

In war on coyotes, some argue for learning to live with them

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Fueled by the war on coyotes in much of the United States, debate is growing over the most humane method of executing the wily predators - as is a vigorous public push to accommodate them instead.

In Seal Beach, Calif., where there have been at least 60 attacks on pets over the last year, officials recently hired a company to trap [coyotes](#) and asphyxiate them in a mobile gas chamber filled with carbon dioxide.

The city was particularly concerned about safety in the local retirement community of Leisure World, where coyotes have ambushed dogs during the day.

In September, for example, Jovanka Radivojevic, 78, spotted a coyote staring through her living room window. When she stepped outside, she said, the predator grabbed her Shih-poo, Sugar, by the head and ran off - with the retired doctor and neighbors giving chase. Eventually the coyote dropped a slightly injured Sugar and walked away.

Critter Busters pest control has captured four coyotes in Seal Beach since September and asphyxiated them. It is a cheaper method than lethal injection, which must be administered by a licensed veterinarian.

"When Critter Busters told us that it used gas to dispatch coyotes, I assumed it meant the animals were put to sleep. So I voted to approve the contract," said Mike Levitt, a city councilman and Leisure World resident. "I found out (afterward) that the animal does not go to sleep.

There are spasms. They choke."

Tens of thousands of coyotes are killed each year across the country using a variety of methods.

Livestock protection collars, which are strapped to the necks of sheep or goats, ooze deadly sodium fluoroacetate when punctured by a coyote. Also popular are M-44 "coyote getters" - devices that lure the animals close with bait, then fire sodium cyanide into their throats.

Exposure to those poisons results in cardiac arrest after as little as three minutes or as long as 10 hours, marked by severe convulsions.

To ranchers and others who see the damage coyotes inflict on livestock, concern over humane killing methods is as misguided as it would be over the killing of rats, roaches and other pests.

Eradication methods are not intentionally inhumane, they say. Rather, they are designed to be cost-efficient and effective.

"The animal advocacy groups have done a really good job of blurring the lines and making this issue unsavory and all about morality," said Steven Childs, a California hunting activist who lives in Monrovia. "It isn't about morality," he said. "It's about personal freedom" to shoot coyotes, which are classified as non-game animals with no bag limit.

But conservationists are challenging what they describe as the cruel killing of the intelligent, socially organized and highly adaptive scavengers. Exterminating coyotes also disrupts ecologies and isn't effective, they say.

Conservation expert Robert Crabtree, a University of Montana science professor, said: "Coyotes define the word 'opportunist.' We kill them ...

and they rebound just fine to normal numbers. We can't beat them."

"It's time we start questioning the policies and laws at state and federal levels that allow the wholesale killing of predators for fun - so-called sport and eradication programs that don't work," said Camilla Fox, founder of the nonprofit conservation organization Project Coyote. "They reflect an almost sociopathic tendency that enjoys gratuitous killing and watching animals suffer in pain," Fox said.

Lawsuits filed in the last year have taken aim at "coyote shooting derbies" in California, New Mexico, Virginia, Idaho, Oregon and Pennsylvania, where hunters win cash prizes for killing the most animals. Amid the outrage, the California Fish and Game Commission voted earlier this month to ban such incentives.

A coalition of animal rights and conservation organizations also filed a lawsuit against Mendocino County in November, accusing it of failing to conduct an environmental impact report before approving a \$142,356 contract for predator control by the federal Wildlife Services agency.

The agency kills more than 75,000 coyotes a year in the United States with steel-jawed traps, wire snares and poisons that "are cruel and pose a danger to both people and their pets," the suit said.

In Seal Beach, the backlash against asphyxiation was so strong that the city reversed course. It did not renew its contract with Critter Busters and abandoned extermination as a solution. Officials now are trying to find a way to live alongside the coyotes.

Seal Beach is drafting a regional coyote management plan in cooperation with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and nearby cities including Cypress, Los Alamitos, Garden Grove and Long Beach. The goal is co-existence, enforcement of laws prohibiting the feeding of

wildlife and development of a system for determining the proper response to encounters with coyotes.

The responses range from hazing to elimination of a coyote involved in documented attacks on humans, officials said.

The city of Calabasas adopted a coexistence plan in 2012 with assistance from Project Coyote that recommends the use of "hazing" techniques - shouting, loud whistles and bright lights that scare coyotes away from neighborhood streets.

But hazing, some say, has limits.

Its effectiveness, said Robert M. Timm, a former UC wildlife specialist who collaborated on a study that documented 128 coyote attacks on humans between 1977 and 2013, "depends on the naivete of the coyote." (A 1981 attack on a 3-year-old Glendale girl is the only documented case in the country of a coyote killing a person.)

Seal Beach's plan for managing coyotes reserves the right to trap and kill problem animals. And some residents say that if threatened, they will take matters into their own hands.

Linda Peters, 68, recently took her white miniature poodle for a walk, holding the leash in one hand and an aluminum baseball bat in the other.

"If a coyote comes near me," Peters said, "I'm swinging for the fences."

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