



Reducing Coyote Encounters through Community Awareness Programs

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Prior to the turn of the twentieth century, wolves were nuisance wildlife to farmers and residential owners. After eradication of wolves, coyote population increased due to lack of predation by wolves. Coyotes expanded their territory into Florida. Their adaptability and behavior allows them to adjust in the urban environment. During Manatee County's urban corridor development and habitat restoration of a county preserve, coyote activity in area residential landscapes increased substantially. Telephone calls tripled ($n = 146$) in a two year period. Residents expressed concern over the increased activity of coyotes, missing outdoor pets, and encounters with coyotes during their evening walk. The Manatee County Commission was called on many occasions to address the coyote concerns when the community requested to "hunt and kill the coyotes." The County Commission requested Manatee County Extension Service to provide educational programming on coyote awareness. As a result, the Coyote Community Awareness Program was developed.

The Coyote Community Awareness Program objectives are to increase the knowledge of the residents in areas of high volume phone calls, encourage residents to adopt preventative practices in their landscape and neighborhood to reduce coyote encounters, and to determine the percentage of workshop attendees who would make one or more adjustments in their lifestyle to reduce coyote encounters. Some of the adjustments suggested during the workshops were to delay trash drop off at the curbside until the morning of trash pickup, secure trash in "coyote-tight" receptacles or inside the garage or a shed, carry a high-pitched whistle when jogging or walking small dogs, reduce the length of retractable leashes to under six foot, and refrain from feeding pets outdoors or at a minimum remove outdoor pet dishes during night hours.

Materials and Methods

In Spring 2014, a community awareness program complemented with a presentation, several videos, and a toolkit containing a coyote fur, skull, footprint, and scat replica, was offered to residents. Pre- and post-tests were integrated into the presentation by using TurningPoint technology to measure knowledge gain. Behavior change was measured through Qualtrics surveys. One month after the workshop, a survey was emailed to determine if there was knowledge retention, and to determine the percentage of residents who had the "intent" to adopt a behavior change. At the three month post-workshop date, either a follow-up phone call was made or a Qualtrics survey was emailed, again measuring knowledge retention and the percentage of residents who made one or more adjustments to their lifestyle (e.g. walking the dog on a shorter leash, trash etiquette).

Results and Discussion

Attendance ($n = 456$) over one and one-half years was rewarding. Fifty-six percent ($n = 255$) of the workshop attendees increased their knowledge as an immediate result of the workshops. The first survey sent one month post-workshop indicated 21% ($n = 96$) of the respondents were willing to adjust their lifestyle and adopt some practices that would reduce encounters with coyotes. The second survey sent three months post workshop indicated 19% of respondents ($n = 87$) adopted at least one change in the daily routine to "live in harmony" with the coyotes. The short videos are used to begin workshops and have been view by more than 500 individuals. Two homeowner associations made the following adjustments: discussed safety tips against coyote activity during their annual and monthly association meetings; reminded homeowners to reduce the length of the retractable leashes in evening hours while walking small dogs; and requested homeowners to delay trash disposal by the curbside until morning (some owners built tighter trash receptacles to deter the coyotes from foraging). Many homeowners adjusted the feeding hours of outdoor pets and/or removed outdoor pet dishes in backyard settings during evening hours.

As a result of the workshops, hands-on props, and modifications offered during the workshops, some attendees reported their level of fear for coyote encounters was reduced. The volume of calls reporting coyote encounters dropped from six calls monthly to one or two calls monthly. The reduction in calls may have been a result of the attendees increase in knowledge of coyote behavior and characteristics; and their adoption of behavior modifications introduced in the workshops. The County Commission does not hesitate to refer concerned residents to the Extension Office for coyote education and follow up workshops.

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