

Coyotes, beavers need their space, advocates say

By Ken Maguire, Associated Press Writer | August 15, 2007

BOSTON --Tired of your new neighbors howling at night or flooding your property? There are easier ways to deal with coyotes and beavers than to expand hunting and trapping, advocates said Wednesday.

Wildlife biologists and the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, in the wake of new regulations expanding the coyote hunting season, lobbied at the Statehouse, promoting alternatives to hunting and trapping.

"We're not managing based on science, we're managing based on politics," said Jonathan Way, who studies the eastern coyote in urban ecosystems.

Regulations that took effect this month allow homeowners to hire "problem animal control" agents to kill coyotes on their property. The state's Fisheries and Wildlife Board also expanded the coyote hunting season by five weeks -- from the Saturday after Columbus Day through March 8.

While coyotes do prey on cats and small dogs, they are shy animals and are easily scared off by humans, Way said. They're territorial and "manage themselves," he said, so that killing one could have the reverse effect of inviting more.

"Coyotes don't need to be managed by people. They patrol their territories. They absolutely positively keep other coyotes out of those territories," he said. "They are howling at night, they are peeing on bushes not to scare us away but to scare other coyotes away."

There are an estimated 10,000 coyotes in Massachusetts, with increased sightings across the state, including Boston.

George Darey, chairman of the Fisheries and Wildlife Board, defended the new regulations.

"As far as I'm concerned, we're very conservative," he said. "The northern New England states haven't got any regulations."

Darey said the season was extended to allow hunters to maximize the time in which pelts are most valuable. The MSPCA estimates that pelts are worth about \$50 each.

Tom O'Shea, assistant director of wildlife at the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, said specialized animal control agents hired by homeowners are now authorized to shoot a coyote on the person's property.

"The box and cage traps are just not effective at trapping problem animals," he said. "That doesn't mean we consider them a pest or a nuisance. Coyotes are here, and here to stay. But there are times when we do need to remove a problem animal."

Coyote attacks on people are rare. There have been just three confirmed coyote attacks on people in Massachusetts since the 1950s, according to the MassWildlife.

At the event, the MSPCA also advocated against bills that would allow trapping of beavers using body-gripping Conibear traps. Beavers cause problems such as flooded basements and blocked culverts after building dams in waterways across the state.

Advocates called on state and local officials, as well as homeowners, to adopt non-lethal solutions such as culvert-protective fences or flow devices that prevent damming, arguing that killing beavers is a short-term fix.

Beavers can be trapped Nov. 1 through April 15. A 1996 law restricted the types of traps to boxes and cages. That law resulted in the beaver population nearly tripling in five years to 70,000, according to MassWildlife. It prompted the Legislature to amend the law, allowing offseason trapping with an emergency permit. ■