

Ch. 6: Professionalism

Learning objectives

- 6.1 Wildlife control professionals must maintain certain standards that fall into two big categories: technical and ethical standards. Describe them.
- 6.2 Professionalism is a self-improvement plan. List the four things that a professional is always trying to improve.
- 6.3 Explain three reasons why NWCOs need to keep learning throughout their careers.

Okay, so technically speaking, not every job is a profession. The term usually applies to fields that have established educational requirements, codes of ethics, and licenses, such as doctors and lawyers. But that's really nitpicky. The word "professional" means a lot more than that, and it can apply to any job. In fact, it doesn't matter if you work part-time or full-time. A part-timer might be more professional than someone who's running a business. Whether you're a street cleaner or a rocket scientist, you can behave in a professional way (or not).

"A professional wildlife control operator is a person with demonstrated expertise in the art and science of applying the principles of wildlife damage management to the sound resolution of wildlife conflicts with humans."

—excerpted from the National Wildlife Control Operators Association's (NWCOA) application for professional certification

Let's talk about what professionalism means for NWCOs. Are you proud of your work? Do you have good reasons to be proud?

Professionalism means that throughout your working life, you will improve your **knowledge**, your **skills**, your **wisdom**, and your **conduct**. Think about those four words.

Knowledge is not the same as wisdom. (Anyone with a teenager is probably painfully aware of that.) When you hear about a business scandal, the people involved may have had some of these traits, such as knowledge or skills, but probably not all four aspects. It's the balance of the four, and the way they influence each other, that makes someone a professional—knowledge and skills, conduct that's tempered by wisdom.

"I don't claim to be a mechanic because I can change the oil in my car, or a dentist because I can brush my teeth. So what defines the wildlife damage management professional? ...technical and ethical standards.

First, the professional must have the highest possible technical standards. This includes performing to the best of your abilities and standing behind your work. It includes turning down a job or referring it to another technical expert whenever your skills are not appropriate or sufficient. It includes seeking out educational opportunities to continuously upgrade your skills.

In addition, wildlife damage management professionals must have high ethical standards. [They must be committed] to resolving damage complaints, [and to following] applicable laws and regulations. [They need] to respect—not necessarily agree—with varying viewpoints on the tools and strategies involved in wildlife damage management. These standards are in addition to traits like honesty, integrity, and sincerity, which all professionals should have..."

—excerpted from Dr. Robert H. Schmidt's column, "The Professional Touch: The Wildlife Damage Management Professional" in the Feb./March 1993 issue of *Animal Damage Control* 1(1):25-26.

Many professions create a code of ethics, defining their own standards for acceptable conduct and practices. Some people may choose to adopt the code of ethics as a way to demonstrate their support for these values, but of course, those who don't aren't necessarily unethical. It just may not suit their styles. People who do adopt the code of ethics, however, are telling the public, their customers, and their peers that they will follow these guidelines for professional behavior.

In 1992, Dr. Schmidt proposed a *voluntary* code of ethics for wildlife damage management professionals, which has been discussed by many people who work with wildlife, including NWCOs, wildlife biologists, and researchers. Some industry trade associations are also promoting standards, such as NWCOA's professional certification program, which judges applicants based on their expertise, education, experience, and ability to represent the profession as an ethical practitioner.

On the next page, you'll find a code of ethics based on those of NWCOA and Dr. Schmidt. (The two codes are similar.)

A voluntary code of ethics for NWCOs

As a wildlife damage management professional, I will

- strictly follow all laws and regulations related to wildlife damage management.
- behave in a professional manner, exemplifying the traits of honesty, sincerity, and dedication.
- treat people, property, and wildlife with a great deal of respect.
- be sensitive to different viewpoints on wildlife damage management.
- encourage others to more fully understand and appreciate wildlife, biological diversity, and the different ways that people value and enjoy nature. At the same time, I'll also encourage people to understand the concerns of those who have suffered wildlife damage.
- offer my expertise to all people upon request, within the limits of my experience, ability, and legal authority.
- promote competence and present an image worthy of the profession by supporting high standards of education, employment, and performance. I will also encourage others to participate in state wildlife control associations and other professional organizations.
- strive to broaden my knowledge, skills, and abilities to advance the practice of wildlife damage management.
- attempt to resolve wildlife damage conflicts with the most humane, selective, practical, and effective management techniques available, whether they are traditional or new methods. I will encourage clients, co-workers, and others involved in the situation to do the same.
- treat other practitioners and my customers in a courteous and honorable manner.
- encourage, through word and through deed, all wildlife damage managers to adhere to this code.

