

# Localities Are Well-Positioned to Improve Wild Animal Welfare

**A** new policy brief published by New York University's Guarini Center on Environmental, Energy and Land Use focuses attention on a "missing issue" in the realm of local government policies—the welfare of wild animals, such as coyotes, hawks, and foxes. Many communities are already aware of the migration of such beasts into urban areas—either from first-hand experience or the numerous news stories and documentaries, such as PBS's *Wild Metropolis* and the BBC's *Cities: Nature's New Wild*, that report on the remarkable ability of natural critters to adapt to city life.

To date, however, few cities have considered the welfare of their wild animal inhabitants—a population that is likely to grow as more and more land is developed and the climate continues to change. According to the brief, which was co-published by NYU's Wild Animal Welfare Program, policymakers "have limited understanding of how their policies may impact wild animal welfare." The brief attempts to fill this knowledge gap and offers options for cities to incorporate wild animal well-being considerations into "their institutions, planning processes and policies on land use and the built environment."

In many cases, these policy options can be achieved through extant planning processes and initiatives. Furthermore, it is a particularly opportune time to incorporate wild animal welfare provisions into land use and built environment policies, many of which address climate change, because ample federal funds are available to support local climate initiatives.

The welfare of captive animals, including companion and farm animals, is of long-standing public concern, whereas the welfare of urban wild animals attracts relatively little attention.

To the extent that localities focus on wild animals, it is often in the negative context of managing human-wildlife conflicts—even though wild animals also provide urban dwellers with many benefits, particularly in the form of pest control.

The brief's co-author, Alisa White, explains that "because local policies and conditions in cities affect the lives and experiences of individual wild animals . . . it is important for policymakers to take their welfare into account. . . . We often think about biodiversity and animals at the species level, but this policy brief focuses on the welfare of individual wild animals."

The brief recognizes several threshold challenges. Chief among them is how to measure wild animal welfare. It suggests, as a starting point, that cities borrow from models used to assess animal welfare in other contexts, and consider indicators such as animals' nutrition, hydration, and physical environment.

The authors also acknowledge the need for further research, noting that "the field of wild animal welfare is in the early stages, and researchers need to make further progress before they can estimate the net effects of policies." Another challenge policymakers may face is the need to make tradeoffs, as some policies may end up benefitting certain wild animals over others.

The brief recommends that cities take a "modest" and "targeted" approach and start by pursuing policies that benefit both humans and wild animals. The text explains that certain factors create negative conditions for both humans and wild animals—traffic noise, air pollution, and extreme heat—citing house sparrows which if exposed to nitrous oxide emissions from motor vehicles may have chicks with lower body mass.

**Cities can start by pursuing policies that benefit both humans and local wildlife**



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The policy options outlined include overarching approaches such as addressing wild animal welfare in ongoing city planning or wildlife monitoring processes. For example, cities can consider bird habitat potential in parks planning. And cities that are currently assessing biodiversity can gather data that cover animal welfare indicators such as levels of light pollution.

In addition to planning initiatives, cities can adopt institutional changes that may include establishing a staff position dedicated to wild animal welfare. Ordinances that require wild animal welfare protections in zoning regulations such as Brunswick, Maine's "wildlife protection overlay districts," for example, can also have a lasting impact.

In addition to these overarching approaches, the brief identifies six land use and built environment policy categories that provide opportunities to account for wild animal welfare, along with specific examples. For instance, green infrastructure, lawn and open space, tree canopy, and other policies have the potential to provide wild animal habitat, shelter, and food. Examples range from preventing the removal of mature trees (DC) to banning gas-powered leaf blowers (Maplewood, NJ). Built environment policy options include installing green roofs that reduce heat but also provide shelter for wild animals (Toronto, Canada).

It is too early to tell whether local governments will embrace wild animal welfare policies, but they now have a menu of policy options to explore.