach, NWCOs must balance a variety of factors when deciding how to resolve a nuisance wildlife problem. (The best practices strategy is also called "integrated wildlife damage management.") The techniques used to accomplish this will be described step-by-step in chapter five. Here, we're going to address the decision-making process.

Before we go any further, let's define the word "humane." When we use this term, we mean that you cause no *unnecessary* pain or stress to the animal. Through each stage of your work, whether capturing, handling, excluding, transporting, or disposing of wildlife, you act respectfully.

Humane does *not* mean that you only use nonlethal techniques to solve a wildlife conflict. There are circumstances in which a nonlethal technique may be considered less humane than killing the animal (we'll discuss that later in this chapter). And there are some nonlethal techniques that are meant to frighten the animal or teach it to stop a certain behavior. This approach does purposefully cause some stress or pain, but for a good reason.

Unfortunately, circumstances may make it difficult to achieve an ideal solution, and what works great in one case may be inappropriate in another. Say a customer wants you to remove a fox from her property. She doesn't want the fox hurt. When you arrive you notice her hand is bandaged and she admits the animal nipped her. She says she didn't do anything to provoke the fox, it just attacked.

Foxes can infect people with rabies, a deadly disease. Although you can't be sure just from behavior, the animal did attack without reason, which is one of the warning signs of rabies. And your customer was bitten, which is the most common way that people catch rabies.

As required by New York State law, you call the local health department to report the possible exposure. They tell you to kill the fox so it can be tested for rabies. Your customer's not happy but she understands. She asks that you use the most humane method to kill the fox.

Of the methods available to NWCOs, two of the humane choices for killing foxes are shooting the animal or capturing it and killing it with carbon dioxide in a chamber. Is either a best practice in this situation?

You rule out shooting for two reasons: first, you know it's illegal in this town, because of local ordinances. Also, you prefer to target the brain, and that could interfere with the collection of the sample needed for the rabies test. (Without the local ordinance, you could have opted for a heart/lung shot. This doesn't interfere with the rabies test and is also a humane target.)

There's a problem with the use of the carbon dioxide chamber, too. How will you safely transfer the fox to the chamber? The more you handle the fox, the greater your personal risk of being exposed to the disease. You also want to minimize any possible exposure of the family and their pets.

A cage trap would offer you the most protection while handling the fox, but it's hard to catch adult foxes in cage traps. You don't want to risk a "miss" that might make this animal trap-shy because you really need to capture it—and fast. So you decide to set a foothold trap. Once the animal's caught, you quickly stun it to make it unconscious, then use a catchpole to place the animal in the carbon dioxide chamber.

This example illustrates a few of the factors that you must weigh in your decisions. In this case, your customer asked you to provide the most humane death possible, but legal restrictions and concerns about human safety also influenced the choice of killing method. This situation could easily have been more complicated.

How can you determine the best course of action to solve the problem for your customer? There are six questions that will help you evaluate your options.

Consider these six questions when choosing capture, handling, transportation, and disposal methods for wildlife:

1. Is it safe?
2. What are the likely ecological consequences of this action?
3. Is it practical?
4. Is it humane?
5. Is it legal?
6. How would your actions play on the evening news?

All of these questions are important, but which ones matter most in a particular situation will change with the circumstances of the job. Your understanding of these issues will deepen over time, as you gain experience working with the public and with wildlife. Here are some basic points related to each of these big questions.

Is it safe?

Many NWCOs are most concerned about safeguarding people: themselves, their customers, and the public. There are health and safety risks posed by the presence of nuisance wildlife, and by wildlife control techniques. Wild animals might expose people to diseases or parasites, for example, or cause fires or road accidents (see chapter four).

Those are the routine risks. Some NWCOs face unusual risks because they handle exotic wildlife, such as pet snakes left behind in dorms when the college term ends. It's not always easy to identify the species. Could it be venomous? Obviously, if you're tangling with an animal that could hurt nearby people, extra caution is needed.

Roof work is one of the more common NWCO job hazards. Falls caused 11% of the deaths associated with job-related injuries in upstate New York (1993 statistics from the Dep't. of Health). How do other NWCOs stay safe and get the job done?

The way you go about your business could also affect the safety of other species and of the environment. A careful NWCO can help prevent the spread of a wildlife disease into a new area, or to a different species. Likewise, by using traps and pesticides carefully, that NWCO can reduce the chances of catching or killing the wrong animal or contaminating the environment.

