

Timothy Casey (Secretary to the Board)

From: Victoria Sunkel <vsunkel01@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, February 04, 2022 5:34 PM
To: CookCounty Board (Secretary to the Board)
Subject: Written statement for Cook County board meeting 2/8/22 in support of River Trails Nature Center

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Hi all,

I am here to speak today as not only a professional in the veterinary field, but as a professional in the wildlife field as well as a voter in the 14th district. I began my career in wildlife care and medicine at River Trails as a volunteer in high school. Since then, I have gone on to work at one of the nation's top wildlife hospitals, become a Certified Wildlife Rehabilitator, and helped run a wildlife program at a well-known and well-respected animal hospital. I have worked with River Trails in a professional capacity and with the coyote specifically in recent years, so I am very familiar with the coyote and his care protocol. I'd like to shed some light today on what wildlife medicine and care of captive animals is actually like in relation to this situation. I'd also like to address the misinformation being spread about this specific animal.

Let me begin by clarifying this coyote is permitted to River Trails as an educational ambassador animal. As such, there is no legal issue surrounding his current care and living situation. This is to say, legally, there is no case to move this animal.

While we have established he is legally permitted, let's also address his physical and emotional well-being. The River Trails coyote is a good candidate for captivity because he was imprinted—specifically, he was raised by humans and sees himself as one of us. Unlike a household pet, he does not have a name because he is ultimately a wild animal. Giving these animals names would misconstrue this idea.

This seems to have caused confusion among some of the general public because they have stumbled upon the idea of a captive habituated animal and it is not a label they understand or are used to. However, this is how it works with captive habituated animals in the wildlife sector. There have to be boundaries to remind and educate people about the fact that this animal is still wild, yet could not survive without the help of his human caretakers. This animal serves to educate the public on the repercussions of raising a wild animal, while also getting a second chance at life.

Coyotes, by nature, are often solitary animals. Meaning, it is not uncommon for members of the species to live alone, only meeting another coyote to mate, then returning to being alone. It is very likely this coyote does not want to ever interact with another coyote ever, especially considering habituated animals do not recognize themselves as members of their own species. Putting this coyote in a sanctuary with other coyotes could be dangerous and have negative health effects.

Every captive animal has its own specific needs and requirements. Some animals need daily medications, specific diets, human contact, etc. These needs do not lend themselves well to a sanctuary situation with little to no human contact. This coyote specifically needs humans to survive. Not only does he need humans to survive but he loves his trainers and caretakers!

The individuals speaking on this issue without having seen this coyote in person are way out of line. To properly assess an animal you have to witness and examine it in person for an extended period of time, I have never heard of another individual making such sweeping statements based on a short video clip of one behavior.

The staff at River Trails show up to work everyday committed to doing their best for these animals based on facts and best practices in the wildlife sector. They are some of the best and most attentive animal caretakers I have ever worked with. They are the professionals who know this animal best and have the best intentions. Please allow these people to continue to do their job in peace and do not give in to the hysteria surrounding this situation.

Victoria Sunkel, CWR

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