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Messy geese, messy solution

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Problem: Goose poop fouling our beaches.

Easiest solution: Shoot the fouling fowls.

The easiest solution to any problem is not always the best one.

When it comes to problems involving wildlife, there is an almost universal fear of even discussing the possibility that the controlled killing off of pests might be the only real solution. It's as if there are 4,000 Canada geese in the room and no one wants to talk about it.

We are not so wary of discussing, for example, killing vermin. We put huge effort into getting rid of the rats under the back yard shed. We don't feel badly about it and no one waves placards to save the rats. They're not a national symbol, they're not cute and cuddly, we know they carry disease. But are disease-carrying rats really much different from disease-carrying geese?

In some parts of the United States this summer, there have been mass killings of Canada geese. In the New York area, for example, there is concern that geese endanger airplane flights. That has been a particularly touchy subject since some flew into the engines of US Airways Flight 1549 in January 2009, forcing the plane to land on the Hudson River. Authorities in an Oregon community gassed more than 100 Canada geese that had become pests in local parks. The goose meat was donated to a shelter.

Americans are not alone in using this dramatic solution for the goose problem. In Nova Scotia, for example, the cull of geese is starting early this year because the goose population has grown rapidly since Ontario birds were introduced in an attempt to solve goose overpopulation in Ontario. The early hunt will be limited to farmers' fields to reduce nuisance and crop damage. In Canada, there are 104 days each year during which hunters can harvest Canada geese.

In Hamilton, goose poop increases the E. coli levels in our beach waters, making it unsafe to swim. A bird exclusion program implemented in 2005 at Pier 4 has meant its beach was open to swimmers more than 80 per cent of the swimming season last year. Those looking to swim at Bayfront Park weren't so lucky -- it was closed 73 days of the 111 days in last year's season.

Certainly, one wouldn't want to see the annual goose-hunting season opened up to include our waterfront parks. But if we don't want the geese to own our waterfront in 10 years, now is the time to talk about how we will manage the proliferating goose population.

It's not a strictly local discussion. This is a problem in many parts of the province and the country. And geese aren't the only issue. Overpopulation of any species -- deer, bears, coyotes, raccoons -- push animals at risk of starvation into areas of high density human population. As that kind of behaviour

increases among animals, humans need to figure out whether deterrence -- through exclusion or relocation -- is adequate. We may need to redraw the line when it comes to how we handle the wildlife we have displaced.

In the meantime, watch your step.

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