

We can thrive alongside wild animals

By Hannah Barron

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Earthroots

King Township put on a workshop called 'Living with Coyotes' with presenters from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF), Toronto Wildlife Centre (TWC) and Coyote Watch Canada (CWC). Contrary to Mr. Laidlaw's disdain for the notion of 'status quo living with coyotes' (letter, 'More action on coyote problem,' Feb. 11), the Township took its first steps to address recent concerns of several landowners in King. It is clear to everyone that change is needed if we are to coexist with King's coyotes.

Having recently moved from a career in wildlife research to one focused on environmental education, it is both my duty and interest to inform the public about ways we can thrive alongside wild animals. Lucky for us, we can draw on decades of coyote research from across North America to help us in our quest for coexistence.

I believe this hard data, and not sensationalist, fear-mongering and inaccurate speculation (particularly concerning coming from a former member of council) is what we need to make effective decisions as a township. As such, I'm happy to respond to Mr. Laidlaw's arguments and predictions using nothing but scientific evidence.

1. MNRF has no accurate, long-term coyote population estimates for southern Ontario. MNRF typically uses data from mandatory hunting and harvest activity reports to estimate the number of coyotes and wolves in central and northern Ontario. Reporting is not mandatory in southern Ontario so we have few population data.
2. The diet of any 'opportunistic predator' is limited by the animal's physical ability to take down large prey. Despite eastern coyotes being larger than their western counterparts (coyotes arrived in Ontario as early as 1917 and bred with remnant eastern wolves due to low abundance; these wolf genes make them larger), adults only range from about 22 to 50 pounds. Despite the variation in body size, there is no evidence that our resident coyotes are getting bigger. I would also add that coyotes commonly scavenge and do consume vegetation, not being either a perfect predator or carnivore.
3. Eastern wolves were southern Ontario's resident wolves but land-clearing and systematic persecution drove survivors northward, opening up our region to incoming coyotes. MNRF's own science shows that eastern wolves are very unlikely to survive outside of their protected stronghold in Algonquin Provincial Park. It is therefore virtually impossible that eastern wolves would return to King Township. What few wolves might disperse south of Algonquin wouldn't be able to displace our resident coyotes.
4. Livestock depredation claim data for King are not public, however, plenty of research shows that a) non-lethal depredation prevention is effective and b) killing carnivores often exacerbates livestock depredation. I encourage the Township to subsidize education and implementation of non-lethal measures to reduce livestock kills. Investigations and consultation with the experts at CWC would be the logical first step. Ongoing budget cuts means MNRF does not have the capacity to help. Sadly, the recent public meeting is about all we can expect from our local MNRF.
5. It is anecdotal to presume that coyotes are killing more and more pets. We need better reporting to identify trends. What we should be asking, though, is why? CWC already provides information about the many ways people can prevent loss of pets to coyotes: check www.coyotewatchcanada.com.
6. The coyote population will continue to be regulated by availability of prey and disease, and competition between coyote families for habitat. The population may increase or decrease in seasonal and interannual cycles. The term 'overpopulation' is a human construct. Wildlife populations increasing past what can be sustained by available habitat (a number we biologists call 'carrying capacity') crash without interference from humans.
7. Conflict between coyotes does not lead to aggressive behaviour toward humans. Coyotes are naturally wary of humans. Conflict results when coyotes are rewarded by individuals (via direct or inadvertent feeding) or if pet dogs instigate defensive behaviours that are commonly mistaken for predatory behaviours. Hazing is very effective when the entire community is cooperative; failure results when one or more people are uncooperative. This can put their neighbours' domestic animals at stake! Wildlife feeding bylaws are sometimes necessary. I urge the public to remember the old adage that 'a fed coyote, is a dead coyote' if they think that feeding benefits wildlife. For those people feeding deer, you are also feeding a range of other species. Remember, the coyote is opportunistic and will eat compost, insects or congregated mammals around feeding sites.
8. Following lethal management, surviving coyotes have better access to resources: a larger proportion of individuals breed and have

larger litters. Wild canine populations increase following lethal management. As such, we have no choice but to learn to live with coyotes and alter our behaviour to support their natural human-avoidance behaviours. Coyotes will pass human-avoidance behaviours to their offspring; it makes sense to keep those individuals that avoid people around instead of killing any and all coyotes because one misunderstands and feels threatened in general by the species.

9. Coyotes are nowhere near as dangerous as dogs; attacks are infrequent and almost certainly from diseased or habituated animals. To prevent attacks, we must work to prevent disease spread (MNRF controls rabies, TWC rehabilitates coyotes with mange) and prevent/undo habituation with a strategy that may include bylaws, signage and coyote conflict response volunteers to educate the public.

Recent science shows that healthy carnivore populations act as insurance for ecological services (water purification, carbon sequestration etc.) that we often forget we need to survive. Only when we commit to learning from wild canine experts and adapt our behaviours to prevent pet and livestock depredation will we begin to see the rich ways coyotes benefit our short-sighted species. For those people unwilling to adapt, I'm afraid you'll have to move very far north indeed to find coyote-free habitat.