

Approaches to deal with the coypu (*Myocastor coypus*) in urban areas - an example of practice in southern Brandenburg, Germany

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Abstract

During the last 10 years the coypu population (*Myocastor coypus*) in the city of Cottbus caused increasing problems by gnawing on plants, destroying river banks, attacking pets and even pedestrians. The legal situation in the federal state of Brandenburg, the competence of different authorities as well as public opinion made it difficult to find a simple solution. To protect river banks in the city and the waterways of park Branitz, a UNESCO landscape park, the institutions involved and an external consultant bureau developed a specific package of measures. Prohibition of feeding coypu in the city area led to a rapid disintegration of the coypu colonies and stopped the stream bank destruction. Eradication of the park population was successful but a few individuals immigrated within one year, as not all the identified dispersal routes could be closed.

Keywords: agency cooperation, damage, eradication, feeding prohibition, population management

Introduction

After escapes and releases from fur farms in the early 1990s the increasing coypu population in Southern Brandenburg became a serious pest problem, especially in urban areas. In Cottbus, coypus live in the city park along the river Spree and in small canals and ponds in the UNESCO landscape park Branitz. Coypus were especially attracted to locations where they were fed by people. At such places complete destruction of ground vegetation, damage to trees, massive erosion of pond and stream banks and small islands occurred, as well as undermining and tilting of sculptures. As well as the coypus, several other rodent species were attracted to the feeding places, posing an increased risk of disease transmission to people. The coypus even attacked and bit pets and pedestrians.

Since the legal and administrative responsibilities of the city administration and the relevant authorities were unclear, it was difficult to find a solution. The Nature Conservation Act, Game Law and Plant Protection Act did not provide adequate control measures. The Animal Welfare Act provided a range of possibilities to control the coypu but the public would not tolerate an extensive reduction by lethal methods. The Veterinary Office as the authority in charge therefore contracted the wildlife consultants Erminea GmbH to map the destruction in the park Branitz and to work out practical measures for an effective population management.

Materials and methods

A first meeting and on-site inspection involving representatives from the veterinary office, regulatory office, gardens office, nature conservation department, water department, water and land communities, park Branitz administration, plant protection service and Erminea GmbH took place in March 2008. The coypu population in the park Branitz was assessed in October 2008 ahead of planned landscape rehabilitation measures. Individuals were counted, their main activity periods determined, feeding and resting places detected and damage documented. In the outer park areas all tributaries and water discharges were checked to identify potential dispersal routes for coypus. Based on the findings, an action plan was developed and adjusted to the needs and possibilities of the institutions involved. The proposed measures were carried out by authorities, park administration and the water and land communities between November 2008 and March 2009.

Results

A total of 26 coypus - 4 males, 4 females, 18 pups - were found in the park Branitz. The colony consisted of four family groups using contiguous territories in the main canal and its ponds. Their main activity periods were in the late morning and in the evening, before sunset. The coypus fed on riverine

vegetation, reed beds, plantations and grassland. Feeding by people occurred in three places. For resting the animals preferred broad bush vegetation on the islands and steep banks. Where coypus occurred frequently damage was observed, such as destroyed vegetation cover, peeled bushes or trees, erosion of banks and islands and undermining of sculptures. Along the park borders nine potential gaps for invading coypus were detected - all of these involved passages under roadways. Five of them were already closed by fences in the waterway and on the embankment.

Based on these observations the action plan recommended a rapid eradication of family groups of coypu, and the closing of all channels and creeks leading in and out of the park to prevent new invasions. According to the action plan, the veterinary office authorised trappers of the land and water communities to eradicate the population in the park Branitz. Trapping was finished successfully within two weeks. The fencing of channels should be done as a cooperation of the park Branitz, the neighbouring zoological garden, the gardens office and the water department. Two individuals immigrated into the park during spring 2009 as the fencing of channels had not all been completed.

For the city area prohibition of feeding of coypus was recommended by Erminea and implemented by the regulatory office, and coypu abundance on former feeding places declined quickly. Animals abandoned these places individually or in small family groups. Consequently no further damage was reported.

Discussion

Relations between humans and wildlife are regulated by many different and sometimes even contrary laws. Animal welfare, wildlife conservation, hunting or pest control are controlled by different authorities. In case of a pest problem it is difficult to find the leading authority to take action. Another major problem is the costs of necessary actions. Both of these issues played a major role in Cottbus and the park Branitz. As coypus are furry mammals, public opinion was an additional factor that had to be taken into account. As there was a potential risk of injuries and infection of people the veterinary office took the lead in Cottbus. Once the project was started effective measures were not too difficult to identify and execute. Within the city boundaries along the river Spree coypus occurred as individuals or small family groups. As long as no new feeding places are established, the coypu problem in the city area will remain under control.

In the park Branitz the problem was slightly different and lethal methods were employed. Coypus cannot be tolerated in the park at all as the artificial waterways and ponds have to keep their original design due to its status as an international heritage. Recolonisation from outside the park must be prevented and this is the responsibility of different authorities. Barriers to prevent reinvasion have not yet been fully installed and coypus are present in the park again. The responsibility for dealing with invasive and neo-zoic species should be in the hands of a single agency no matter where and what kind of control is needed.