

Unit 10: Sean Kheraj: How do pests affect an urban environment?

Q: How do pests affect an urban environment?

A: A good example of a pest species or a species we might consider to be a nuisance today is a raccoon. The raccoon has had quite an ascendancy in the late 20th century and the early 21st century in Canadian urban environments. But the raccoon's history is very interesting. In a place like Toronto or in Vancouver or Winnipeg or Montreal, raccoons were indigenous species in wilderness environments. And, in fact, they were somewhat coveted species for hunting. So hunters would hunt raccoons. Their furs could be sold and used to manufacture fur products that were quite fashionable. So Eaton's, for example, so raccoon coats, raccoon fur coats, which could you even imagine today a raccoon fur coat. So they were both a wilderness animal and a recreational animal and they were a commercial product. Over the course of the 20th century, the raccoon population declines in Canadian cities, in part because of habitat change. As the footprint of urban environments grew, it ate up those wilderness environments that raccoons could live in. So where once there'd been a time in the 1910's where workers might go on a weekend to shoot raccoons out on the peri-urban environment in places that we now call the suburbs, by the mid-20th century, this is not practical anymore. The populations have collapsed. They're no longer within accessible distances. But by the end of the 19th century, the population rebounds because the composition of human garbage changes. So in the post-war period, Canadians' accumulation of solid waste skyrockets. Whereas in the first half of the 20th century, Canadians produced a lot of organic waste but not in very large quantities. The introduction of synthetic wastes, new packaging and higher quantities of food waste created new ecological conditions that were highly conducive to a rebound of opportunist species like raccoons. And so as we threw out more food, it made more food for raccoons to reenter urban environments such that they're now considered nuisance animals because they tip over garbage can and they eat garbage and their populations thrive. Somewhere along the line, and perhaps because they feed on our garbage, they no longer became desirable recreational animals to hunt. Also, because of changing sensibilities about the relationship between humans and wild animals by the end of the 20th century and because of that, they couldn't be fashion items to be sold as a commercial product anymore. And so when you look at the longer term of the raccoon's life history in Canada, there's a tragedy of the loss of its natural habitat, a rejuvenative story about the return

of the raccoon, but a collapse of its status in terms of its relationship to people as it goes from being a wild animal to a nuisance.