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TOWARD AN INTERSPECIES ETIQUETTE FOR THE MULTISPECIES CITY

ERICA VON ESSEN
Stockholm Resilience Center and Norway Inland University of Applied Sciences

Abstract Urban wildlife navigate an unspoken interspecies code of conduct that often positions animals as either too bold or too timid, too numerous, or simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. This plenary talk examines human-wildlife relations from the perspective of municipal hunters in Sweden, who play a role in managing "problem" wildlife in urban environments. Rationales for removing wildlife include reparative, sacrificial, situational, categorical, aesthetic, goodwill, and practical justifications. Contrasting Sweden's utilitarian approach to practices in other cultural contexts, I discuss international variations in tolerance thresholds and intervention strategies. These hunters confront ethical dilemmas in their multifaceted roles as eco-facilitators, garbage collectors, and enforcers of coexistence norms, often mediating between public expectations and ecological realities. However, I also argue that urban environments, characterized by their emergent and fluid norms on wildlife, offer unique opportunities for fostering coexistence through adaptive management.

Key words coexistence; conflict; interspecies communication; biosemiotics; code of conduct

INTRODUCTION

To be a good urban animal, Alagona (2022) explains, is to appropriate characteristics of charisma, adaptability and to be friendly—but not to be *too* friendly. Urban wildlife in particular face a *goldilocks* challenge of rarely getting the vibe right. In this plenary talk, I discuss the ways in which urban publics perceive how wild animals cross the line when it comes to an interspecies code of conduct for coexistence. I do so chiefly from the perspective of municipal hunters in Sweden. They are called in for resolving problems that arise when wild animals become too numerous, too bold, or simply appear in the wrong place at the wrong time (von Essen and Redmalm, 2023a). By their own admission, these hunters must be 'people managers' first, 'wildlife managers' second: they have to deal with members of the public and their often discrepant ideas of 'wanting to kill everything' or 'wanting to save everything'. I reflect on these hunters' dilemmas in cleaning up the city, and how it compares internationally to various cultures dealing with unwanted or out-of-place urban animals.

In the Nordic countries, we have a 'shoot first, ask questions later' approach to wildlife causing problems in the city. This may be compared to the other extreme where rescues and rehabilitations of animals close to death, involving more suffering and dependencies for life, champion the sanctity of life. In Indian cities, even murderous monkeys are spared, and two-legged dogs are kept alive (Barua, 2023). In US, wild coyotes are baited with medicine to help treat the immune disorder that results in sarcoptic mange. In Sweden, the mere presence of a moose in an urban neighborhood beckons the killing squad. Different cities across the world are

in different stages of wildlife coexistence depending on their sociecological profiles from first encounters to initial enthusiasm, backlash and polarisation, and adjustment.

Tolerance thresholds to wildlife are a complex factor of circumstances, attitudes and place. Accordingly, the sorts of corrective acts—lethal or non-lethal removals—also vary wildly across cities, species and publics (Hunold and Lloro, 2022). In my research, it became clear that it varied also from between individual municipal cullers and their high levels of discretion to remove a wild animal or to leave the situation be. Beyond hunting legislation of minimizing suffering and the permitted firearms, the hunter had flexibility. Municipal hunters had a broad and open mandate over both culling decisions and methods.

Below I present rationales by which Swedish municipal hunters currently remove problem wildlife in Swedish cities. These are analytically derived from matching findings to literature on e.g. biopolitics, and thus not emic wordings. To these hunters balancing the preservation of a "multispecies spirit" with public sentiment toward charismatic wildlife requires careful consideration of the rationales that justifies lethal interventions. I identify rationales as: reparative, sacrificial, retributive, categorical, situational, aesthetic, goodwill, and practical. In addition to justifications, these rationales may be understood also as saying something about breaches of an interspecies code of conduct (von Essen et al., 2023): violating safety norms or disrupting ecologies. I show how these breaches and their attendant corrections by municipal hunters are carefully informed by space and type of land-use. But they also depend on the species, the time of the day, and factors like aesthetic preferences of the residents. Ultimately, not all of these rationales are equally morally justifiable. Hunters themselves were critical toward man, but acknowledged these prevailed in the present, rather than aspirational ones.

