

Feral Rabbit Management Plan

June 2010



Introduction

Feral rabbits have been a part of the University of Victoria campus for many years. These rabbits are abandoned pets, originally purchased at local pet stores, or descendants of non-sterilized rabbits abandoned on campus by members of the wider community. The feral rabbits are now considered to be part of the UVic experience. However, the feral rabbit population has grown to the extent that it constitutes a health and safety hazard, and is responsible for significant damage to campus vegetation; and rabbits are dispersing in greater numbers into surrounding communities. UVic's neighbours have been very clear that they do not want the rabbits on their property. Rabbit damage and digging activity creates safety hazards everywhere and is of most concern in our athletic and recreational playing fields.

UVic is moving forward, as identified in this management plan, to reduce and control the feral rabbit population on the Gordon Head Campus.

UVic has had an awareness campaign in place since September 2008 to educate the public about the feral rabbits on campus. Resulting from a public competitive process, UVic engaged a contractor and completed a two-month pilot project to test community capacity to re-home rabbits into sanctuaries. Valuable lessons learned from these activities, together with research on other communities with similar wildlife issues, and suggestions from the community, have informed the development of our long-term management strategy.

The University will implement this long-term strategy for the management of the feral rabbit population to keep their numbers to sustainable levels in specific areas, using what we have learned and what we will continue to learn as we proceed.

Appendix "B" includes photographs of damage caused by the overpopulation of rabbits.

Issues

- It took many years for the rabbit situation to reach this point, and it will take some time to manage the population down to sustainable levels.
- Despite our awareness campaign, numerous members of the campus and the community continue to treat the rabbits as pets, and continue to feed and touch the feral rabbits on campus. There are instances of rabbits being chased or harassed.
- Members of the community also continue to abandon their pet rabbits on campus. As wildlife, feral rabbits are protected by federal and provincial legislation from acts of harassment and cruelty.
- The BCSPCA has been encouraging area municipalities to adopt by-laws prohibiting the sale of non-sterilized rabbits and the abandonment of rabbits. To date, new by-laws have not been passed but the University has and will continue to support these efforts.

- The University cannot justify diverting substantial funding from its educational mission, but is prepared to dedicate some resources to this project and to long term management.
- From the rabbit count surveys completed over the last two years, it is estimated that there are approximately 1,400 – 1,600 feral rabbits currently on campus. Rabbit population counts are challenging to conduct and the numbers vary from season to season.
- Although trapping and sterilizing rabbits was relatively easy, re-homing or adopting feral sterilized rabbits into the community or into sanctuaries following The Ministry of Environment's guidelines was not very successful due to the unwillingness of potential sanctuaries to obtain Ministry permits and undertake inspections.
- Feral rabbits are a region-wide issue. Not only UVic but also many other properties around the Capital Region have been affected, and it will take a region-wide effort to resolve it. Governments, municipalities, organizations and individuals need to get involved.

Lessons Learned from 2008 to 2010

The following are a few of the lessons we have learned:

From the Trap, Neuter, Relocate – Pilot (Dec 2009 to Feb 2010):

- In the winter months, when food was scarce, rabbits were easy to capture using humane live traps. Fifty-one rabbits were captured in eight hours, using five traps.
- Volunteer support was available to capture rabbits in a neuter / relocation / release program.
- Some rabbits captured had already been spayed and neutered, indicating they were previously pets and were dropped off onto campus.
- Some of the veterinary community was prepared to offer their services at reduced rates for a neuter / relocation / release program.
- There are provincial policies that must be adhered to regarding holding, transporting, and relocating feral rabbits. Individuals and organizations must be prepared to adhere to the regulations, go through the necessary permitting process, and be willing to have their proposed sites approved.

From the Trap, Neuter, Release – Pilot (March 2010):

- A trap / neuter / release program can be an integral component of a long-term rabbit management plan, once the population is brought to sustainable numbers.
- Rabbits were captured in and around the playing fields as part of the pilot project. As rabbits in this area cause significant damage and risk the safety of the athletes, the rabbits were released in a different part of campus. Based on tracking of the released rabbits, it appears they do not migrate back to the areas where they were captured.

From the Trap, Euthanize – Pilot (May 2010):

- Rabbits are not as easy to trap when food is plentiful, as in the spring, summer and fall. Therefore, creating areas on campus that are completely free of rabbits is not likely possible when trapping in spring / summer / fall seasons.
- The majority of rabbits can easily be enticed into traps. The remaining rabbits are more difficult to capture.
- Veterinary and trapping costs can be significant.
- It is unlawful for individuals to interfere with the trapping process. The Ministry of Environment can impose fines pursuant to The Wildlife Act.