How safe is the situation, and the method you want to use? Consider such things as:

- Is the nuisance animal sick, aggressive, or otherwise dangerous?
- Do you have the right gear for the job?
- Is the building safe?
- How well can you control access to any pest control devices, such as traps or pesticides?
- Could children, pets, or other animals gain access to the animal, or to your tools, and injure themselves?
- Do weather conditions make the job too dangerous? (For example, icy, wet, or windy conditions could make it unsafe to walk on a roof.)

What are the likely ecological consequences of this action?

Think beyond your client's property. What effects might your actions have on local wildlife populations?

Many of the wildlife species that most commonly cause conflicts with people are abundant, so capturing and killing an individual isn't going to threaten the species' survival. But what if you're asked to remove hundreds or thousands of animals?

This could happen with starlings, crows, Canada geese, or bats. Some conservationists would be happy if you killed European starlings because they're an exotic species that competes with our native wildlife. Crows and Canada geese are abundant in this area, so wildlife biologists aren't overly concerned about the effects of reducing the size of a flock on the larger population. Bats are a different story.

The two species of bats that are most likely to cause nuisances in the Northeast are the little brown bat and the big brown bat. In both, females gather in large colonies to raise their young—each has only one or two pups each year. This low breeding rate, and their colonial habit, makes them vulnerable.

The most important tool for a NWCO is good judgement. A solution that works when you're dealing with 70 bats may not be appropriate if you're dealing with 7,000 bats.

Typically, you'll see a few hundred brown bats in a maternal colony but in a very successful site you might find as many as several thousand females and their pups. Although it hasn't been well-studied yet, doesn't it seem reasonable to assume that what you do in such a situation could affect the local population of bats? Obviously, the bats have been there for a long time. Can you convince your customer to choose the two-season solution instead of the quick-fix, which might cause long-term harm to the local bat populations?

Here's what a more relaxed approach would look like. In the first year, you install two or three bat boxes in the early summer. Let the bats raise their young in the building, and give them time to check out those newly-installed boxes. In late fall, you can begin limited bat-proofing, but don't close the main entry hole. In early May of the following year, install a checkvalve over the main entrance. Once you are certain all the bats are out of the structure, you can finish permanent bat-proofing by sealing the primary entrance.

Bats in the house or barn may be a problem, but bats in the yard are often considered beneficial because they eat so many insects. By giving the bats a little more time to get used to the alternative roosts, you increase the chances they'll return to the area to use them. That cushions the drop in the local population.

Quite a few of the techniques mentioned in this manual could affect other wildlife. Any modification of the landscape, even something as simple as mowing, will be good for some species and bad for others. For this reason, when you're planning your strategy, imagine two zones around the building.

To solve the problem and prevent future occurrences, how far must wildlife be kept from the building? That's your inner zone, which you'll probably want to keep well-manicured. The size of this zone depends on which species you're concerned about. A one-foot gravel perimeter around the foundation may foil mice, but it's not going to make a bear hiccup. What about the areas beyond this zone? If you maintain proper defenses, you should be able to leave the outer zone wilder. You might even alter the landscape to encourage certain wildlife to use that area.

Best practices are all about common sense and good judgement. If it's easy for squirrels to get into your attic, why wouldn't they nest in this warm and secure place? If it's nearly impossible, does it matter if they're nesting in a tree fifty feet away?

As a NWCO, you have many tools to solve nuisance wildlife problems. Good judgement is the most important one. You can offer effective, long-term solutions—and help prevent wildlife conflicts from developing—without sterilizing the planet.

Extra care and thoughtfulness is needed with certain techniques, because of their greater potential to harm other species or the environment. This is especially true when using lethal tools such as body-gripping traps or pesticides. You could accidentally capture or injure someone's pet, or a protected species.

You don't want to catch any member of the wrong species, or individuals of the target species that aren't causing the conflict. Don't condemn an entire species because of the actions of a few individuals. Nuisance animals aren't malicious, they're simply taking advantage of an opportunity, adapting natural habits to an artificial environment in order to survive. If you catch the wrong individuals, you haven't solved the problem for your customer.

Sometimes, just moving an animal can cause problems. We'll talk about that technique, called "trap and transfer" or "translocation," in chapter five.

Is it practical?

Some methods sound great until you actually try to make them work. And some methods are great, but customers balk at the cost. Many factors will affect whether you can actually use a certain approach, ranging from your skill levels, the available gear, weather conditions, and timing, to cost.

Of course, your solution has to fix the problem. After you've determined which species to target and placed your devices so they'll most likely capture the offending animals and no others, you still need to figure out how many animals are probably there. If there are six and you've caught three, chances are that's not good enough.