Rationales for culling

Reparative rationale, hunters acknowledge that humans are responsible for many of the ecological imbalances requiring intervention. Human activities—such as creating garbage heaps, releasing pets that establish urban populations, and conditioning wildlife to human presence—were seen as the root causes of these disruptions. Hunters felt morally obligated to rectify these anthropogenic harms. This perspective views culling as a moral duty to restore balance in disrupted ecosystems (Crowley et al., 2018).

Sacrificial rationale promotes the greater good, by removing diseased or contagious individuals to minimize suffering and prevent the spread of disease within populations or across species. It treats certain individuals or populations as "sacrificial" to ensure ecological or public health benefits. Examples from research include culling badgers to reduce bovine tuberculosis in cattle in the UK (Prentice et al., 2019). In recent years, many urban animals have been put to death in the name of biosecurity, following pandemics and health anxieties.

People welcome wildlife in urban areas but also believe animals could forfeit their "right to the city" under certain circumstances of being. *Situational culling* was deemed legitimate when animals exhibited aberrant behavior, posed a safety threat, or disrupted the urban environment. This meant operating on the individual level, taking into account animal personalities (Honda et al., 2018). Moreover, culling animals on a situational rationale gestures toward a belief in the power of teaching animals the rules of the game. This was also challenged, as research demonstrates that urban animals are inherently unruly: in synurbanization, urban animals become more audacious. Perhaps for this reason and others, the communicative approach of teaching animals to adhere to urban behavioral norms often proved challenging. Critics of this rationale argue that expecting wild animals to conform to human standards imposes domestic expectations on inherently wild creatures (Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011).

Such expectations create a "Goldilocks dilemma," where animals navigate a narrow range of acceptable behaviors—neither too aggressive nor too tame (Alagona, 2022).

Categorical culling targets species based on their a priori identity rather than exhibited behavior. For instance, wild boars are often culled in Sweden merely for their presence in urban areas, regardless of what they may be doing. Invasive species constitute another categorical culling case. These animals are 'guilty until proven innocent', or do not get a trial at all. Critics argue that culling based on species identity reflects societal biases, often influenced by aesthetic or ecological perceptions (Crowley et al., 2018). Hunters themselves express discomfort with this rationale, recognizing its inconsistencies, such as favoring "charismatic" species over less appealing ones (von Essen and Redmalm, 2023b).

Aesthetic culling, driven by public preference for an idealized urban environment and its critters, is understood as decisions that detach from conservation objectives. Hunters are skeptical of calls to euthanize animals based on appearance, such as mangy foxes or three-legged deer, simply because these do not conform to residents' aesthetic criteria of what animals should look like—fluffy, complete, healthy. Hunters emphasize the addressing of genuine ecological or safety concerns over superficial preferences like these.

In *goodwill hunting* (Chapron and Treves, 2016), hunters appease the public, even if their convictions suggested otherwise. For example, culling a fox, repeatedly reported by residents, to maintain public trust and reduce conflict, even if it had little ecological impact. Such actions reflect hunters' efforts to balance professional responsibilities with relationships with the community, 'throwing a bone' to affected, scared, or concerned members of the public.

In some cases, *practical considerations* dictated culling decisions. When non-lethal solutions were infeasible (such as relocating large, aggressive animals) hunters opted for lethal measures. A notable example is Freya the Walrus in the Oslo fjord, whose interactions with humans led authorities to cull her for public safety despite her popularity (Sollund, 2023). Leaving Freya be would mean a level of risk not practical to accommodate, given that if and when she would decide to interact hostilely with a human, the harm could be significant.

