



November 20, 2019

Dear Chair Witt and Members of the House Natural Resources Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today before the House Interim Committee on Natural Resources. My name is Bob Sallinger and I am the Conservation Director for the Audubon Society of Portland. As part of my responsibilities at Portland Audubon, I have directed our wildlife hospital (Wildlife Care Center) for nearly three decades. Our hospital operates under permits issued by both Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. We are staffed by three trained wildlife rehabilitators, a half-time veterinarian and more than 100 active volunteers. During my tenure, we have treated more than 80,000 wild animals and responded to more than 250,000 wildlife related calls from the general public. I have also served on Many ODFW advisory committees that have addressed capture, care, transport and treatment and euthanasia of wild animals and provided training for Oregon State Police regarding capture, handling and transport of wild animals.

We consider our hospital to be part of a network of agencies and institutions that work together to help distressed wildlife and to provide the general public with resources and expertise to address wildlife related concerns. We are on the frontlines of identifying and characterizing threats to our wildlife populations from emerging diseases and anthropogenic hazards such as collisions, poisons and poaching. Ultimately our goal is to inspire wildlife stewardship—to inspire and engage the public in ways that they can support and enjoy healthy, thriving wildlife populations in their own communities.

We work frequently and collaboratively with both Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and Oregon State Policy. We do a lot of good work together and I do want to stop and acknowledge the positive aspects of our relationship with those agencies and the many dedicated staff that work at those agencies. That should not be lost in this discussion.

That being said, something went seriously wrong with the handling of the bobcats that were found at the Oak Hill School in Eugene and I believe that this situation is reflective of greater challenges within ODFW.

Our specific concerns include the following:

- The discovery of a wild animal, especially a young wild animal, in an inappropriate location is not evidence that the animal is displaying abnormal behavior or represents an ongoing threat to the public. Wild animals wander into inappropriate situations all the time, sometimes by happenstance and sometimes because there is an attractant. In most cases removal, assessment and release is the appropriate response.
- The method by which the bobcat was removed was not appropriate. Ideally, the bobcat would have been captured, placed into a covered carrier, and transported to a vehicle. Dragging an animal through a school and across the pavement on the end of a catchpole caused unnecessary stress for the animal.
- The bobcat should have been transferred to an appropriate facility for assessment. ODFW has veterinarians on staff. There is also an extensive network of licensed rehabilitation centers in Oregon that could have taken possession of this bobcat and provided a full assessment of its health and fitness for return to the wild or potentially into an appropriate permanent captive situation such as a zoo.
- If euthanasia was warranted, it should have been done using American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) prescribed methods. There is simply no excuse for using blunt force trauma in this type of situation and it runs contrary to the rules that ODFW has adopted to regulate the facilities it permits. There are many facilities available (veterinary clinics, rehabilitation centers, ODFW's own veterinary staff, etc.) that could have humanely euthanized the bobcat if in fact euthanasia was necessary.
- The second bobcat should have been transferred to a rehabilitation center for assessment. The most obvious explanation for the discovery of two young bobcats in close proximity to a school is that they were recently orphaned. A licensed rehabilitation center could have assessed whether the second bobcat had developed the skills necessary to survive on its own in the wild. Simply releasing the animal back to the wild without assessment under these circumstances increases the odds that the animal will starve to death or wander into another inappropriate situation.

Field rescue events involving wildlife are always dynamic, but we are troubled that poor decisions seem to have been made at each critical juncture of this situation, including once the bobcats were in secure captive situations and the urgency of the initial response had dissipated. We are further troubled that rather than conduct a meaningful critical review of how this event was handled, the agencies appear to have instead doubled-down on explanations that strain credibility. Agencies that the public rightfully expects to protect our wildlife failed at each step of this process to meet basic standards of animal care and stewardship and to avail themselves of readily available resources, some under their own jurisdiction, which could have resulted in a more humane and ecologically responsible outcome. It is all the more tragic that these events occurred at a middle school where there was an opportunity to engage youth in a manner that could have modelled stewardship and compassion.

At a broader level, we are concerned that this situation is reflective of an agency that is increasingly out of step with the general public: An agency that views itself as a traditional "fish and game agency" rather than an agency which truly embraces a broader more holistic conservation mission. This is reflected in a

recent survey, *America's Wildlife Values: The Social Context for Wildlife Management in the United States*¹ produced by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies et al. which found that ODFW staff is heavily dominated by “traditionalists”² while the public is increasingly dominated by “mutualists”³ to the extent that a nearly 30 percentage point gap now exists between the values held by the majority of agency staff and the values held by the public at large. As an organization that works on an ongoing basis with ODFW, we find that the agency has been resistant to embracing Oregon’s changing demographics, evolving wildlife values, and meeting the needs of new constituencies. We believe that these foundational challenges were reflected in the decisions made regarding these bobcats that seem so out of step with the wildlife values of many Oregonians and the failure to recognize a clear opportunity to not only give these bobcats the best chance for survival, but also to inspire and engage the public in their story.

We would make the following recommendations:

1. The legislature should continue to invest in ODFW programs, staffing and commission appointments that promote a holistic approach to wildlife management and conservation (including funding of the ODFW Conservation Strategy) and which prioritize outreach and engagement of new audiences including urban populations and underserved populations. It is critical that ODFW shift in terms of funding, priorities and internal culture to better reflect and support the values of Oregonians as a whole.
2. ODFW should increase investment in building expanding and supporting the existing network of wildlife rehabilitation centers across the state of Oregon which provide care for distressed wildlife and information resources for the public to resolve wildlife conflicts and promote wildlife stewardship.
3. ODFW should work with stakeholders to review its rules, regulations, policies and procedures regarding captive wildlife care and treatment and also human-wildlife conflict situations to ensure that they are consistent current best practices, prioritize non-lethal approaches and do not create unnecessary barriers to providing animal care and promoting ecologically responsible, humane outcomes.
4. ODFW should develop effective systems to provide the public with accessible information about available public and non-governmental wildlife support/ response services and to promote better coordination among wildlife response agencies.

¹ <https://content.warnercnr.colostate.edu/AWV/OR-WildlifeValuesReport.pdf>

² Traditionalists are defined as people who view wildlife as subordinate and for the benefit of humans, believe wildlife should be killed if they threaten property or lives and believe populations of wildlife should support fishing and hunting.

³ Mutualists are defined as people who embrace wildlife as part of a person’s extended social network. See animals as family and deserving of caring and rights, like humans, and believe humans and wildlife should live side by side without fear.

Again we appreciate that field rescue situations regarding wildlife can be challenging and dynamic, but we believe that there are important lessons that can be learned from this unfortunate situation. A significant opportunity was missed at Oak Hill School. This community could have been engaged in an inspirational narrative that emphasized respect and stewardship for wildlife. These kinds of events can be truly transformative—our facility hears regularly from people whose appreciation, awareness and sense of stewardship for wildlife was fundamentally changed through positive participation in events such as the one that occurred at Oak Hill School. It is important that ODFW carefully consider why far more positive alternatives that were readily available to the agency were not pursued.

We value our work with ODFW, OSP and other agencies and hope that these comments will be received in the constructive way in which they are intended.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Sallinger". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bob Sallinger
Conservation Director
Audubon Society of Portland