A Brief Review of Wildlife Translocation

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Wildlife translocation is defined as the transport and subsequent release of live wild animals from one location to another (Conover 2002). Wildlife translocation is often associated with human-wildlife conflicts or damage (Craven et al. 1998), but can also be used in conservation of rare or endangered species and for stocking game. This newsletter reviews the science behind translocation of individual animals responsible for human-wildlife conflicts.

Wildlife damage management has shifted emphasis in the past few decades to focus more on the individual problem animal (Hone 2007). As a result, translocation has increased as a method to address human-wildlife conflicts. The public often perceives this approach as humane and preferable to lethal control. Further, a common belief that follows is translocated animals will “live happily ever after” at their new location. Although translocation does serve to address the problem behavior by removing the animal, exclusion or habitat modification methods often represent superior long-term solutions. Further, when used for problem animals in a wildlife damage context, euthanasia may be an appropriate and more humane alternative than translocation.

Unpredicted and unintended consequences of translocation are among the top concerns when considering its use. Because the primary objective for translocation of a problem animal is to reduce or remove the problem, there is often little attention given to possible consequences. There is limited scientific information regarding consequences of translocation. However, points of concern include: spread of disease and parasites (Griffith et al. 1993, Woodford and Rossiter 1993), humanness of translocation (Massei et al. 2010), movement of relocated animals, impact to resident species at relocation area, and genetic consequences for wildlife species at relocation area (Craven et al. 1998, Massei et al. 2010).

Translocations may also take a toll on the individuals being relocated. Stress of captivity and relocation may predispose individuals to harassment from resident animals, increased predation, and increase the difficulty in acquiring resources such as food, water and shelter. Research on a variety of species demonstrates survival rates range from similar to non-translocated individuals to approaching near total mortality (Mosillo et al. 1999, Conover 2002). Individual survival is dependent on several variables including species behavior, season of release, habitat characteristics, and environmental conditions.
In addition to animal welfare issues, individuals may resume problem behaviors at the new location. The problem behavior has then been introduced or moved to a new area continuing the human-wildlife conflict. For example, urban raccoons translocated to rural environments tended to den near rural homes (Mosillo et al. 1999).

The concerns cited above have prompted wildlife professionals involved in conservation, game management, and wildlife damage manage to revisit translocation as a common practice and consider appropriate criteria for its use in wildlife management.

Species in New Mexico that should not be translocated are raccoons, skunks, and foxes as they represent common species known to carry rabies. The American Veterinary Medical Association is strongly opposed to translocation of these species because of the demonstrated potential to translocate rabies with the individual (AVMA 2009). A classic example involves rabid raccoons moved from Florida to North Carolina (Nettles et al. 1979). Similarly, spread of parasites by relocating wildlife is concerning yet poorly documented (Cunningham 1996). Euthanasia is especially preferred when a species has a potential for disease transmission. Guidelines for euthanasia are available through the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA 2007).

Summary

Translocation of common wildlife species has little value from an ecological perspective (Craven et al. 1998). Translocation of some species may promote expansion or introduction of disease and parasites. Humaneness of translocation should not be assumed; captivity, transport and release into unfamiliar environments are high stress situations that may affect an individual’s ability to survive. Continuance of problem behavior means the problem has been relocated to a new area. State and federal laws often influence how individuals may move or euthanize wildlife. Translocation as a tool to address human-wildlife conflict should be weighed carefully before being used. Areas for animal release should be carefully and comprehensively assessed to determine ecological and social acceptability before problem animals are relocated. The public’s perception that translocation is humane and preferential to alternatives for addressing problem animals is not fully informed from ecological, animal welfare, and social perspectives. Euthanasia, habitat modification and exclusion often represent better and more humane approaches to address human-wildlife conflicts.

Literature Cited


