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BIO 631

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CEL 3: Listening to Your Community

Part One: Overview

Ever since humans killed off the red wolf causing them to be extinct in the wild, coyotes have migrated from the plains throughout the east coast, north and south. Their adaptability to live in various types of areas has allowed them to prosper in urban areas such as Atlanta, GA and the surrounding metro and suburban cities. Though they typically stay away from humans, living in the same area as humans provides them with more and less risky feeding opportunities. Coyotes typically eat meat they have hunted either solely or in a group, though they will scavenge for food occasionally, this includes insects, fruit and grass. This opportunistic feeding behavior may stem from when coyotes had to compete with red wolves who were their only natural competitor in North America. In these urban and metro areas, coyotes prey on livestock and pets, spread rabies, and may attack humans (rarely). There are now estimated to be around 250,000 coyotes throughout the state. With this overpopulation of coyotes now and their flexible behavior, human-wildlife conflict has become a major issue. The Atlanta Coyote Project is working to educate the public about coyotes and how to manage and coexist with them. As much as coyotes have become a nuisance to residents, they are quite important for the environment. They provide species diversity and maintain healthy ecosystems. For instance, they limit the populations of smaller carnivores such as skunks, raccoons and foxes. This in turns allows for bird populations to stabilize as well since those smaller carnivores raid nests and diminish multiple bird species. Coyotes also help control disease transmission by maintaining rodent populations (Project Coyote, 2019). Through and through coyotes are an important species in our environments and learning how to coexist with them only benefits this. The Atlanta Coyote Project states that their goals are: “to provide the public with general information about the biology and natural history of coyotes; to be a centralized location where coyote sightings, activity, and incidents across metro Atlanta and urban Georgia are reported, maintained, and

mapped; and to conduct peer-reviewed, scientific research on coyotes,” which is exactly what is needed in Atlanta (Atlanta Coyote Project, 2017).

Part Two: Conversations

As I have stated in my overview, my interests about coyotes lie mostly with why they are important, how we can coexist with them, and how the Atlanta coyote project has contributed. I had the pleasure of speaking with three community members about this. My first two conversations were with people who work directly with the Atlanta Coyote Project. They both are highly influential people with a passion for ecology and conservation. Neither of them started with the interest of coyotes or canids in general. One has a background in primatology and the other with amphibians and reptiles. It was an undergraduate student and their passion to better understand the environments they personally live in that got them hooked on the coyote. When the idea for the Atlanta Coyote Project was just a glimmer of passion, there was not much known about coyotes in the southeast. This provided the perfect foundation to start studying the species in the area. The first thing these two community members and their undergraduate students did was conduct a resident survey, trying to cover as much of Atlanta and the surrounding areas as possible. Their goal of this survey was just to get an idea of what residents knew about coyotes. The survey showed that residents felt an increase in coyote populations over the last few years, residents wanted more information about the species and that there was a widespread distribution of opinions about coyotes. My third conversation was with a general public community member with a passion for canids. She got interested in the Atlanta Coyote Project, because she believes they do crucial work on providing information about the species and decreasing human-wildlife conflict. She understands that coyotes and wolves have a long history of being wrongly “demonized and persecuted.”

When I asked each of them why they think it is important to conserve the species, they all indicated that the concern is not so much to conserve the species but rather to avoid persecution which was interesting to me that this was the opinion across the board. One stated, “trying to eradicate the species is misguided. Coyotes are here because the red wolf is gone due to our wrong doing. They are filling a niche.” Further, this emphasizes the point that coyotes do provide a healthy ecosystem and are vital to maintaining balances. So, if this is the case, what can we do to learn to coexist with them? Based on the opinions of these community members, it is

situational. There is a difference between how people in the city and how people in rural areas would deal with the populations of coyotes. All in all, coyotes ultimately control their own numbers. It is not up to us to decide how large their populations can get. All we can really do is influence the amount of resources that are available to coyotes. The most important thing in urban areas is being a responsible pet owner, not leaving food out and watching your companion animals. Conflict is a learned behavior in coyotes; it is not instinctual. Beyond this, there is going to be mortality in urban areas due to vehicle collisions and the presence of diseases such as mange.

I then asked about the reintroduction of red wolves since there are programs working on this in the southeast. They all stated that they do not believe the reintroduction programs will be successful. The population of 35 red wolves on the coast of south carolina is already experiencing issues with maintaining its population due to severe inbreeding. This also happened when a group attempted releasing a group of red wolves in the Appalachian mountains. It has also been discovered that red wolves shared about 75% of their DNA with coyotes which in turn allows for cross breeding between the species. Again, this just leaves us with the need to understand the species and how to live them instead of fearing them. Every animal has a part to play and if we were to just get rid of coyotes the way we destroyed the red wolf, another apex predator would swoop in and fill the niche again.

Both of the community members who have a direct connection with the Atlanta Coyote Project, listed multiple ways they are spreading the word about coyotes and their importance. The first thing being the projects website which they keep up-to-date yearly and hope provides enough information in a colloquial manner. They conduct new studies with the species and plan to have these studies published. When these studies are published, they use social media (facebook), public lectures and documentaries. Further, they involve themselves in community festivals and parades, just any opportunity they have to get the word out about the project. They also partner with multiple other environmental organizations such as the Chattahoochee Nature Center, Zoo Atlanta, Fernbank Museum, as well as organizations around the country like Project Coyote based in California and Lincoln Park Zoo in Illinois. My last conversation with the general public member said she contributes by sharing information on social media and having conversations with others about the issue.

Part Three: Reflection of Conversations

All of my respondents were knowledgeable about the topic and very passionate about it which was a benefit for me because it allowed the conversation to flow more fluidly. As you can tell, everyone was in agreement and had pretty much the same answers for each of my questions. I did learn some new things about this coyote issue mainly in part of the red wolf reintroductions and why that actually would not do much at all. I always thought that if we did reintroduce red wolves successfully, the coyote populations would diminish because if the red wolves were still here, coyotes would not be. I learned though that would not be the case because of how well coyotes adapt and red wolves do not. It shows that these things are a lot more complicated than they seem to be.

Part Four: Reflection of Methods

I am very satisfied with the answers I got to my questions, and I believe the way I ordered my questions allowed for more of a conversation than an interview. It was easy to get a flow going when talking to people who are so passionate about the issue. I felt well prepared for these conversations by doing my own research and gaining knowledge about coyotes ahead of time.

References:

Atlanta Coyote Project. (2017). Retrieved on 28 September 2019 from:
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