

Human Wildlife Conflict – Above the Noise (focus on text in black for presentation)

MYLES BESS: Hey everyone, Myles Bess here, journalist and host of "Above the Noise."

If you don't live in Oakland California, like I do, you have probably never seen wild turkeys in a major city. Yep, we've just got roving bands of turkeys, just wandering around. Now they're not a big problem or anything, they're just kind of here. Although, they can sometimes block traffic and every once in a while, they can get aggressive. If we're being completely honest, they're just *kind of* rude.

Now, over the last year, cities all over the world have seen an increase in wild animals.

We're talking wild boars in the parks of Rome and coyotes in the streets of San Francisco.

The pandemic has kept a lot of us stuck in the house and scientists *have dubbed* this, the anthropause, which refers to a global slowdown of human activity, that is given all sorts of animals, the green lights ahead into cities and surrounding suburbs.

Now, how we deal with urban wildlife is not some minor issue for conservationists who are on the ground and fighting to protect and preserve wild animals in their habitats. The solution isn't always getting animals out of the city and into some pristine untouched corner of nature far away from humans. It's also about making room in and around cities. Why?

Well, *turns out* 80% of the U.S. population live in urban areas and that includes cities and suburbs. And those areas are projected to keep expanding. Going forward, there's only going to be less wild land that humans don't control. So, today we're asking: can animals and humans learn to coexist in an urban world?

Humans officially dominate the planet, no contest. It's been that way for centuries. But for most of that time, it was low density, rural living. So farming, hunting, *all that stuff*. And when the industrial revolution started to pick up steam in the early 1800's, people slowly started to leave the country and head to cities. Fast forward to 2007 and the earth hit a major tipping point. For the first time, more people lived in urban areas than in rural areas. And that shift isn't slowing down.

By 2050 the United Nations estimates that two thirds of the world's population will live in or near cities. On top of that, the sheer amount of people on the planet just keeps growing. Right now, there are over seven and a half billion people. By 2050, that number is going to be 9.8 billion. That means more construction to house all those people, more land to grow food to feed all those people and more pushing into forest and fields and rivers.

Here, in Oakland, it's the same situation. Back in the 1800's, it was oak trees for as far as the eye could see. That's how it got the name Oak-land. And in the early 1900's, urbanization started to take off and those trees kept getting cut down. Today there are almost no oak trees in Oakland. *Oakland is almost Oak-less. That sounded way less corny in my head, I'm sorry you got to hear that.*

But urbanization can do more than just obliterate trees. It can disrupt and even destroy animal habitats, which usually spells disaster for wildlife. Here's a random depressing stat. In a 42-year span between 1970 and 2012, the size of vertebrate animal populations, that is animals with a backbone and that includes everything from elephants to sharks, to naked mole rats, declined on average by almost 60%. Now *that's bananas* for two reasons.

One, how are naked mole rats, a thing? I mean, look at them. Are you serious?

But more importantly, how can the number of vertebrates drop that much in such a short period of time? The key here is average. Not every population of vertebrates dropped 60%. Some populations stayed constant. Others might have even increased. But enough dropped a lot to bring the average of all vertebrates down to 60%.

All right, so let's get back to urbanization. Habitat loss isn't the only reason why these animal declines are happening. There's also pollution, climate change, poaching but they all have one common denominator, us. And, as we continue to urbanize, it will absolutely affect animals. So when animals start *wandering onto our turf*, what do we do? *Now it's hilarious when you see a video of a mountain lion chilling in the backyard or a bear taking a dip in a hot tub, but is this a good thing or a bad thing?* Should we be happy that these animals are learning to adapt to urban life? Or is it a sign that they're in trouble? *And can I ask four questions in a row? I just did.*

When we picture wild animals living in cities it's easy to think about the problems. We don't want the conflict and we don't want people walking around in fear of an animal attack.

Take a look at the area in and around Chicago. It is home to thousands of coyotes, *wild*, right? And every *once in a while*, you'll read about a coyote attacking a person or someone's pet. But the reality is that the Chicago PD *hits thousands of calls* every year from people who've seen a coyote in the city. Reports of any kind of attack or injury are super rare.

It's *way more* common for urban animals to be a nuisance or viewed as a pest. Coyotes might be predators but they're also generalist. They'll eat what's available, including your trash.

And that's just annoying for a lot of people.

A more serious concern is any parasites or viruses that animals could bring with them if they *set up shop* in cities. There is a real possibility that it could kickstart a pandemic. Remember one possible origin for COVID-19 is bats. So it can happen.

At this point you might be thinking, why can't we just remove all the coyotes? Problem solved. Well, I got news for you. Coyotes have more pups when their numbers start dropping. It's called *compensatory breeding*. And it's just another example of how animals can adapt to city living. And *if you pull back a little bit*, removing animals from cities might cause a bigger problem than it solves because it can disrupt the whole animal ecosystem.

Now that could look something like this. You get rid of the coyotes and then the feral cat population increases because there's none of its predators around. These feral cats eat more birds. So now, there are less birds around to eat insects. So now, I've got ants in my kitchen and bed bugs in my bed. *That's a simple and gross example, but you get the idea.* So whether you like it or not, animals are getting comfortable in cities. They're here and they're not going anywhere. So, instead of putting *a bunch of effort into getting* animals out, what if we tweak our cities so animals can more easily fit in.

Now there's this whole concept called urban rewilding. It's a growing trend of transforming urban areas from wildlife dead spots into something more attractive so nature and animals can move back in. I looked into which cities are really leaning into urban rewilding and I kept seeing Washington DC *pop-up*.

It's pretty impressive actually. It has more green space per capita than nearly any city

in the country. It's planting around 11,000 trees every year. And the city has passed some pretty strict pollution laws to improve the surrounding water quality. All of that is bringing back more birds, fish and reptiles. Some animal experts *in the know*, even refer to DC as an urban paradise for wild animals. It's *a win for* humans and a win for animals.

And actually, here in Oakland, the city has been doing some urban rewilding too. *Just around the corner* for me is Lake Merritt, and for most of my life, it was a stinky mess. Like, literally, I could smell the lake as soon as I walked out of my house. Like, you didn't even want to open your mouth because the smell was that strong.

But, over the last decade, the city has actually done the work and cleaned it up. Now I see people fishing in the lake and that never used to happen, *like ever*. The lake now contains over 600 different species. That's impressive if you asked me.

Now, obviously every city is different. How DC and Oakland choose to rewild won't be the answer to help conserve every animal that is being threatened in every other city.

But, as we humans keep expanding, we have to consider all our options.

So, what do you all think? Should we make cities more inviting to wildlife? Please share with us any examples of rewilding in your community. Thanks for watching, but before you go, our PBS friends across YouTube are celebrating earth day. So, follow me over to "It's Okay to be Smart," to find out about the weird connection between ocean currents, climate change and rubber duckies. It's wild. Go check it out and tell them "Above the Noise" sent you. One more thing, for those of you in the U.S. you should check out Greta Thunberg, "A Year to Change the World ", a new three-hour earth day broadcast event on your local PBS station.

The special's going to premiere on Thursday April 22nd at Eight Seven Central and then we'll repeat starting Wednesday, April 28th, at Eight Seven Central.

Until next time, I'm Myles Bess, *peace out*.