

On the Positive Side

Predator control must include entire ecosystem

By Dr. Judy Long For the Sun-News

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In New Mexico, a state with a strong cattle-ranching tradition, current controversies pit ranchers against wildlife advocates.

One way to understand these issues is to follow the example of current and past predator control policies. We can begin with the 1931 federal Animal Damage Control Act, which reads like a declaration of war on mammals, though snakes and many bird species have also taken a hit.

This legislation and its legislative offspring are based on the old paradigm: "dog eat dog" or zero-sum, only one winner and winner-take-all. In this paradigm, the dominant species (human) is cast as The Avenger. The bad guys may be meat-eaters, seed-eaters, fish or lizards.

In New Mexico, funding for predator control is built into a farm and range improvement fund based on the Taylor Grazing Act. New Mexico's war on coyotes, undertaken in 2000 to decrease predation on mule deer, provides a useful lesson.

The war on coyotes employed mercenaries, creating a mini-industry of trappers and killers. Another way of saying this is that the policy (created) a group of "stakeholders" or incentives to stay with an old, ineffective program instead of looking for more up-to-date solutions.

As it turns out, other factors influence the mule deer population. What we have learned from past experience is that development and road-building - human undertakings having nothing to do with coyotes - are keeping deer populations down. This is called "habitat loss."

A decline in the kill rate over time would indicate success, as the coyote population came under control. In 2005, the agency reported 99,346 kills (carnivores only), but in 2008 the number had risen to 124,414. Forty-eight thousand of these were captured in leghold traps and many died there. (Leghold traps are outlawed in some states for their extreme cruelty). Methods employed in this program included aerial gunning and gassing, as well as other means of poisoning. With these methods "collateral damage" is to be expected.

At a recent conference on predator-prey dynamics, experts reported that mass coyote kills were unsuccessful in reducing predation.

Which is worse, that it killed more than 1,200 coyotes or that it didn't work? Are we ready for a new paradigm?

Wildlife experts are pointing to a new paradigm that emphasizes the ecosystem as a system. It recognizes that change in one part inevitably changes other parts, often in unanticipated ways. One simple example: if we kill more coyotes, they have larger litters: the system restores the balance. Canny coyotes will move into areas where mass kills have been engineered, leaving a balance of zero gain. The data indicate that the coyote population is self-regulating.

The modern approach to wildlife policy recognizes that in a complex ecosystem, a number of factors change with the seasons, the water supply and many other facts of nature. This means that there is no one-size-fits-all policy. This year's plan will have to be altered to meet next year's conditions. Any plan must be part of the ecosystem, not its enemy.

Since feelings run so high among parts of the population, it is most advisable to have good data before setting in motion massive exterminations that don't solve the problem at hand. Though many people believe without question that coyotes are cattle-killers, the NM Game and Fish Department research got right down to the nitty-gritty and

analyzed coyotes' scat. Contrary to common opinion, meat constitutes a very low percent of their diet. It will be disappointing to some to learn that coyotes' diet consists largely of juniper berries.

These days authorities are demanding a much tighter link between coyotes and cattle predation. Documentation in the form of registered complaints may lead to a more targeted predator control, and spare a large number of berry-eaters that have not offended.

A pressing question for today is do we know any more, or better, ways to control predation without destroying more of the ecosystem?

If calves are the most vulnerable of our cattle, the best target for predators, one option might be to increase protection for that subgroup of the population. Ranchers could fence certain areas and employ dogs to police the boundaries.

As you read this, a nearby community is advertising for a "wildlife specialist." Qualification: he/she must have a gun. What kind of specialty is this, exactly? Since wolves are still protected, they must be after the coyotes. The logic is old paradigm.

Such nonselective methods are responsible for the near-extinction of bald eagles, grizzly bears and gray wolves. "Habitat loss" takes on a new meaning as, through the deliberate actions of humans, other species are eliminated from the globe.

The habitat we are destroying is our habitat too.

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