Ethical issues behind the control of wild species

Background

1) There have been decades of debate surrounding the issue of controlling wild species. Such strategies can have several beneficial purposes including the protection of human, indigenous and domesticated animal populations, agriculture and the local environment from disease or from other threats (e.g. predation or competitor species).

2) There will be occasions when it may be necessary to control certain wildlife species for the benefit of that species or another; however, the general public often has strong opinions and emotions about such interventions and of the necessity to do so.

3) This paper considers the ethical questions that should be answered when an organisation is considering methods of controlling wild species.

Recommendations

4) The BVA recommends that there be an ethical review process to consider, in each case, if the proposed intervention should be approved and, if it is decided that it should, then to consider how to minimise the adverse welfare impacts of it.

5) Such a group should address the following issues:
   a. Is it ethically justifiable to kill or control the animals in this case for the proposed purpose (e.g. to protect human or animal health, biodiversity, or the local environment?
   b. Is there a scientific basis for controlling the wild animals?
   c. Would a cull be feasible and deliverable?
   d. What interim reviews should be carried out to determine if the original objectives and aims were being achieved?
   e. What is the exit strategy?
      i. When can it be judged the right moment for a cull to end?
      ii. What indicates that the critical mass been reached?
      iii. What criteria should be considered before ending a cull?
   f. What is the area of the cull?
   g. Is it national/regional/local issue?
   h. If a cost benefit analysis for a cull is undertaken how would the scores be attributed to and weighted for each variable?
   i. Which species or populations are likely to be affected and to what extent?
   j. What the ecological impact of any control might be;

6) The BVA believes that all capture or culling procedures have the potential to produce adverse welfare consequences. Therefore, decisions regarding culling procedures should be made carefully using well known ethical frameworks such as the principles of the three R’s (Reduction, Refinement, Replacement):
7) Reduction:
   a. Can the numbers of animals to be culled be reduced in any other way e.g. by targeting animals during breeding seasons?
   b. What is the minimum number of animals that can be culled in order to achieve the objectives?

8) Refinement:
   a. What methods of culling are to be used?
   b. Are they humane and efficient?
   c. Have the capture/culling/control procedures been refined in order to minimise adverse welfare or environmental impacts?
   d. How will the personnel involved be educated, trained and be assessed as competent?
   e. How will the control methods be regularly tested to ensure that their welfare impact is constant through out the process?
   f. Are there sufficient risk assessment and contingency plans in place?

9) Replacement:
   a. Are there alternatives to culling?
   b. Have cost/benefit assessments been conducted for both target and non-target species?
   c. What are the welfare costs at an individual scale as well as at population level?
   d. How far do the benefits (e.g. human health, biodiversity, the economy, scientific knowledge) outweigh the harm done to the target species?