The roles of municipal cullers – garbage collectors of society, enforcers of interspecies code of conduct, facilitators of a natural order. Municipal hunters came to inhabit a multitude of sometimes conflicting roles as caretakers of the city. First, and in a preferred role, these hunters saw themselves as eco-oriented facilitators of a natural order. They culled animals where they should not be, simultaneously encouraging their residence elsewhere. But they also wrestled with a role as highly utilitarian garbage collectors of the city. Here, they inhabited a role that the public preferred to operate out of sight, out of mind, (von Essen and Redmalm, 2023a). This role became especially pronounced when hunters would get called out to simply dispose of diseased animals, or to handle what they saw as out of their jurisdiction and more of pest control: rodent and reptile killing.

Finally, in what may be the most accurate reflection of hunters' role in stewarding the multispecies city, they operated as enforcers of an interspecies code of conduct. This included attempts at communicating an etiquette to both the public (don't feed wildlife, don't leave garbage out, etc) and to wildlife (stay away from kindergardens). Like *skyddsjakt* (culling) generally, it was important that lethal interventions were not retributive to animal villains, but aimed at improving the situation going forward. This was accomplished by taking out problem individuals first by sheer force. But second, it was seen to ideally 'teach' other animals to stay in their lane. Hunters' experience pointed to successful 'sending a message' type interventions when individuals were culled before their conspecifics. It was clear that animals could

conceptualize of lethal danger and adapted by not frequenting this area for a while. Hunters also used the landscape to communicate non-lethal messages, by creating affordances and deterrents, seeking to correct wild animal rogue mobilities in the city.

The public and their (changing) attitudes. In a previous paper, I outlined the various idiosyncrasies of urban residents when it came to what sort of responses they had to urban wildlife and in particular to their lethal removal. I see three major issues facing public attitudes to wildlife in the city. First, people do not always want to see wildlife, but that they also do not want to see them get culled. Second, there is often a divide between what is seen as people's personal preferences for some species and what managers consider as detrimental to ecosystems, like non-native species. Third, 'urban wilds have no constituency' (Hinchliffe et al., 2005), meaning no clear responsibility-taking as through landownership. In addition to this, rental precarity, transient living and cosmopolitanism may undermine pathways to stewardship over local nature. Hence, wildlife fall through the cracks, become somebody else's problem, and are poorly understood.

Although residents could be talked to and reasoned with, and sometimes all they needed was a listening ear for problems caused by wildlife, there were also difficult members of the public. Depending on the charisma, popularity and species identity of the animal to be lethally removed, for example, the public could mount resistance. This could take the form of vigilantism, putting themselves between the animal and the hunter, insistence on rescues and animal ambulances, or harassment of hunters afterward. In a previous paper, I connected this to poor necro-aesthetics (von Essen and Redmalm, 2023a): it was often not so much the kill itself as the way it was carried out. Culls in bad taste, poorly communicated to the public, with seemingly brutal methods, in zero tolerance zones, at rush hour, or by a big burly outside contracted culler with poor people skills, were likely to compel resistance.

With all these problems of killing before an audience, there is a dimension to city life that is promising to multispecies coexistence going forward. That is that the urban is not as fixed and entrenched in its attitudes toward wildlife as the countryside but acts as site for evolving and experimental norms. They are subject to shift with new cultures and demographics, as well as, hopefully, public education and awareness.

CONCLUSION

Despite claims of the city constituting a living lab of dynamic norms, urban wildlife management has lagged behind. It is reactive rather than proactive, evidenced by disciplinary schemes as problems arises with populations or individual animals. At present, the relatively lofty ideas on e.g. multispecies 'right to the city' (Kornherr and Pütz, 2022) remain abstract and poorly connected to practical solutions on the ground. I propose that the interspecies etiquette presents a handy concept to think about coexistence with, including how this necessarily goes both ways, operates on species as well as individual levels, and can be reflected in planning and infrastructure in urban ecology as well as in practices and actions in the everyday.

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