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## Coyote at River Trail Nature Center Rehoming Rebuttal

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Hannah Nelson &lt;hmnelson@gmail.com&gt;

Mon, Jan 10, 2022 at 1:55 PM

To: "Liz Polmanski (Board of Commissioners)" &lt;liz.polmanski@cookcountyil.gov&gt;, Scott.Britton@cookcountyil.gov

Dear Commissioner Britton,

I hope this email finds you healthy and well. While this email's length is intimidating, I implore you to read it in its entirety. To give credence to my following rebuttal, my background is in Environmental Studies and Anthropology from Loyola University Chicago with an emphasis in Animal Behavior. I have also been volunteering for the River Trail Nature Center since 2008 with 100+ volunteer hours logged (you may find me with my maiden name on a nice little leaf on their wall). Please also note that I write this in advocating for the well-being of the resident coyote, not in blind cooperation with any persons I may have formed relationships with over the years at the Nature Center.

**Background:**

It has come to my attention that a Northbrook resident, Nicole Milan, is advocating for the rehoming of the resident coyote at the River Trail Nature Center in Northbrook, Illinois. According to the [Daily Herald article](#) Joe Lewnard on the matter, Milan notes that the coyote "never gets out of that cage, and it's small, he does the figure-eight pacing in there...There's no place for him to run and get exercise; that's not a natural environment for him at all."

Additionally, on Milan's [Change.org petition](#), she states that the cage is "TINY" and she lists her four arguments as to why the coyote should be released to "The Wild Animal Sanctuary" in Keensburg, Colorado:

1. "There is NO recognizable benefits to him being held captive here!"
2. "Taxpayers are funding this inhumane cruelty. I wouldn't leave my own dog in there one night, let alone 4 years!"
3. This is cruel to keep a wild animal in solitude in an unnatural, tiny cage, where his old refuge from the weather is a plastic dog cage!"
4. "This is not proper training for our children to treat and house wildlife for selfish means! I've witnessed children screaming in front of his cage, where there's nowhere for him to escape their vocal torture and the parents do nothing to stop it! There's nowhere for him to run and he's never been out of his cage!"

Milan also claims that the coyote is not being rehabilitated, she restates the conditions are inhumane, and there are youtube links to the coyote pacing in his cage. She also states that "rehabilitation experts" say that "his pacing is a stress behavior from confinement."

She does recognize the statement from Carl Vogel, director of communications for the Cook County Forest Preserve, that the enclosure is USDA approved, but she adds that "my lawyer and several rehabilitation experts attest, this still violates the Illinois Humane Care Act."

**Rebuttal:**

While Milan's heart is undoubtedly in the right place, there are quite a few worrisome statements that she has made, and if her wishes are granted, the repercussions to the coyote could be dire. Here, I will address her statements. In the interest of time, I will make a shortened form of my overall argument. The numbered argument immediately below corresponds to the same number in the "Arguments Expanded" section further down this email. The "Arguments Expanded" section of my email includes references to scientific studies that objectively support the arguments I make. However, for Points 4 & 6, I do expand upon my personal experience as a volunteer.

**1) Sanctuary Information:** Milan claims in her Change.org petition that the facility she is advocating the coyote be rehomed to is 10,000 acres. In reality, the Keensburg facility is 789 acres and is further broken up into specific enclosures. There are 11 coyotes in two pre-established packs at this location, and this lone male coyote has a high chance of being violently rejected from either pack due to the predatory & defensive nature of coyotes. This solitary coyote also has no chance of forming bonds with coyotes in this habitat space because he has already imprinted on humans. Additionally, disruption of both this solo male's habits, as well as the habits of either pack at the Sanctuary, will lead to stress for all coyotes involved.

**2) Pacing around humans:** Milan seems to interpret the pacing of the solo coyote as an indication of stress, as one might see in domesticated dogs. While coyotes and dogs do share the same genus (*Canis*), their differing species plays an important role in their everyday activities and needs, including but not limited to diet, enrichment, actions with humans present, and actions illustrating stress. While humans have imprinted on this coyote, it is still a wild animal. Naturalists are, themselves, alert to possible dangers while around the male and train their volunteers to do the same.

**3) "No recognizable benefit":** Though the argument has been (and will be on Tuesday) made ad nauseum, I will restate that the solo male coyote has imprinted on humans and cannot be released into the wild. Additionally, its ability to socialize with other coyotes is nonexistent. (No "Arguments Expanded" follow up needed).

**4) "Inhumane Cruelty":** This broad-stroke argument is made out of ignorance of the everyday workings of the River Trail Nature Center. From my personal experience, the resident animals' diets are prepped according to their eating habits, their personal dietary preferences, and their nutritional requirements (species, age, season, etc). Milan continues to draw parallels to her personal domesticated dog (*Canis lupus familiaris*) and her treatment of that animal, so I would think she would take great interest in the staff & volunteers' top commitment to the comfort, enrichment, health, and happiness of the resident animals. **I will unwaveringly state, however, that the relocation of this coyote would be inhumane in and of itself.**

**5) "Several rehabilitation experts":** Claim seems to be made flippantly, as no "expert" has come forward to support claims in any Daily Herald articles nor are there quotes in petition summary. (No "Arguments Expanded" follow up needed).