And have you provided a long term solution or just temporary relief? You may want to avoid quick-fix jobs because no matter what the customers say when they hire you, they might not be happy later, and might blame you. (Well-written contracts may help, especially if the paperwork includes descriptions of the options offered, the recommended actions, and the likely consequences.)

Sites sometimes present unexpected challenges. The area you really want to get to may be inaccessible. Or maybe the neighbors are feeding the squirrels that are overrunning your customer's yard. Without their cooperation, your options are limited. Your traps might be vandalized or stolen. And some sites, because of their location or use, suffer from a curse: people think the area is a good place for animals, and don't consider the landowners' needs. Some farms suffer from this problem. Many people abandon animals at farms, and over time, it can become overwhelming.

Timing can present practical problems, too. What if no one knows who owns the potential release site? Will you tell your customer to wait while someone does the research? (Who?) Or what if the owner refuses to give you permission to release animals onto that land, and it would take hours to drive to another suitable site? Or if the customer wants you to deal with the problem right now, but certain techniques require federal and state permits?

Then there's the dilemma of the mysterious "someone." Your customer asks, "isn't there *someone* you can just take it to?" In nearly all cases, the answer is "no." Wildlife rehabilitators accept injured, sick, and orphaned wildlife, not healthy adult animals. And they don't want you to routinely drop off baby animals, either. Consider this a matter of professional responsibility: you should work in a way that minimizes the chance of creating wildlife orphans. (Another thing to keep in mind is that not all wildlife rehabilitators handle the same animals. They must have special training and additional permits to handle rabies vector species, for example.)

One last practical point to consider as you choose a method for capturing, handling, evicting, transporting, or disposing of wild animals is, could you make things worse? Expect to get a few calls where this has already happened, because your customers followed some bad advice or just had bad luck. Perhaps they thought the animal had left, so they closed up the hole to keep it from getting back in, only to trap the animal inside. Or maybe they had a raccoon family in the attic. Their neighbors had one in their chimney and used a loud radio and a pan of ammonia to harass the female so she'd move her young. They did the same, and it worked…but not quite the way they wanted. The female did feel threatened and did move her young—to a much more secure place—*in the wall*. In both cases, the job becomes much harder.

Even if you could afford everything on the market, how would you fit it into your truck? Here's a simple answer to a situation that called for a covered trap. Solutions don't have to be fancy to work.

Is it humane?

Most NWCOs enter the industry because of their love of wildlife. If you want to work in a way that reflects that value, you'll need skills, knowledge, compassion, and a mature way of thinking. Those abilities may be sorely tested at times. The problem is that some people focus on a particular method and believe that it's always the "right" answer.

We'll discuss the details of handling and disposal methods in chapter five, but here's the big picture. If you want to treat wildlife in a humane fashion you have to think about what this means through every stage of the job. How is the animal affected by the strategy and techniques you've chosen? What's likely to happen after you leave?

Questions about the humane treatment of wildlife usually focus on the choice between nonlethal and lethal techniques, but it's more complicated than that. Although it seems odd, a nonlethal technique will not guarantee humane treatment for the animal in all situations. For example, relocating squirrels during the summer may be appropriate. But harsh winter conditions may not give a relocated squirrel enough time to find shelter before it dies of exposure; if it finds shelter, it may starve to death if you've moved it too far away from its food cache. Another example: if you release an injured, sick, or highly traumatized animal in a new place, it may not be strong enough to ward off the attacks of animals that are already well-established in that area.

To make this discussion of animal welfare even trickier, there are nonlethal techniques that are *meant* to stress the animal a bit. Why? To train the animal to change its behavior. For example, NWCOs may use border collies to chase Canada geese away from a park, or rubber buckshot to scare bears. This is a legitimate approach that may solve the wildlife conflict. It does make the nuisance animal feel some pain or stress—but only as much as is necessary. You'll see this general approach described by such terms as "frightening techniques," "scare devices," "repellents," and "aversive conditioning." These techniques support other wildlife management efforts, too.

Here are a few issues to consider when you're trying to decide how to humanely capture an animal. Many types of traps are selective, effective, and humane when they're used properly. Really. It all depends on your skill and carefulness. A cage trap can be misused and cause a cruel death, while a foothold trap could be used well and aid in a humane capture. Some simple modifications to your traps and trapping habits may provide more comfort to the captured animal and increase its chance of survival. Try to protect the trapped animal from exposure to bad weather. In some cases, you'll also need to protect them from people (especially children), pets, and predators, or their own behavior.

