

<b>Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management</b>	
<b>SUBJECT:</b> Management & Response Protocols for Incidents Involving Coyotes	<b>Date:</b> March 13, 2006 <b>Revision:</b>

Director's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**I. Purpose:** The purpose of this policy is to establish uniform wildlife management and response protocols to guide landowners, community groups, and municipalities in their efforts to address concerns associated with eastern coyotes (*Canis latrans*) in Rhode Island.

**II. Legal Basis:** Pursuant to RIGL Chapter 20-1, the Director of the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) is vested with the management authority and responsibility over the wildlife of the State, and is empowered to adopt and enforce any and all rules and regulations necessary to carry out his/her duties and responsibilities.

**III. Background:** Sightings of eastern coyotes in suburban and urban neighborhoods have become a routine occurrence in many parts of Rhode Island. Since the late 1960s, coyotes have expanded their range, through natural dispersal, into all Rhode Island cities and towns, with the exception of New Shoreham. This has occurred as part of a larger range expansion by coyotes throughout eastern North America. Coyotes are intelligent and adaptable, and they are capable of surviving and even thriving in human-altered environments where natural and artificial food sources may be abundant.

**IV. Research:** DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife collects biological data from coyote carcasses obtained from hunters, trappers, Division of Law Enforcement personnel, or other sources; such data provides valuable insight into coyote distribution, dietary habits, diseases, reproductive history, and population age structure. The Division of Fish and Wildlife also maintains a record of all reported nuisance complaints regarding coyotes. DEM lacks the resources to undertake large-scale, targeted research projects involving coyotes, or to provide funding to outside entities for such purposes. However, DEM continues to support, through necessary permitting and guidance, and draw upon sound scientific research projects undertaken by university-affiliated researchers or private sector professionals.

**V. Status as Natural Resource and Regulated Species:** While some view coyotes as a threat, others recognize coyotes as an important part of the State's fauna. As a natural resource, coyotes can offer recreational opportunities for hunters and trappers, as well as wildlife viewing opportunities for non-consumptive users. The presence of coyotes has been known to suppress local populations of smaller animals, such as foxes, raccoons, skunks, woodchucks, squirrels, and mice, that in fact may be responsible for more nuisance problems and economic losses than coyotes themselves.

DEM recognizes the recreational, cultural, economical, and biological importance of the regulated harvest of Rhode Island's common furbearer species. Regulated harvests can also help meet the public's demand for reduction of furbearer-related damage. Coyotes are classified as a protected furbearer under RIGL section 20-16-1. Through regulation, and pursuant to RIGL §20-1-12, DEM provides opportunities for hunters and trappers in Rhode Island to harvest coyotes for recreational, economical, and nuisance-related reasons. Staff from DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife review regulations on an annual basis and solicit public input. Seasons and bag limits are established with the goal of sustaining furbearer populations for their ecological, recreational, and economic importance while balancing the needs of the public. DEM regulations allow coyotes to

be taken at any time of year by legal means. However, state law that restricts the use of certain trap types, and local laws imposed by some municipalities that restrict or prohibit the use of firearms, can impede the harvest of furbearers.

**VI. Diseases:** Coyotes can be affected by a wide variety of parasites and diseases, including ticks, fleas, intestinal worms, canine heartworm, canine distemper, canine parvovirus, sarcoptic mange, and rabies. Coyotes are a known reservoir for canine heartworm; nearly all of the adult coyotes examined by the Division of Fish and Wildlife are infected with the parasite. Coyotes, like all other mammals, can contract the rabies virus; however coyotes are not a frequent host of the strain of the virus that is present in the northeast. Several coyotes have tested positive for the rabies virus in other New England states, but to date no coyote has tested positive for the virus in Rhode Island. DEM has always strongly emphasized the importance of vaccinations for pets and promoted the steps that pet owners should take to prevent interactions between pets and wildlife. DEM and the Rhode Island Department of Health have established protocols for the capture, handling, destruction, transport, and testing of wildlife specimens suspected of having rabies; and there are numerous public informational materials available on the subject of rabies control. DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife will continue to examine coyote carcasses for the presence of diseases.

