

Advice of the Brussels Animal Welfare Council (11/10/2024)

regarding the expansion of the population and the welfare of foxes in the city

Problem Statement

In the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR), the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) is a strictly protected species (like all native European mammals¹). Over the last 15 years, red foxes have increasingly moved from the surrounding Flemish countryside into the urban areas of Brussels, mirroring trends observed in other major European cities. This shift can be attributed to their opportunistic lifestyle, which allows them to easily adapt their behaviour to different environments.

As a result, foxes are increasingly observed in places and at times when people are also present. Some people view this with suspicion or experience inconveniences, often labelled as "nuisances." In 2018, due to a perceived increase in such issues, the National Council for Animal Protection and Help Animals expressed concern that foxes might be subjected to control measures (illegally or, should their protected status be revoked, legally) that could negatively impact their welfare. These organisations called for alternative solutions to be explored, including sterilisation programmes or the creation of areas where foxes could live separately from humans.

Approach by the Council

The Department of Biodiversity of Brussels Environment (responsible for wildlife management in the BCR) shared its extensive knowledge on this topic, succinctly summarised in an online information sheet². The main points were combined with information on the number and nature of complaints about foxes received by Brussels Environment, as well as a literature review conducted by the Department of Animal Welfare on contraception as a management strategy. In a first meeting on the topic (in 2018), the Council concluded that further research was needed to understand the potentially more nuanced opinions of the broader population of the BCR regarding coexisting with foxes. The Council called for a well-designed survey of a representative sample of all Brussels residents.

In 2021, this survey was incorporated into a broader questionnaire titled "Coexisting with Animals in the City" as part of the AWI-BRU project³, by a collaboration between Ghent University and the University of Namur, commissioned by the Department of Animal Welfare. One of the other goals of this project was to bring together and inform municipalities⁴ and police zones⁵ about issues related to animal welfare, including foxes. As part of this effort, an information session on "Best Practices for Municipal Fox Management in the Brussels-Capital Region" was held in early 2024, and its findings were reported back to the Animal Welfare Council on 24/05/2024.

¹ Excluding rats, house mice, farm animals and pet animals

² Source only available in French ([20201119Infofiche_Vos_FR.doc](#)) and Dutch ([20201119Infofiche_Vos_nl.doc](#))

³ French : https://environnement.brussels/sites/default/files/user_files/bea-004_awi_bru_fase1_finaal_fr.pdf,

Dutch : https://leefmilieu.brussels/sites/default/files/user_files/doc_20220411_awi_bru_fase1_eindrapport.pdf

⁴ <https://be.brussels/en/about-region/structure-and-organisations/local-authorities-and-municipalities/municipalities>

⁵ <https://be.brussels/en/about-region/structure-and-organisations/local-authorities-and-municipalities/police-zones>

Inventory of questions and complaints, and survey results

Data collected from municipalities and the Department of Biodiversity shows that most questions and complaints about urban foxes come from southeastern municipalities bordering the Sonian Forest⁶ and Bois de la Cambre⁷.

Questions received by the Department of Biodiversity indicate that some residents worry about potential aggression (toward humans or pets) or the spread of diseases (such as alveolar echinococcosis caused by the fox tapeworm, and rabies). Many of these concerns can be addressed relatively easily through awareness campaigns about preventing (already limited) risks of disease transmission and avoiding behaviours that could lead to problematic or aggressive fox behaviour. These topics are covered in the aforementioned information sheet, which also serves as the basis for telephone conversations aimed at reassuring concerned citizens or addressing complaints. Regarding complaints about nuisances received by the department of Biodiversity, the sense of dissatisfaction seemed to become more noticeable in an increasing number of them (in any case between 2017 and 2020), particularly during peak reproduction periods (May and June), with up to three phone calls per day. The complaints included: fox droppings in gardens and on terraces, foxes tearing open rubbish bags and scattering waste, nighttime fox calls, inconveniently located dens, trampled plants, bitten garden hoses, ... but never fox attacks.

On the other hand, the broader survey of Brussels residents [912 valid cases (including demographic data), representing 0.1% of the total Brussels population, primarily women, predominantly middle-class, with a good age distribution] presented a more nuanced picture compared to the calls and complaints.

Only 10% of respondents believed there were too many foxes in their municipality, and 75% agreed that foxes have the right to live there. The same questions were also posed regarding other animals, such as stray cats and pigeons, which were found to be less "popular" (see Table 1)

Table 1: Percentage of respondents indicating agreement or disagreement with three statements regarding domestic cats, colony cats*, stray cats, dogs, foxes, and pigeons in their municipality (n=912).

