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Living with nature

# Raccoons, rabbits and rats: Pest control proves a pesky problem

CHANTAIE ALLICK

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Whether it's the furtive scavenging of raccoons in Toronto or the stench of angry skunks in Vancouver, every city, province, territory and country can claim a pest that defies eradication.

In Toronto's battle between human and beast, Nguyen Dong was recently arrested after a neighbour reported someone beating a family of raccoons in his backyard garden with a spade.

City residents are divided on whether the animals are pests that should be eliminated or cute mammals that deserve rescue. People on both sides of the debate even held a small demonstration in Mr. Dong's west-end Bloor Street and Lansdowne Avenue neighbourhood.

Mr. Dong was charged with cruelty to animals and possession of a weapon for a dangerous purpose and is expected back in court on July 13. His wife, Thuy, told The Globe and Mail that she and her husband were at their wit's end dealing with the raccoons that climbed on their deck and showed no fear.

Under provincial legislation, property owners in Toronto can hire private pest-control companies to trap and remove urban pests such as raccoons, but in most cases the companies are legally obligated to release them within one kilometre of where they are caught.

Dan Frankian, owner of Hawkeye Bird and Animal Control, said he understands why the animals can't be taken far from their natural habitats. But he said these rules don't work on industrial factory properties, which are often larger than a kilometre, or if whatever is attracting the animals to private residences—crawl spaces and garbage—isn't removed.

Effective alternatives are necessary in some cases, he said. "The whole idea of being able to move an animal from point A to point B does not make sense," he added. Mr. Frankian's company has permits that give him the option of killing raccoons.

Here's a look at how some governments and individuals have dealt with their resident pest populations.

## **Rat poisoning in Alberta**

It took Alberta 52 years to deal with an infestation of Norway rats, which were brought to North America's east coast in 1775. The rats moved into Alberta in the 1950s and destroyed crops in the Eastern parts of the province.

The Alberta government set up a poisoning program to kill all rats along its eastern border. By 1975, the Department of Agriculture was paying the salary and expenses of full-time pest-control officers for each municipality along the eastern border of the province. It's now illegal for anyone except research institutions with permits to import, possess or transport live rats in Alberta. The province declared itself rat-free in 2002. Since then, it has had only two known infestations.

### **Biological control in Australia**

The population of wild rabbits, one of many non-native species on the continent, is legendary. Once introduced, the highly fecund long-eared mammal is known to populate an area quickly. Governments around the world have gone to extremes to beat them back.

In 1996, the Australian government, using the method of biological control, released a virus unique to rabbits known as rabbit calicivirus, which infects the lining of the throat, lungs, gut and liver of rabbits. Captured rabbits were injected with the virus and released into the wild to infect others. As part of an ongoing effort, scientists in the country are now identifying strains of the virus that will be effective against the genetic resistance that rabbits have developed.

### **Sterilization and euthanasia in Victoria**

Canadian organizations with similar problems have chosen other measures. The University of Victoria has been experimenting with methods of rabbit control since 2008. With the help of community volunteers and wildlife centres, the school set up three pilot programs and two public-awareness campaigns to address its rabbit problem. The rabbits were captured, sterilized and then released, relocated or euthanized. In March, the university declared the campus rabbit-free. Over the course of a school year, 900 rabbits were removed from the campus through special provincial permits. The rabbits were released onto the campus by domestic pet owners beginning in the 1990s. Any new rabbits found on campus will now be trapped and killed, said Tom Smith, facilities management director at the school.

### **Catch and release in Toronto**

Wildlife control is regulated by the Ministry of Natural Resources in Ontario, however, property owners must deal with pests, such as raccoons or other small wildlife, on their own. "Relocating is not going to solve anyone's problems," said Fiona Venadam of Toronto Animal Services. She recommends homeowners get rid of open garbage or access routes to food in and around their houses. The city has worked with the province to find alternative ways to deal with situations such as urban coyotes, but have very little power otherwise. It can't legislate on the issue, but municipalities do offer advice on deterring infestations. Some raccoon deterrents include sprinkling pure soap flakes on the lawn and watering, mixing bone meal into garden soil, lighting the area where raccoons are a problem with a 100-watt bulb, or sprinkling diluted Tabasco sauce over fruits and vegetables (with an advisory to wash before eating).