Rain, or extreme heat or cold, can kill some animals. You can prevent many of these accidental deaths by checking your traps as soon as you can (at least once a day); by using a plastic box trap (except in the summer, when it can heat more quickly than other designs); by covering a standard metal cage trap with plywood, cardboard, burlap, towels, blankets, tarps, or aluminum; by setting the trap in a less exposed place; or by waiting for better weather, if possible.

Trap placement is critical if you need to keep children, pets, or predators away. Some people might intentionally harm an animal, or release it. Kids might be too young to understand the effects of their actions. Even if all they do is watch the animal, their presence will increase its stress. If a person is scratched or bitten, that could translate into a death sentence for a mammal, should rabies testing be necessary. Pets and predators may also investigate, causing even more stress for the animal.

When captured in a live trap, some species will settle down while others, like squirrels and raccoons, will paw furiously at the trap or rub their bodies against the metal. Given enough time, they could rub off fur and bloody themselves. The shape and size of some new trap designs helps to minimize this problem. Checking traps frequently helps, too.

Those concerned with the humane treatment of wildlife also take special care so they don't turn young animals into orphans. This means you may need to alter your habits when there are young in the den or nest who aren't mature enough to take care of themselves and leave on their own.

Adult wildlife may need special consideration at certain times of year, as well. If you accidentally trap a hibernating animal inside a building, it will either find another way out (perhaps through the living spaces or by creating a new hole, causing more damage to the building) or it might die inside. Sounds like a lose-lose situation, doesn't it?

So what do you do? Many NWCOs will install a "one-way door" (also called "checkvalves"). This device allows animals to leave but keeps them from re-entering the building. We'll discuss it in more detail in chapter five, but here's a quick example of its use. If a client requests bat exclusion in February, some NWCOs will close up most—but not all—of the exits. They'll install a checkvalve over the main exit. This way, if they've missed a bat, it still has a way out. The NWCO returns in April or early May, after the bats have emerged from hibernation, to finish the job. (One caution about checkvalves: don't use them during the pup-rearing season, beginning in late May, when young, immobile bats may be left behind.)

Finally, when you have to kill an animal, choose one of the best practices described in chapter five whenever you can. These techniques are more likely to provide as painless a death as possible. You may achieve this using one, or perhaps a combination, of techniques. Ideally, you either kill the animal quickly, or first quickly make it unconscious, then kill it quickly.

Is it legal?

Consider whether you are allowed to handle the species. Do you need permits or additional licenses for the methods you'd like to use? You may not take, possess, or transport a migratory bird without a federal

permit, for example. To use chemical repellents on your customer's property, you'd need a commercial pesticide applicator license in addition to your NWCO license.

Can you legally use this method in this area? Local restrictions might affect which techniques you use to capture or kill an animal. Shooting is frequently regulated by local ordinances, but some areas will even control the type of fences you can install.

Have you secured all of the necessary permissions? If you want to release an animal off-site, you'd need approval from the landowner who's hired you and from the owners of the land you're going to use as a release site. Some people mistakenly believe they can release animals onto public land, such as parks or wildlife management areas, without permission. Nope! Talk to the property manager first.

How would this play on the evening news?

"Wildlife belongs to the public. Regional and national surveys demonstrate that the public has concerns about how their wildlife is treated. Because of this, [NWCOs] should manage wildlife as the public asks, whenever possible and practical. In all cases, [NWCOs] will use [their] professional judgement to determine the best course of action, understanding that every damage prevention job is a customized operation."

—excerpted from Dr. Robert H. Schmidt's column, "The Professional Touch: A Professional Code of Ethics for Wildlife Damage Management" in the Oct/Nov. 1993 issue of Animal Damage Control 1(5):8

Many NWCOs are deeply commited to improving the industry and achieving professional recognition for their work. Communication skills are critical to this effort, and to the success of your business. The greatest wildlife expert in the world won't win customers, or the public's trust, if that person is dismissive of other people's feelings and beliefs, arrogant, or just plain confusing.

Nuisance wildlife problems can be highly emotional for some clients. You're entering someone's home, perhaps at a time when they're not even close to being at their best. Be at yours.

Let your professionalism shine. Be respectful and honest with your customers. Decent. (Isn't that the way you want to be treated when you're a customer?) Listen. Try to understand what they want. One thing that's probably true about most successful business people is they make their customers happy. That's a balancing act, of course. It's okay to refuse a job if someone insists on something that you think is wrong, or you know that "solution" won't work. You also have to maintain your reputation.

You'll probably have some difficult customers. It can be challenging to listen, sometimes. Do your best. Remember, listening quietly to someone's point of view doesn't mean you support it.

