2015 AASHTO TRANSCOMM SKILLS CONTEST

Division: 6) Writing
Category: 6a) News releases

Entry title: Why did the bear cross the road? Tracking wildlife patterns
Organization: Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT)
ENTRY PROFILE

1) Situation, goals and objectives of public relations activity

Sometimes, you get lucky. That’s what happened when an automated camera snapped this family scene along Interstate 64.

The photo is one of many collected for a Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) research project that’s tracking natural wildlife corridors along I-64 to help prevent animal-vehicle collisions.

VDOT knew this picture would grab public attention and tell an important safety and environmental story.

Virginia is among the nation’s top 10 states for deer-vehicle collisions. Other animals, especially black bears, also cross busy roads seeking food and shelter. Because of the danger this animal activity causes both drivers and the critters, VDOT’s research division has examined ways to reduce animal-vehicle collisions for more than a decade.

This particular study has deployed more than 50 remote, automatic cameras to determine where deer, bear and other animals naturally roam along I-64 near the northern terminus of the Blue Ridge Parkway and the southern end of Shenandoah National Park. The three-year project will identify strategic locations — corridors such as streambeds, underpasses and other passages — where VDOT can deploy measures to mitigate animal-vehicle collisions. These could include fencing to guide wildlife toward underpasses where bridges and culverts are located.

The photo gave VDOT the opportunity to push an important safety message during the summer driving season. Communications staff in VDOT’s main office and research division planned a news release using the photo to raise awareness for highway safety in general and vigilance for driver safety and that of wildlife specifically.

The release included available information from the research project, as well as links to the project page on the research division’s website, images on VDOT’s Flickr site and a 2008 Federal Highway Administration report to Congress on reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions. The image of the mama bear and her cubs also reminded motorists of their own young ones and underscored their safety on the road.

VDOT issued the news release in August 2014, a slow news period for the agency and before the dangerous fall deer mating season, when animal-vehicle crashes increase.

The project’s lead researcher at the Virginia Center for Transportation Innovation and Research (VCTIR), VDOT’s research division, provided Communications staff with pertinent information about the purpose and status of the project. She also helped Communications write the background talking points and was available for media interviews.

The photo of the bears was also shared via VDOT’s Flickr site, as well as one of a deer near the same location along I-64.
2) Target audience
All motorists who use Virginia’s roads and highways

3) Measureable results
Every picture does tell a story. Sometimes that story, with the help of that good photo, goes viral. The photo initially drew people into the release and resulting news stories, while the release and articles told the story of the research that supported the purpose of the photo.

The Associated Press version of the wildlife-mitigation article ran in many locations nationally and internationally. The following are links to some locations that picked up information from the news release:

- Richmond Times-Dispatch (see above-the-fold play, photo, right)
- Public Roads magazine, Federal Highway Administration (scroll down on link)
- AASHTO Journal
- The Washington Times (via AP)
- The Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk, via AP)
- Nelson County Times (near Charlottesville)
- WDBJ-7, Roanoke (CBS)
- WVIR-TV/NBC29, Charlottesville
- WCAV-Newsplex, TV-19 Charlottesville (CBS)
- WTKR TV-3, Norfolk (CBS)
- WFIR-AM, News Radio, Roanoke
- The Washington Post (via AP, but content no longer available on website link)

On VDOT’s social-media sites, the release received the following:
- Facebook: 210 post likes; 43 post shares; 283 post clicks; 52 links (to news release); reach, 10,320 (organic)
- Twitter: @VaDOT, Aug. 12, 2014: 5,914 impressions; Aug. 13, 2014, 4,945 impressions; average impressions for the month: 4,400

Finally, on May 21, 2015, VDOT received an award of excellence for media relations for the news release with the bear photo from the Richmond chapter of the Public Relations Society of America as part of its Virginia Public Relations Awards.

So, yes, a picture is worth 1,000 words — or in the case of this news release in the digital, limited-attention-span age, 568 words.
Wildlife Images

This image of a black bear and her cubs considering the traffic on Interstate 64 in Albemarle County on Afton Mountain was captured by a camera collecting research for an ongoing safety study.

The photo helped the news release, and the story, go viral.

Another remote photo of a deer about to cross I-64 on Afton Mountain.
News Release

Image of news release concerning VDOT's wildlife mitigation research project from the VDOT website.

RELEASE: IMMEDIATE
CONTACT: Greg Slayton 804-786-4790
Aug. 12, 2014

VIKING RESEARCH WILDLIFE PATTERNS TO REDUCE COLLISIONS, INCREASE ROADSIDE SAFETY
Study focuses on Afmara area and Interstate 64

RICHMOND, Va. - They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but while this bear and her cubs watching traffic on the interstate may get a lot of attention, it's the story behind the photo that should grab headlines. Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) is looking to make roads safer - for wildlife and motorists alike - by researching animal travel patterns.

VDOT's research division, the Virginia Center for Transportation Innovation and Research (VCiR), is conducting a three-year study to identify strategic locations to reduce animal-vehicle collisions. For this study, VDOT targeted a section of Interstate 64 in Afmara, in Albemarle, Augusta and Nelson counties due to the high number of related crashes in those areas. When the study began in 2012, deer-vehicle collisions were the third most frequent type of accident in the region, accounting for up to 30 percent of all crashes. The study will be completed in late 2015.