Do you agree with the following statements?						
	These animals have the right to live in my municipality		There are too many of these animals in my municipality		There are not enough of these animals in my municipality	
	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree
Domestic Cats	17.5%	81.5%	91.9%	8.1%	96.6%	3.4%
Colony Cats*	29.5%	70.5%	92.9%	7.1%	93.9%	6.1%
Stray Cats	41.6%	58.4%	82.3%	17.7%	97.0%	3.0%
Dogs	21.4%	79.6%	88.9%	11.1%	95.2%	4.8%
Foxes	25.2%	74.8%	90.4%	9.6%	82.6%	17.4%
Pigeons	38.3%	61.7%	60.8%	39.2%	98.0%	2.0%

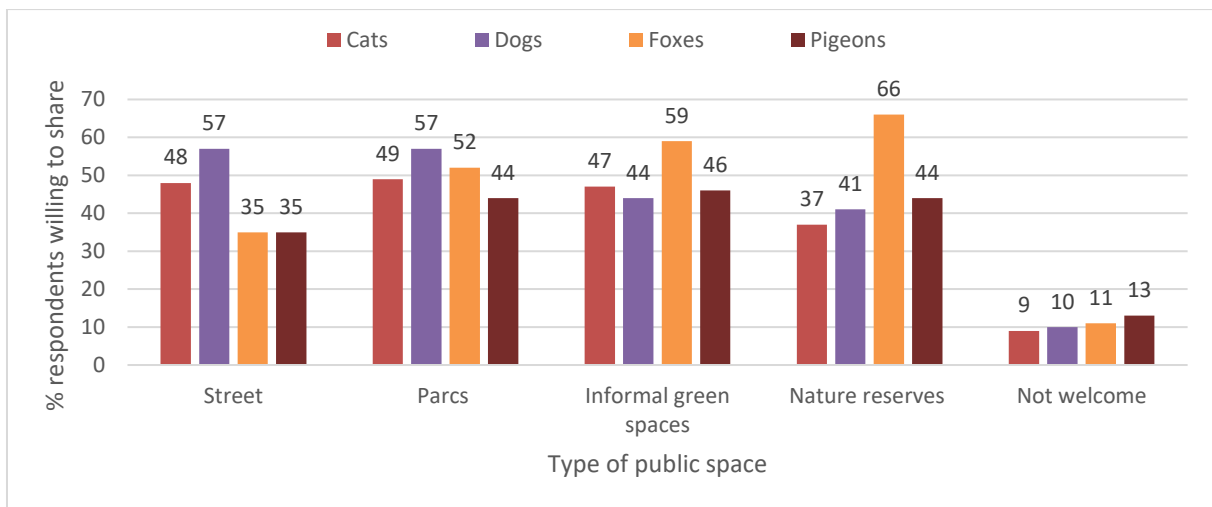
*Colony cats or community cats or do not live in households; they are sterilised and cared for by (certified) feeders or caretakers. This group does not include domestic cats that occasionally visit feeding stations.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonian_Forest

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bois_de_la_Cambre

When asked which public spaces they were willing or unwilling to share with foxes, 35% of respondents were willing to share streets, 52% parks, 60% informal green spaces, and 66% nature reserves. These questions were also asked regarding pigeons, which were again found to be less "popular" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents willing to share streets, parks, informal green spaces, and nature reserves with the mentioned animals, and the percentage of respondents indicating that they are not welcome (n=912).



The most commonly mentioned perceived benefits and drawbacks of fox presence in the area were rodent control, the enjoyment of watching foxes, and the sense of connection with nature they bring. The most commonly mentioned perceived drawbacks included the potential physical threat to pets (rather than humans) and the diseases they might transmit to pets (rather than humans).

Why contraception and relocation are not effective in reducing nuisance and could even be harmful

Although no **contraceptives** for foxes are currently available on the market, significant research has been conducted into their development^{8,9}. Regarding hormonal methods, there is substantial scientific debate about potential long-term effects on animal welfare (e.g., abscesses or inflammations, uterine and ovarian pathology, body weight, behaviour, etc.) and the environment¹⁰. Immunocontraception faces a fundamental challenge with oral administration: its effects are often short-lived, typically requiring multiple applications¹⁰. As a result, costs are expected to be very high. In addition, both categories of contraceptives are rarely species-specific, leading to potential **unintended** uptake and **effects on non-target species**. **More importantly**, reducing reproduction does not necessarily lead to a decrease in population density or nuisance, because **overcompensation effects** are **likely**: increased birth rates among remaining fertile females, reduced mortality, decreased dispersal, and increased immigration⁸.

⁸ Saunders, G., & McLeod, L. (2007). Improving fox management strategies in Australia. Canberra: Bureau of Rural Sciences.