**VII. Threats and Concerns:** The recent increase in sightings of coyotes in suburban and urban neighborhood backyards, parks, cemeteries, golf courses and other open space areas, often during daylight hours, has led to heightened concern by residents not accustomed to encountering coyotes in these areas. Generally, the mere sighting of a coyote does not constitute a problem or threat to public safety. Yet direct interactions with pets, livestock and humans do pose concerns. Predation of pets, particularly house cats and small dogs, by coyotes has become a common occurrence in some areas, and has emerged as the most pressing concern. Predation of livestock and poultry by coyotes is also known to occur, resulting in economic impacts on commercial and backyard producers. Predation of piping plovers and least terns, particularly nesting adults as well as eggs and hatchlings, has at times hindered efforts aimed at protecting these endangered species. Coyote attacks on humans have been documented in parts of the U.S., but are extremely rare. There have been no documented attacks in Rhode Island.

### **VIII. Recommended Management/Control Protocols:**

**A. Public education.** Educating the public about coyote behavior is the most effective way of reducing or preventing negative interactions between coyotes and humans. Public education materials regarding coyote life history, management issues, and nuisance issues are available on DEM's website at: <http://www.dem.ri.gov/programs/bnatre/fishwild/pdf/coyotes.pdf>. Perhaps the most important message is that incidents involving bold or brazen behavior or daytime activity by coyotes are often attributable to unsecured garbage cans or other food sources -- or worse, the intentional feeding of coyotes by individuals. Removing food sources, and discontinuing any intentional feeding, can often resolve problems involving coyotes quickly and effectively. Community meetings are very helpful in conveying such information to the public, and DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife remains available to conduct and participate in such meetings at the request of local communities.

**B. Addressing problematic or nuisance situations.** Problematic situations involving coyotes, particularly those involving aggressive coyotes, are rare but need to be addressed quickly and decisively if/when they occur. Nuisance situations involving coyotes are much more common; they also tend to be more complex and involve a wide range of circumstances. As such, it is impossible to specify appropriate responses in all such situations. The following recommended

response protocols are intended as guidelines for local authorities, community groups, residents, and landowners. The protocols may require modifications based on the individual circumstances and the judgement and experience of the personnel involved. On a case-by-case basis, DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife (789-0281) and Division of Law Enforcement (222-3070) are always available to provide specific guidance.

- 1. Coyotes that attack humans. Coyotes that attack pets, domestic animals, or livestock in the presence of humans. Coyotes that show signs of rabies.** Individual coyotes that exhibit aggressive, destructive, or high-risk behaviors, and/or appear to be rabid, need to be addressed quickly and directly in order to protect public health and safety. Such instances are rare, but if they occur, the recommended response protocols are as follows:
  - Immediately notify DEM (222-3070) and/or the appropriate municipal animal control officer or police department.
  - State and local authorities will assess the situation and respond appropriately. The likely response will be to dispatch the animal, if the opportunity presents itself.
  - Landowners also have the right to dispatch such animals on their own property, in accordance with applicable local ordinances. (Some municipalities in Rhode Island have ordinances that prohibit the discharge of firearms.)
  - If an aggressive coyote cannot be immediately located, DEM will coordinate with local authorities and landowners to advise on appropriate measures for capturing and dispatching the animal.
  - For any instances involving a bite or other direct exposure to humans or domestic animals, the state rabies protocol must be followed. As a first step, DEM and/or the local animal control officer or police department must be immediately notified. Further action will be dictated by the nature of the incident.
  - As part of ongoing, broad-based public education and outreach efforts, and in direct response to any problematic situations involving coyotes, local authorities and the public should be reminded of the non-lethal measures that can help prevent future problems, such as discontinuing any intentional feeding of coyotes.
- 2. Coyotes that cause livestock losses, inflict significant crop damage, or prey on endangered species.** There are a host of non-lethal control measures available to property owners, wildlife agencies and stewards to guard against these types of impacts. Also, RI state law (RIGL 20-16-2) allows any property owner to kill, at any time, any fur bearer that is "worrying, wounding, or killing domestic animals or livestock on the property or destroying or mutilating agricultural crops." In addition, RI state law (RIGL 20-16-8) allows any property owner to apply to DEM for a special permit to use foothold traps to capture fur bearers that are causing damage or preying on livestock when other methods of control have proven ineffective. RI state law does not provide for remuneration for damages associated with coyotes.