If there are legal or practical reasons why you can't do what your customers ask, explain. Describe the available options in the amount of detail your customers request. Some customers won't care how you do the job while others will have strong opinions, especially about the disposal of animals; they may want to hear every detail.

Think about the average person, who probably feels either neutral about wild animals, or likes the idea that they're "out there." This same person probably believes that people have the right to protect their families and their homes. Our John Doe might believe it's perfectly reasonable to remove nuisance animals from a home by trapping them. Would he be squeamish if he saw a dead animal in a trap? Maybe. Would he be upset if he saw a dead animal in a body-gripping trap hanging over the side of someone's roof? And would that cause him to reconsider his opinion of trapping in general?

That's the kind of blunder that can lead to a media feeding frenzy, and polarize communities. Whether you like it or not, the public cares about how you do your job. So imagine the cameras are always rolling. What reaction would you expect if someone videotaped your work, then showed it on the evening news? If you have to work outdoors, be as discreet as possible. Consider how your work might be interpreted by a passerby.

Are you willing to step in front of a real "camera," to let the public see the positive sides of the industry? Many NWCOs volunteer to help educate the public about wildlife and wildlife damage management. They participate in public events, write columns for local newspapers, appear on local TV or radio shows, or maintain websites to help others find credible information.

Such actions help people get to know and respect you. It's a chance to help others understand the facts and complexities of various wildlife situations. Each year, you can count on local media addressing the issue of what to do about baby birds that have fallen out of their nests. If you can think of a creative angle, you'll probably find yourself talking to reporters. (Good for the community and good for your business).

This assumes that you're doing good and fair work that would shine, if only you didn't fidget and grow tongue-tied once the camera turns your way. One of the challenges of wildlife control work is that people will define "good and fair" differently. This brings us back to the complex issue of trap and transfer, which is an example of how doing right by your customer may also be an unneighborly act.

The science isn't definitive yet, but many people believe that nuisance animals can't be rehabilitated, that once an animal has learned about the "good pickings," it will seek the same situation wherever it lives. Remove a raccoon from your customer's attic and it will move into the neighbor's attic. Then the next one. And the next one. Is it fair to transfer your customer's problem to someone else? You'll hear different opinions from NWCOs, and will have to develop your own standards. Even if your treatment of wildlife is beyond reproach, those cameras could focus on business practices. So make them best practices.

Higher, deeper, further…

- How do you define the word "humane"? Try explaining this to a few friends.
- Find out if there are any legislative bills that would affect the wildlife laws of your state. You can check the state government website, or ask a librarian for help. What's your position?
- Start a file that lists opportunities to talk to the public about wildlife or animals and write down your ideas about how you might participate.

Summary

Before you answer the review questions, you may wish to think about the learning objectives:

2.1 Name the six major questions that NWCOs should think about as they decide how to handle a job.

2.2 Define "humane."

2.3 Describe one ecological concern related to a NWCO activity.

2.4 Name one thing you can do to promote good public relations.

Review questions

1. Trap and transfer can be bad for local wildlife because

a) it may overload a habitat, forcing all of the members of that species to struggle more to find food and shelter
b) the public doesn't like this technique
c) it can spread a wildlife disease into an area that wasn't affected
d) answers "a" and "c" are both correct
e) answers "a" and "b" are both correct

2. A best practice takes the following factors into account (check all that apply):

___ practical limitations
___ landowner rights
___ public beliefs about how wildlife should be treated
___ human safety
___ protection of the environment
___ public health
___ legal restrictions
___ "management by objective" theory

3. To ensure a humane death for a wild animal, you should

a) kill it as quickly as possible, using a best practice for that species
b) use anesthesia
c) quickly make the animal unconscious, then kill it quickly
d) all three answers are correct
e) answers "a" and "c" are correct

4. Which questions help NWCOs choose the best ways to solve their customers' problems? (Check all that apply)

___ are these methods legal?
___ where's the coffee?
___ is this practical?
___ how will this affect the local wildlife population and the environment?
___ does this minimize the animal's suffering?
___ what's the public relations angle?
___ where's the aspirin?

5. For good public relations, you should

a) figure out which method the public likes best, and then convince your customer to accept that solution
b) spend a lot of money on advertising
c) explain what you're doing, and why
d) use best practices
e) answers "c" and "d" are both correct

Answers:

1—d
2—all of the answers are correct except "management by objective theory"
3—e
4—all are correct, except for the requests for coffee and aspirin, which we leave to your discretion
5—e (The best practices approach to solving wildlife problems takes the customer's needs, and many other factors, into account. It's a custom-tailored solution, not a "one-size-fits-all" approach.)