⁹ Strive, T., Hardy, C. M., & Reubel, G. H. (2007). Prospects for immunocontraception in the European red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*). Wildlife Research, 34(7), 523-529.

¹⁰ Massei, G., & Cowan, D. (2014). Fertility control to mitigate human–wildlife conflicts: a review. Wildlife Research, 41(1), 1-21.

Relocating foxes can cause **stress or even death** for the animals, contribute to the spread of diseases, and, like culling or sterilisation, will not have a sustainable impact on population density or nuisance due to **compensation effects**. When a fox disappears from a territory / fox community, the following year sees an increase in the number of breeding females and the number of pups per litter, according to the habitat's carrying capacity. This rejuvenates the population and leads to more roaming individuals searching for new territories. Over time, all territories will remain occupied. Moreover, territorial disputes (fighting, howling, or barking) can cause additional disturbances for nearby residents.

Useful and desirable: (a) limiting food availability (active and passive)

To prevent further increases in fox density and genuine nuisance, it is most recommended to make sure the foxes maintain large territories. The best way to achieve this is by limiting food availability in these areas as much as possible.

First of all, proper management of waste and other potential food sources (pet food, fallen fruit, torn rubbish bags, open bins, poorly managed compost heaps, unsecured chicken coops, ...) is key. In most Brussels municipalities, **waste collection using closed, rigid plastic bins/containers** currently applies only to apartment buildings (organised by Net Brussels¹¹, the regional public service for cleanliness and waste management). In only one municipality (Woluwe-Saint-Lambert) is this **mandatory for all households** (unless their properties are too small to accommodate a rigid bin)¹². **Extending this measure** further is a topic for discussion between municipal governments and Net Brussels.

Secondly, it is very important that foxes are never actively fed. Feeding increases their numbers, makes them dependent, reduces their motivation to forage, and may lead to intrusive behaviour. Attempting to lure or pet foxes should also be discouraged, as it fosters familiarity with humans and can encourage nuisance behaviours. In practice, persistent feeders are challenging to address. Emotional factors (e.g., human loneliness) play a significant role, particularly with non-shy fox cubs. Religious or philosophical beliefs may also influence feeding, as feeding leftovers to animals is sometimes preferred over disposal or composting. Offering alternatives (or informing the public about them) is critical in addressing these issues.

Currently, **feeding wild animals is legally prohibited only in public green spaces** (under Article 13, Clause 11 of the regional Park Regulation¹³ and Article 100, Clause 3 of the General Police Regulation¹⁴). The Council believes there is a **need for an additional ban on feeding foxes specifically on private property**. This comprehensive ban should apply only to foxes, not to other animals (e.g., controlled feeding of garden birds/small songbirds in winter should remain permissible).

¹¹ <https://arp-gan.be/en>

¹² Source only available in Dutch : <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/sint-lambrechts-woluwe-verplicht-harde-vuilnisbakken-2023-12-26>

¹³ French : <http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/arrete/2014/05/08/2014031502/moniteur>, Dutch : https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=nl&caller=summary&pub_date=14-07-11&numac=2014031502

¹⁴ French : <https://www.bruxelles.be/reglement-general-de-police>, Dutch : <https://www.brussel.be/algemeen-politiereglement#hoofdstuk5>

Useful and desirable: (b) raising awareness about harmonious coexistence

In addition to a legal ban on feeding foxes, **continued and targeted awareness-raising** is essential. Public education should focus on the negative effects of inappropriate or excessive feeding on animal health and the intrusive behaviours this may encourage. Other aspects of harmonious coexistence with foxes also require ongoing information dissemination, even though surveys indicate that a large proportion of Brussels residents already hold positive views about fox presence. Monitoring potential diseases in foxes (as with other wildlife, conducted by Brussels Environment¹⁵) remains important, despite the reassuring results thus far¹⁶.

As is already the case in a number of municipalities (as shown by the surveys and exchanges within the AWI-BRU project), the **municipal authorities**, alongside and in **cooperation with Brussels Environment**, have a very **important, proactive role** to play in raising awareness. This is not only useful or necessary in municipalities with many questions or complaints but also in others, as a preventive measure. Continued collaboration between municipal authorities and Brussels Environment is also crucial for **monitoring** population density and addressing complaints.

¹⁵ French : [Que faire des cadavres d'animaux sauvages ? | Professionnel - Bruxelles Environnement](#),
Dutch : <https://leefmilieu.brussels/pro/diensten-en-aanvragen/klachten-meldingen-en-waarschuwingen/wat-te-doen-met-kadavers-van-wilde-dieren>

¹⁶ French : <https://environnement.brussels/media/15654/download?inline>, Dutch : [Template Rapport Technique](#), see page 12