

The Negative Effects of Feeding Wildlife

Many people enjoy feeding wildlife because it allows them to have closer contact with these animals. Often they think they are helping the animals to survive, especially in an urban environment. They could not be more incorrect. Wild animals that are in your neighborhood have survived because of available food, water, and shelter. Most urban wildlife feed on a variety of vegetation, insects and small animals (such as mice) which are plentiful in most neighborhoods.

When wild animals begin to depend on humans for food, their foraging skills diminish. When young wild animals learn to depend on humans for food, they become less experienced in foraging and consequently less likely to survive. Furthermore, wild animals that are accustomed to food provided by humans commonly lose their fear of people. Animals that are unafraid of people will approach them for food and are sometimes mistaken for as rabid, or otherwise ill and subsequently killed for the perceived threat. They also become easy targets for people who mean them harm. An instinctive wariness of people is important for a wild animal's survival.

The food fed to wild animals by humans is often nutritionally inadequate and can cause serious health problems for animals, especially if they are young and still developing. Just like humans, wildlife needs a variety of foods in their diet, and if they fill up on "junk food", they will not get the nutrients needed to stay healthy. Most humans will feed animals "people food" which bears no resemblance to what the animals eat in the wild.

Animals are opportunistic and will be attracted to the most convenient food source available. When food is readily available, they will gather in large numbers. This means that if one animal in the group is ill or has a disease, it can spread throughout the group. Many wild animals do not normally interact with each other except during mating season and when raising their young. This behavior helps to limit diseases among a wild population. By attracting these animals into unnatural groups, disease can spread much more quickly and can decimate a large population of animals.

Reproduction rates are affected when an artificial food source is readily available. In the wild, the number of animals being born and surviving is directly related to the availability of food. This is nature's way of keeping a balance and assures that not too many animals are in one area. When an unnatural food supply becomes available, wild animals may produce more young and soon their numbers become greater than what natural food sources can support. This may lead wild animals to become persistent pests in adjacent areas in their effort to find food.

Feeding migratory animals such as ducks, geese, some passerines and hummingbirds can interfere with the animal's awareness of the seasonal changes in natural food

supplies, which informs the birds to its time to migrate. This has been a large problem with Canada geese in many parts of the country, especially California. Human food sources have been so plentiful that some Canada geese do not migrate, but continue to reproduce to the point that they have to be removed or killed because they have become such a nuisance.

Often we receive at Alameda County Vector Control Services District calls from people whose neighbors are feeding wild animals, birds or feral cats. The animals have become an incredible nuisance and have begun to impact neighbors by leaving feces, fleas, tearing up gardens, damaging property or setting up home in crawl spaces and attics.

There are many ways to enjoy wildlife without harming them. Visits to local parks, camping trips, or even planting native plants, which are a natural food source, will provide this opportunity. Another positive way to feed and have contact with wild animals is to volunteer at wildlife rehabilitation centers such as Ohlone Humane Society (ohswildlife@yahoo.com), Sulphur Creek Nature Center (nature@haywardrec.org), Berkeley Shorebird Nature Center (trees@cityofberkeley.info), or the Oakland Zoo (<http://www.oaklandzoo.org/images/pdf/volunteer-application.pdf>).

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