**6) Child education & behavior:** Milan's statement regarding the behavior of the visiting children is not untrue. I have certainly seen children conduct themselves with their "outdoor voices" around the resident animals. While jarring to some, this is nothing new to any of these animals, and this is something they would also experience at The Wild Animal Sanctuary, as it is also an educational facility for the public. From my experience educating the public in my volunteer capacity, I would engage the kids with fun facts about the coyote, his background, etc. The children are excited, not cruel, and their brains are literally incapable of controlling the volume of their voices, as that comes with practice. **I would argue that Milan's statement of "vocal torture" is hyperbole and undoubtedly subjective.**

Additionally, every person and piece of signage that engages with the public states that this enclosure is not the coyote's natural habitat, and all animals at the Nature Center are there due to circumstances outside of our control. Instead, they have a comfy, enriching home and serve as educational guides to the public on the species as a whole, what role the species plays in the ecosystem, educational awareness for native flora and fauna, and they serve as a visualization of what not to approach in the wild. At no point does the Nature Center advocate for the confinement of wildlife or even up-close interaction with wildlife. At the same time, staff & volunteers will not reprimand children for screaming; they will redirect instead. Plus, like Milan said, the Nature Center is funded by taxpayers - they may only remain open so long as the public (whom in my experience has only communicated overwhelming love for the facility) views them positively. (No "Arguments Expanded" follow up needed).

#### **Arguments Expanded:**

1) **Sanctuary Information:** The Wild Animal Sanctuary gained their notoriety from the Netflix series "Tiger King" as being the chosen rescue to seize [Joe Exotic's big game from their established roadside zoo](#). There is no argument that Joe Exotic's zoo was inhumane, and he is in prison for 22 years for his related crimes. In the first paragraph of her Change.org petition, Milan states "I made this petition to ensure that the solo coyote is released from the River Trail Nature Center's TINY, unnatural, inhumane cage to the Wild Animal Sanctuary in Colorado on over 10,000 acres, run by rehabilitation and veterinary experts." I argue that Milan's broad-brush statements are made from reading headlines advertising

Based on Milan's statements on Change.org, it is unclear to me if Milan thinks that the coyotes are able to roam 10,000 acres unhindered. From [The Wild Animal Sanctuary Facility page](#), there are actually **two facilities in Colorado: the Keensburg facility which is 789 acres, and the Springfield Site (9,684 acres)** dubbed "The Wild Animal Refuge," which **currently has 35 acres dedicated to two Tigers and one African Lion**. The remaining acres are still under construction, and there is a link on their page for anyone wishing to sponsor the additional construction of the land. There is an additional 41 acres in Boyd, Texas housing bears, wolves, ocelots, african servals, and bobcats. This facility is not open to the general public, but "Active Supporters can visit on special days." The write up on the properties is [HERE](#).

From this information, I feel comfortable in surmising that the coyote would be rehomed to the Keensburg 789 acre facility. Already, we notice that the acreage proposed in the petition and the actual acreage does not match. I have attached the map featured on The Wildlife Sanctuaries page of how the animal facilities are broken up (KeensburgFacility.jpg) - you may also find the map [HERE](#). The coyotes are housed at numbers 10 and 11. I am unsure of the exact size of these enclosures, as it is not stated on their website.

There are approximately 11 coyotes currently at the facility. Four were rescued together at a small zoo in central Mexico and were forfeited because they were inhumanely housed in cramped wire cages. Five other coyotes were rescued from another small zoo in Mexico. From that original five, two more were born. I have attached the website's write up of the coyote family (coyote-writeup.JPG), but you can also find the write up for all of the animal rescues [HERE](#).

- **IMPORTANCE:** The coyotes housed at this sanctuary are already two distinct packs having grown together over time and through their shared trauma. A single male will be considered a threat, will be excluded from either pack, and possibly killed due to the predatory nature of these carnivores. Not only would this lone coyote be excluded,

but his presence in either of the enclosures would disrupt the habits of pre-existing coyote population at the Sanctuary. From the 2008 article "[The effect of randomly altering the time and location of feeding on the behaviour of captive coyotes \(\*Canis latrans\*\)](#)" authors Lynne B. Gilbert-Norton, Lisa A. Leaver, and John A. Shivik state in their opening statement that "captive carnivores appear highly susceptible to the negative effects of predictable feeding routines." **It goes without saying that the introduction of a lone male would disrupt all coyotes involved leading to significant stress, especially to our individual male who has known nothing else for his entire four years of life.**