From the Public Awareness Campaign (2008 – 2010):

- Posters, campus signage, community media releases and on campus communication does not appear to have had a significant influence on the University community nor the wider community to stop feeding and nurturing, or abandoning rabbits on campus.

Rabbit Management Approach

The UVic Gordon Head Campus has been partitioned into designated rabbit free zones (RFZ) and rabbit control zones (RCZ). See Map - Appendix "A".

Four rabbit control zones are designated inside the Ring Road. All areas outside the Ring Road are designated as "rabbit free".

Reducing the population, and then controlling rabbits to sustainable populations and restricting their territory to inside Ring Road should protect UVic's neighbours from unwanted rabbit intrusions.

The University has conducted feral rabbit counts in various locations on campus at different times, and understands that the population varies from month to month. It is clear that the average number of rabbits inside the Ring Road is more than the University is currently able to accept. The damage caused and the hazards created are unacceptable. The rabbits outside the Ring Road in areas designated as "rabbit free" (estimated to be 800±) will be eliminated, and numbers inside the Ring Road must be significantly reduced. This position is also supported by the neighbourhood associations surrounding the University property.

The University has consulted with the BC Ministry of the Environment and the BCSPCA in the development of this management plan. The University is committed to following humane procedures to achieve its objectives.

Rabbits will not be allowed to be relocated from UVic without a plan in place to address their sterilization.

Rabbit Control Zones

Rabbit Control Zones 1, 2, 3 & 4 (See Appendix "A") will be managed over time to bring the population down to no more than 50 rabbits per zone for a targeted total population of 200 rabbits (this number to be monitored and re-evaluated over time). To manage these Rabbit Control Zones, the University will seek some form of community volunteer support to establish a program of trap / neuter / release or a male vasectomy program to reduce the population of those managed areas recognizing this may need to occur over a four to five year period.

The University will look to the public to support this initiative through financial and volunteer contributions.

The University will consider, with community support, the establishment of a feeding program to reduce the damage to vegetation, and to encourage the rabbits to remain in these zones.

Rabbit Free Zones

Rabbits in the RFZ will be trapped and euthanized using humane methods.

There are already too many rabbits in the Rabbit Control Zones, therefore rabbits will not be relocated to these areas.

UVic will examine options for controlling the population which may include hiring contractors.

Should groups or individuals come forward in advance and indicate a willingness to accept rabbits, the University will accommodate those requests subject to the necessary permits being obtained, and the costs associated with capture, neutering, and relocation being provided by the community or the receiving facility.

The University will commence trapping and euthanizing rabbits in the designated RFZ beginning in the summer months. It is expected that the remaining rabbits not captured in the summer will be trapped in the winter months when it is easier to capture them due to their hungry state, and when there are fewer young rabbits.

Should there be rabbits that can not be captured after the winter capture program the University may need to consider other humane methods to eliminate the remaining rabbits, using lessons learned to date.

Implementation

The University will first focus on the 'Rabbit Free Zones' on campus.

Areas outside the Ring Road will be targeted with a phased cull of rabbits commencing in 2010. To ensure the personal safety of the individuals conducting the cull, the timing and location of this activity will not be shared with the public.

Sanctuaries willing to obtain the necessary permits and address the cost of the trap / neuter / relocate program are encouraged to contact the University at www.uvic.ca/rabbits. The Ministry of Environment permitting procedures and other information is accessible via this website.

It is hoped that a Trap / Neuter / Release (TNR) or Vasectomy Program can be incorporated into the management of the Rabbit Control Zones. It will commence in 2011, and continue for the ensuing two to three years. The University will entertain proposals from the public and on-campus volunteers for assistance with this component of the program and for the establishment and operation of feeding stations. Should volunteers not come forward, the University will reassess its approach to managing these areas.

The University will establish an information campaign to inform students, staff and the community about the management of the feral rabbit population.

The University will provide regular updates on its website, for the benefit of the neighbouring community associations and others who may want to get involved.

Contact Information

For information on the Feral Rabbit Management Plan, please visit www.uvic.ca/rabbits.

Comments may be directed to:

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Appendix "B"

Examples of Rabbit Damage on University of Victoria Campus



Rabbit damage on the west side of UVic Centre



Rabbit damage to trees at Cluster Housing



Rabbit damaging a tree at Cluster Housing



Damage on Wallace rugby field



Rabbit damage to a Tulip tree in front of the Mearns Centre Library



An example of UVic's rabbit population