"VDOT is seeking innovative ways to meet the needs of motorists, increase safety and at the same time protect wildlife," said VDOT Commissioner, Charley Q. Parker. "Our goal through this valuable research is to come to the table with recommended locations for cost-effective strategies to help mitigate these crashes, increase safety and reduce the significant damage that can occur when wildlife and motorists meet on the roadway."

Recent numbers included 180 deer fatalities from 2012 to 2016 along Afmara, plus 10 black bear deaths in the same area in September and October 2013. Biologists from the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VGDF) have attributed more frequent and visible deer movement to scarce food supplies last fall.

"Animal-vehicle collisions represent one of the most significant wildlife management challenges in many parts of Virginia, due to concerns about: human safety, wildlife population impacts and animal welfare," said VDOT Executive Director Bob Duncan. "VDOT is pleased to collaborate with VDOT and its researchers on the Afmara Mountain project, which are seen as a step toward understanding how, when and where animals are crossing roads and how to adapt accordingly."

A 2009 Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) report to Congress on reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions found the most effective methods to reduce such crashes are fencing, either alone or used with wildlife crossing (overpasses or underpasses), and animal detection and driver warning systems that can alert drivers near the roadway and alert drivers.

The FHWA report estimated the cost per deer-vehicle collision at $5,388 in 2009 dollars, which includes factors such as property damage, human injury, and animal removal and disposal. The VDOT researchers cited that report in their initial proposal for the Afmara project.

VDOT published two other research studies in 2005 and 2010 that investigated the use of animal underpasses by wildlife throughout Virginia. They both concluded that if such structures are properly located and are the right size, deer, bear and other animals will use them.

Caption: The photo in this news release is from VDOT's research study to identify strategic locations for wildlife crash mitigation. Large version

Sound bytes: Attached are two sound bytes from lead researchers Bridget Donaldson, Senior Research Scientist at VDOT's research arm, the Virginia Center for Transportation Innovation and Research, about the three-year study to identify strategies to reduce those types of dangerous incidents. Audio WTJ Audio WTG

END

Twitter: [x]

Information in VDOT news releases was accurate at the time the releases were published. For the most current information about projects or programs, please visit the project or program Web pages. You may find those by searching by keyword in the search Virginia D.O.T. box above.

Page last modified: Aug. 12, 2014
News and Social Media Coverage

Bridget Donaldson, lead researcher at the Virginia Center for Transportation Innovation and Research, on WDBJ TV-7.

News and Social Media Coverage

The Daily Progress, Charlottesville, Va.

VDOT studying wildlife patterns, road safety on I-64

The Virginian-Pilot, Norfolk, Va.

Va. agency studying wildlife patterns, road safety
Why’d the bear cross the road? Because VDOT is trying to make it safer. Study under way: http://bit.ly/1q6GiZ2


VDOT is aiming to make the commute over Afton Mountain on I-64 safer for drivers and wildlife alike. http://ht.ly/Ag71G

VDOT is working to make roads safer – for wildlife and motorists alike – by researching animal travel patterns. http://ht.ly/AfqEK
News and Social Media Coverage

BESTPASS @BESTPASSINC
You have to see this picture and get the full story! Way to go VDOT - saving wildlife and motorists lives, alike! http://bit.ly/1oHeRYL

BESTPASS @BESTPASSINC
If you are an animal lover like us, you have to check this story out! http://ow.ly/AfJbo Thanks @donbrownbus for showing us! #wildlife

Charlottesville News @cvillejournal
VDOT Researches Wildlife Patterns to Increase Roadway Safety: VDOT is working to make roads safer – for wildlife... http://dlvr.it/6bWPwX

Wildlife Tweet @WildlifeTweet
VDOT Researches Wildlife Patterns to Increase Roadway Safety - NBC 29 News http://dlvr.it/6bWPN8

Wildlife report @Wildlifereport
VDOT Researches Wildlife Patterns to Increase Roadway Safety - NBC 29 News http://dlvr.it/6bWPMf

Local News Feeds @localnewsfeeds
VDOT Researches Wildlife Patterns to Increase Roadway Safety http://bit.ly/1mGnBOY
News and Social Media Coverage

WLNI@WLNIRadio
Va. agency studying wildlife patterns, road safety http://goo.gl/APfovE

WCHV NEWS@WCHVNEWS

TIRF Canada@TIRFCANADA
#WildlifeWednesday @VaDOT Researches #Wildlife Patterns to Increase #RoadwaySafety http://ow.ly/AhycT

Washington News@WashingtonNews5
#Washington #News Va. agency studying wildlife patterns, road safety: RICHMOND, Va. (AP) - The Virginia Depar... http://go.besturl.es/F9GH

Luciana Nechita@luciana_nechita
#WildlifeWednesday @VaDOT Researches #Wildlife Patterns to Increase #RoadwaySafety ow.ly/Ahyai

Wildlife Center VA@WCVtweets 2h
VDOT is conducting a three-year study that researches animal travel patterns on Afton Mountain Check it out! http://ow.ly/AhFEN