The following recommended response protocols apply to any property owner experiencing livestock or crop damage due to coyotes, as well as any representative of a wildlife agency or organization responsible for the stewardship of an endangered species that is being preyed upon by coyotes:

- Contact DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife (789-0281) for technical assistance and advice regarding the application of appropriate control measures.
- Upon request, DEM staff will evaluate the property or resources being threatened or harmed and recommend appropriate steps to be taken.
- Property owners may wish to exercise their right to dispatch nuisance coyotes, but may only do so in accordance with applicable local regulations. Non-lethal control measures may be better suited to address coyote-related problems in many circumstances.

**C. Addressing the occurrence of coyotes in suburban or urban areas, including negative interactions with people and pets.** Coyotes in suburban and urban areas that are not causing the types of problems described above often represent the most complex and challenging situations. Non-lethal techniques, such as elimination of potential food sources, proper handling of trash, etc., are the most effective means for minimizing negative interactions with coyotes, but entire communities must employ such avoidance protocols to render them effective. Lethal options are often hindered due to local ordinances restricting the use of firearms, high densities of people and domestic animals, and varying public opinions. Resolving problems with nuisance coyotes in these situations requires outreach and education and broad-based cooperation. DEM will not trap and relocate problem coyotes, nor allow such relocation to occur. Listed below are two common scenarios and recommended response protocols.

1. ***Reported sightings/complaints of coyote(s) in backyards, parks, cemeteries, crossing roads.*** Such sightings are not a concern, per se, but they may cause discomfort for some individuals or communities. In such cases:
  - Contact DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife (789-0281) for technical assistance and advice regarding the application of appropriate control measures.
  - Provide residents and local officials with technical advice and printed educational information pertaining to the nature and behavior of coyotes, as well as non-lethal techniques for avoiding problems, such as removal of possible food sources, keeping pets indoors, employing scare tactics, wildlife proofing property, etc.
2. ***Coyote(s) that appear to have been acclimated to people, or appear to lack fear of people. Coyotes attacking unattended small pets.*** Such incidents are not unexpected, but do warrant attention. In such cases:
  - Contact DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife (789-0281) for technical assistance and advice regarding the application of appropriate control measures.
  - Provide residents and local officials with technical advice and printed educational materials pertaining to the nature and behavior of coyotes, as well as non-lethal techniques for avoiding problems, as well as lethal options, if deemed necessary and if appropriate.
  - Coordinate efforts with local animal control officers and officials.
  - Issue one or more press releases to ensure that affected communities are well-informed.
  - Hold community workshops in conjunction with DEM and local officials.

**D. Generalized DEM Management and Response Protocols Regarding Coyotes**

1. DEM will continue to undertake efforts to educate the public through printed materials, educational programs, technical assistance, website, etc. to help reduce problems associated with coyotes.
2. DEM will continue to record all complaints regarding coyotes. Data will be compiled and maintained by Fish and Wildlife.
3. In circumstances where successive complaints are received for a particular area, a biologist from DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife will conduct a site inspection and meet with residents to assess the situation and advise property owners of options.
4. Euthanization of injured, sick, or aggressive coyotes shall be conducted in a humane but practical manner, when there has been a confirmed or suspected exposure to humans or domestic animals, in accordance with the State of Rhode Island Manual for Rabies Management and Protocols.
5. DEM has neither the authorization nor funding to make remuneration for damage associated with coyotes.
6. Through the regulatory and legislative processes, DEM will continue to manage and promote harvest methods that are consistent with professional wildlife management principles.