- In the 1980 article "[The Social Ecology of Coyotes](#)" by Marc Berkoff and Michael C. Wells, the authors note another study done by Donald Bowen of the University of British Columbia where the author reported "coyotes living in packs not only eat, sleep and travel in close association with one another but also tend to exhibit dominance relations" (1980, Bowen, [https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1055&context=acwp\\_ena](https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1055&context=acwp_ena)). Additionally noted by Bowen, "In general pack members are more sociable with one another than they are with outsiders, such as single coyotes living in the same area or passing through" (1980, Bowen). While these studies were done observing coyotes in the wild within national parks, it is my argument that these innate behaviors are still in place within the Sanctuary's resident coyote packs, and undue stress to be placed on the "outsider" due to the space being a designated area, not a national park.
- **\*\*Colorado is a completely different biome than the Chicago area. Even just the humidity and temperature change to the coyote will cause immense stress.\*\***

2. **Pacing:** In her arguments, Milan tends to draw parallels between her personal domesticated dog and the solo coyote in question. As I mentioned above, their shared genus evolutionarily links them, however generations of divergence into distinctly different species has profound impacts on the internal workings of either animal. For example: *Canis latrans* is carnivorous whereas *Canis lupus familiaris* is omnivorous - diet directly impacts social behavior due to learned flexibility when out in the wild. Additionally, *C. lupus familiaris* and humans have evolved together cooperatively. While we have learned how to interpret their non-verbal communications, they have learned to communicate their needs with us. Also *C. lupus familiaris*' ability to be trained is distinctly different, showing the complete domestication of the species. One could argue that the pacing of *C. latrans* is then more powerful of an stress indicator because it is not being performed in a conscious action to communicate stress. In the article "Behavioral and spatial responses of captive coyotes to human activity" (Shultz, Jeffrey T. & Young, Julie K., 2018, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0168159118302600>), the actions displayed by coyotes as well as the space they utilized in the presence of humans differed to when they were not in the presence of humans. "Coyotes utilized open areas and enrichment structures less during human activity...Coyotes were less inactive and more vigilant during human activity" (Shultz & Young, 2018).

4. **"Inhumane cruelty:"** As a bleeding-heart animal lover, Milan and all parties involved should take solace that I have no agenda other than to act in this coyote's best interest. I can unequivocally state that everyone (staff & volunteers alike) who is associated with the River Trail Nature Center cares deeply for the resident animals, even giving the animals their own "pet names." There is a checklist that is done for every animal, every day. Each animal also gets a different diet on different days of the week. None of the care given to the animals is done without the utmost care. I can also say that I think we would all love to see larger facilities given to all of the resident animals, but I think a good start would be additional funding for more enrichment activities. For the immediate argument, however, it would be inhumane and cruel to abruptly change this coyote's surroundings to one in which there is no guarantee for success or happiness. I know for certain that all of the animals do not want for anything, and the disruption of this comfortable existence could prove fatal.

Lastly, Milan and her cohort have unduly inundated Yelp with negative reviews calling the River Trail Nature Center cruel and inhumane. They went from 5 stars to 4 stars due to the barrage of her misinformed group reporting solely on hearsay, which is unfair without a proper hearing. Like I mentioned previously, the Nature Center may only remain open from the public's positive view and tax dollars - this is unjust persecution.

Thank you for taking the time to read my statement. I look forward to tomorrow morning's review of the topic.

Sincerely,  
Hannah Nelson

Hannah Nelson (*née* Helminiak), LEED AP ID+C, RA  
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**Please consider the environment before printing this email.**

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2 attachments

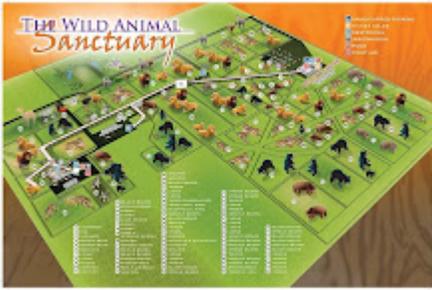
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**COYOTES**

**Chow, Jack, Pugs, and Shih-Tzus: PLANT DISTRIBUTION**—These species have been a component and critical element of the diet of many wild animals that have been taken to the sanctuary. The diet of these animals is made up of a variety of plants, including alfalfa, timothy, and other types of hay. The diet is also made up of a variety of fruits and vegetables, including apples, carrots, and other types of produce. The diet is also made up of a variety of grains, including corn, sorghum, and other types of grains. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including fish, chicken, and other types of meat. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including eggs, milk, and other types of dairy products. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including vitamins, minerals, and other types of supplements. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including water, and other types of fluids. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including bedding, and other types of materials. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including toys, and other types of enrichment. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including social interaction, and other types of care. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including love, and other types of affection. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including respect, and other types of dignity. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including freedom, and other types of choice. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including safety, and other types of security. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including health, and other types of well-being. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including happiness, and other types of joy. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including peace, and other types of harmony. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including love, and other types of compassion. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including respect, and other types of dignity. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including freedom, and other types of choice. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including safety, and other types of security. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including health, and other types of well-being. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including happiness, and other types of joy. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including peace, and other types of harmony. The diet is also made up of a variety of other types of food, including love, and other types of compassion.

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