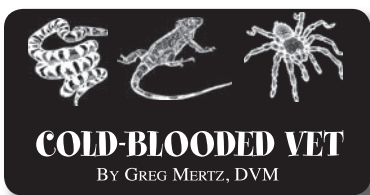


Ethics in Wildlife Care:

What's wrong with a one-eyed skunk?



By Greg Mertz, DVM, New England Wildlife Center

There is no richer ethical landscape than the care of, interaction with, use and management of animals. Everyone has a fist in the argument. The abortion issue has only slightly more fervor but pales by comparison when it comes to the variety of points of view. Wildlife is a subset of the animal world, but again, the variety of species and the variety of flavors here far outweigh the diversity of views seen in domestic animal issues.

Hunters, fisherman, people with flyswatters, preservationists, farmers, Jain monks, parents of young children, animal rights activists, and mail carriers go at animal issues from different points of view. And as you can imagine, people carrying flyswatters are sometimes parents of young children, and alas animal rights activists or hunters, too.

In veterinary medicine we are confronted daily with ethical decisions. In commercial domestic animal veterinary medicine the decisions of care and outcome are left to the owner of the animal. With wildlife the owners are disinterested parties except in the case of endangered or otherwise protected animals. The owners, it turns out, are the state government for non-migratory species and the federal government for migratory species. It is hard to get them to attend the bedside of a dying gray squirrel.

The day-to-day care of squirrels, Canada geese, gulls, raccoons, painted turtles and skunks pry up fascinating ethical puzzles. These animals come to us because they have been run down by the school bus, dragged in by the cat, or mowed down by an overzealous grass care Nazi. They arrive with injuries like broken backs, fractured wings, cracked shells, lacerations, and bite wounds.

So why are these so perplexing? It depends on the species (of which there are 225), where and how the animal came to the Center (by animal control, a family with three pre-teens, a rescue organization?), what the history is (Did it bite or come in contact with a pet or person?), and what is the cause of its illness (infection, parasite, trauma, fly swatter?)

Let's use a hit-by-car skunk as an example. It is admitted by a rescue organization who had it delivered to



their front door overnight in a box by an unknown Good Samaritan. It has sustained injuries to its face and back leg with ground down toe nails and what appears to be road burns to its butt.

Diagnostic exam shows that the right eye is damaged beyond repair. The right leg at the tibia is fractured. The skunk is conscious but is in mild shock.

What do you do now? Medically all these problems are repairable. But several questions rise above the immediate medical protocols. Will a one-eyed skunk survive in the wild? How much money will you spend on repairing a skunk? Where will you release this skunk when you are done?

Your legal choices are to kill it, give it medical attention or refuse to take it in. What will you do? Let's take these questions one by one.

Will a one-eyed skunk do okay in the wild? There are so many variables that it is hard to evaluate. Skunks have good noses to find their food. No one eats them except great-horned owls. So releasing a one-eyed skunk is probably reasonable. Some rehabilitators will have issues with that call and will choose to euthanize. Their arguments range from 'this animal will slowly starve in the wild' to 'by releasing it you are setting it up to get eaten by a great-horned owl.'

Is it okay to release an animal that is going to die a predicted slow death? How often do animals die a slow death in the wild? I'll bet you not often. They get eaten long before anguish sets in. And isn't that the way of the wild? By euthanizing an animal in our hospital are we not the immoral ones, taking a perfectly good meal out of the mouth of a starving fox? For every animal you kill in the hospital

you add one more death in the wild.

How about you? Where do you fall on this spectrum of kill it or care for it?

How much money will you spend on this skunk? There are loosely about a billion wild animals a year in Massachusetts that could benefit from veterinary or rehabilitation care. The Center treats 2,000 wild animals a year and all the wildlife rehabilitators and clinics combined in Massachusetts care for less than 10,000 a year. That is .0000001% of the total. It takes money, time, commitment, and a state permit.

So what will you spend? \$10? \$100? \$1000? This skunk with its injuries in a conventional commercial veterinary practice will push the \$1000 mark. No one at the state will pay a dime towards its care. It is against the law to charge anyone for any wild animal's care. The money comes out of your pocket.

So if you have agreed to care for this skunk and see it to the end where will you release it? Your yard? My yard? The governor's yard? There are regulations that limit where it can be released. If you do not know where it came from, you can only release it into someone's yard within a five-mile radius of where you cared for it.

We have scratched only the ethical surface. Why did this skunk get hit on the road to begin with? Does it have rabies? Does it have distemper? *Baylisascaris procyonis* or *B. mephitis*? Should we give it antibiotics without a culture? Should we use antibiotics that are also used in people? The questions and implications go on and on.

What would you do with a one-eyed skunk?



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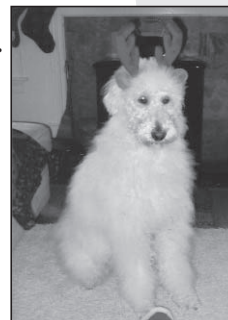
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