

## WILDLIFE STRATEGY REVIEW

### PUBLIC EDUCATION

It is essential for a Wildlife Strategy based on coexistence to have a comprehensive Public Education and Community Outreach Program.

Based on comments during the two recent Public Information sessions on the Wildlife Strategy Review, the City acknowledged that it has not been successful in communicating to the public how they can get help/advice for urban wildlife issues.

A revised Wildlife Strategy is an opportunity to address where the City missed the mark with public education in 2013 by choosing to solely direct wildlife education to primary schools.

Why would the focus be on providing wildlife education to children in primary grades when it is the adult population that needs the critical understanding and tools to coexist with wildlife. It's not to say that reaching young children isn't important but it doesn't make sense to make it the priority when it's not really the responsibility of the City to provide education on wildlife to school children.

Also, why would the City choose Let's Talk Science, an organization whose focus is on science and engineering to develop and deliver an educational kit on urban wildlife, something it would have little first-hand knowledge about when there are established educational resources already doing this work in the community.

The only other deliverable in 2013 with respect to public education was a Wildlife Speakers Series, which was more of a forum for those already interested in wildlife rather than a means to reach the wider public. For example, the City invited wildlife interest groups to have an information table so many of those attending came because of their affiliation with these organizations. In a way, the Speakers Series was preaching to the converted.

**Youth** – The Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre has been developing and delivering presentations on urban wildlife in schools and Nature Discovery Workshops at its Centre for grades JK through to university for over 20 years. The presentations provide age-appropriate knowledge and appreciation for urban wildlife, including species such as coyotes and beavers, and the ways in which we can co-exist with these species.

The Centre's presentations are very popular for a number of reasons. They easily gain children's interest because they are based on the Centre's direct, hands-on personal experience in having rehabilitated thousands of orphaned and injured wild mammals, comprising over 24 different species.

Teachers value the experience the Centre brings because, although there are kits and educational materials available, teachers say they have neither the time nor the expertise to present the information as effectively as the Centre. Exciting children about urban wildlife provides the Centre with the opportunity to introduce concepts about ecosystems and biodiversity in a meaningful way to younger audiences.

**Audiences of All Ages** – The Centre has always provided a range of wildlife presentations to a wide variety of audiences through its community outreach program. They include community associations, social clubs, business and professional organizations, retirement homes, new Canadians, seniors, youth groups, nature and environment clubs. Not only is the Centre's expertise in having rehabilitated the majority of local

species of interest to people but the experience the Centre gained in operating a telephone hotline that assisted close to 100,000 Ottawa residents resolve a wildlife conflict, make its presentations particularly relevant. The detailed advice is available on the Centre's website, with a link to it on the City's website.

**A Strange Decision** – Let's Talk Science has no public profile with respect to wildlife and, in fact, there is not a single reference to 'wildlife' on the organization's website. So, why would City staff have elected to hire them when they could have partnered with the Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre at no cost to taxpayers?

**Recommendations:** Our recommendations for an effective Public Education Program to support the Wildlife Strategy include:

- Focus should be on the general public where wildlife education and conflict prevention tools are most needed and where information will have the most immediate and beneficial impact.
- Use 'Key Messages' that build an understanding and respect for urban wildlife together with practical tips for residents to prevent and/or resolve wildlife conflicts.
- Partner with established wildlife organizations to ensure the widest, most helpful, as well as the most cost-effective dissemination of information to the public.
- Commit to wildlife-sensitive planning as a key component of public education. Any changes to natural habitat will result in increased interactions with wildlife, so helpful **advance** information to residents in that neighbourhood will reduce potential conflicts.
- Consult species-specific expertise, i.e. coyotes, beavers, bears to use 'best practices' in developing education, staff training and response strategies.
- Councillors' newsletters are an excellent vehicle for providing regular interesting information about local wildlife along with targeted seasonal tips to prevent conflicts. An example is the timely article produced on bears by the Councillor in College Ward for residents and the Councillor in River Ward who often includes tips for avoiding wildlife conflicts in his newsletter.
- Expand City website to reinforce 'Key Messages' and provide links to in-depth information available from wildlife organizations.
- Encourage or require Contractors/Builders to provide wildlife information pamphlets to their homeowners in newly-developed areas. The Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre had success by promoting this as a public service/marketing opportunity for several large developers in the past.