Does this code match your definition of professionalism for wildlife control operators? If not, how would you say it? For example, some NWCOs might consider the promotion of long-term solutions to wildlife damage problems, instead of quick-fixes, as an aspect of their professionalism. Do you? What about prevention?

If you were thinking about your customers as you read those suggestions, try re-reading them and consider how they apply to the other people you work with. Chapter one mentioned the importance of a professional network. Some NWCOs go a little bit further than just saying “thank you” when another professional refers a client or otherwise helps out. One NWCO, for example, always donates some supplies or cash to a wildlife rehabilitator whenever he transfers an animal to that person’s care. That’s a nice, practical gesture that shows he values the rehabilitator’s work and appreciates the challenge of offering such services for free. It also demonstrates one of the most important aspects of professionalism: it’s got to be more than words. Professionalism must translate into action.

A life-long commitment to education is crucial, because wildlife control really is both an art and a science. Some people may have a knack for hand-capturing certain species, for example, and may prefer to use a catchpole instead of a cage trap. That’s the art of wildlife control, the blend of personal skills and style. Of course, there’s a lot of science involved, and you need to keep up with it.

Not only does our understanding of animal behavior change, but sometimes, even the behaviors change. NWCOs in the Northeast have noticed that more raccoons are breeding late in the season. If the only book on your shelf has a 1908 copyright, you might be unpleasantly surprised to find a raccoon still nursing her young in August. Techniques change, laws change, new and better tools hit the market, and new problems crop up. If you really care, you won’t rely on the knowledge and skills you have today for your whole career.

Some people like to learn on their own, using books, videos, websites, trade journals, or other resources. Classes work well for many people, who find they learn a lot from the other students or from a hands-on experience. There are the natural scientists among us, people who have been tinkering as long as they’ve been alive. For them, experimentation is a great way to

learn. Some people prefer to befriend experienced professionals and ask for their advice. Others join professional organizations or attend conferences and meetings for inspiration. The method doesn't matter much, so pick the ones you like, because if you're having fun, you'll learn more. You may find some methods more appealing than others at certain times in your career.

It's easier to recognize professionalism than it is to define it. You know if someone's a professional or not. And you know if someone *was* a professional, but isn't anymore. How do you want people to think about you?

The best practices strategy promoted in this manual requires professionalism and encourages its development. Best practices represent the combined wisdom and experience of many people. Please contribute to the advancement of the field of wildlife damage management by sharing your knowledge with others.

Higher, deeper, further...

- Get to know other NWCOs. Figure out which ones are most deeply respected by their peers. Why?
- Contact a few wildlife damage management organizations. Find out about their goals and any standards of behavior promoted by their members.
- Check the websites of a few of the government agencies and animal welfare organizations involved in wildlife management. What ethical codes do they encourage?
- Express your views about professionalism by talking to your friends, peers, or neighbors. As you become more comfortable with this, you may want to speak to school groups or other organizations.

Summary

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

- 6.1 *Wildlife control professionals must maintain certain standards that fall into two big categories: technical and ethical standards. Describe them.*
- 6.2 *Professionalism is a self-improvement plan. List the four things that a professional is always trying to improve.*
- 6.3 *Explain three reasons why NWCOs need to keep learning throughout their careers.*

Review questions

1. To maintain professionalism, you must
 - a) join professional trade associations
 - b) keep improving your skills, conduct, knowledge, and wisdom
 - c) go to the right parties
 - d) wear a uniform
2. NWCOs must meet _____ and _____ standards. (Fill in the blanks)
 - a) legal, trade
 - b) intelligence, athletic
 - c) height, weight
 - d) ethical, technical
3. You must accept every job you're offered. (Circle answer).

True False
4. NWCOs need to know about
 - a) new wildlife disease outbreaks
 - b) changes in building codes, firearms regulations, wildlife laws
 - c) new solutions for wildlife conflicts
 - d) all of the above

Answers:

- 1—b
- 2—d
- 3—false (if you lack the technical skills, expertise, or equipment to successfully and safely solve a problem, it's better to refer the customer to someone who has the appropriate resources).
- 4—d

Your chance to grade us

Please let us know whether or not you found this manual helpful. Have any ideas for how to make it better? *Send your comments to:*

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I most liked: _____

I'd like to see you change this ...(please tell us why): _____

Please add: _____

I'd like to know about DEC efforts to improve best practices for NWCOs (you don't need to include this information to send in other comments).

Name _____

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