

CARNIVORE MANAGEMENT IN THE U.S.: The Need for Reform

by Camilla H. Fox

Few Americans have heard of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services (WS) program. Even fewer are aware that their taxdollars subsidize the killing of millions of animals every year under this program; between 2004 and 2007, USDA WS killed 8,378,412 animals (Keefover-Ring 2009). Wolves, coyotes, black bears, mountain lions, bobcats, badgers, foxes, beaver, Canada geese, cormorants, sea gulls, blackbirds, crows, cowbirds, and starlings are just some of the species targeted by this agency. Their crimes? Preying on sheep and cattle, eating fish in commercial aquaculture facilities and seeds in large-scale sunflower plantations, pooping on municipal lawns and golf courses, creating a "nuisance," and flying in the pathway

of airplanes (refer to DJ's article) and airport runways to name but a few.

While the vast majority of species targeted by WS are birds (more than 4 million in 2008) the agency's predator control program has been the focus of intense public and scientific scrutiny over the last fifty years as increasing scientific research calls into question the efficacy, ethics, and economics of killing tens of thousands of native carnivores at the behest of livestock ranchers and other agriculturalists.

The WS program, administered through cooperative agreements with states, counties, municipalities, and other entities, operates under the 1931 Animal Damage Control Act (7 USC 426-426c), which authorizes the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to "determine the best methods

of eradication, suppression, or bringing under control mountain lions, wolves, coyotes, bobcats, prairie dogs, gophers, ground squirrels, jack rabbits, brown tree snakes, and other animals injurious to agriculture, horticulture, forestry, animal husbandry, wild game animals, fur-bearing animals and birds....The Secretary is also directed to conduct campaigns for the destruction or control of these animals." This Act, which remains virtually unchanged today, expanded the federal government's role in predator control, authorizing funding and Congressional support for killing native predators to benefit private ranchers (Di Silvestro 1985).

In 2008, WS killed more than 120,000 native carnivores in the U.S. of which approximately 90,000 were coyotes (USDA WS 2008). In addition to coyotes, more than 5,000 foxes, 1,883 bobcats, 528 river otters, 396 gray wolves, 395 black bears, and 373 mountain lions were killed that same year. While one might think that the kill figure would gradually decrease over the years if the methods employed were effective in resolving conflicts, the number of native carnivores killed by WS has actually increased over the last decade. In 2005, the agency killed 99,346 carnivores while in 2008 the total number killed had increased to 124,414, a 25 percent increase over a three year period. The agency's overall kill figure increased by 125% from 2.2 million animals killed in 2007 to close to five million in 2008, the vast majority of whom were birds killed with poison.

Despite claims that it has improved its target specificity in the methods it employs to kill carnivores and other animals, WS's annual kill tables say otherwise. In 2008, of the 124,414 carnivores killed by the agency, 48,000 were captured with leghold traps and snares and either died directly in the device itself or were killed after capture by a WS agent;

50,537 were shot by aerial gunners; 13,286 were killed with poisons; and 531 coyote and fox pups were killed by "denning" (the killing of pups in their dens either manually or with poison gas). Many of these methods are inherently non-selective and undoubtedly remove many non-offending/problem animals—up to 81.3% according to one study that looked at lethal carnivore management programs across the globe (Treves and Naughton-Treves 2005).

Not all predators kill livestock (Treves and Naughton-Treves 2005) yet the dominant practice of predator management in the U.S. is based on the theory that by killing a large number of carnivores the "offending animal" will be among the casualties (Wagner 1988). Wagner (1988:113) suggests that the federal government's approach is "something of a sledge-hammer one: If enough coyotes are shot, trapped, and exposed to M-44s...their numbers can be reduced and the chances are that the offending animal(s) will be among those taken and the losses reduced."

It was this very indiscriminate sledge-hammer approach to predator management that led to the extirpation of gray wolves, grizzly bears, and mountain lions from much of their former range by the middle of the 20th century (Fox 2008). As bald eagles, wolves, swift and kit fox, and other imperiled species died by the thousands from poison baits, traps, and snares set for other species, scientists and conservationists pressed Congress to take notice and action. In 1963, Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall commissioned Dr. Starker Leopold (son of Aldo Leopold) to chair a committee to investigate and make recommendations on the federal government's predator management program, then called "Animal Damage Control" (ADC).

Out of this committee came the Leopold Report, which charged that ADC practiced indiscriminate and excessive killing of predators



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and posed a significant threat to imperiled species. Secretary Udall took the criticisms and recommendations seriously and accepted the Leopold Report as a “general guidepost” for Interior Department Policy (U.S. Congress 1966). Over the next five years, the agency went through a major overhaul to change its public image with substantial changes implemented in the agency’s policies, philosophies, public messaging, and personnel. Even terminology was changed—into euphemisms—in an attempt to reverse negative perception; “poison” was now called “toxicant” or “chemical compound”; “kill” became



“reduction” or “removal” (Feldman 2007). However, despite the significant resources spent in trying to improve public perception of and support for the agency, these superficial changes largely failed (Feldman 2007).

In 1966, Congressman John D. Dingell led congressional hearings on the federal predator control program which strongly condemned the government’s efforts to eradicate native carnivores and elicited the following condemnation (U.S. House of Representatives 1966):

It is well known that over the years predator controls actually practiced by governmental and private organizations have been considerably in excess of the amount that can be justified, particularly when total public interest is considered. In fact, indiscriminate trapping, shooting, and poisoning programs against certain predators have been so effective that it has

resulted in reducing their number to such an extent that their continued existence is now endangered. In some cases, methods of control, such as poisoning, are producing secondary killings of certain species that are already on the endangered list.

In 1971, Secretary of Interior Rogers Morton commissioned the Cain Report (Cain et al. 1971). The Cain Report found that the predator control program:

...contains a high degree of built-in resistance to change. . . the substantial monetary contribution by the livestock industry serves as a gyroscope to keep the bureaucratic machinery pointed towards the familiar goal of general reduction of predator populations, with little attention to the effects of this on the native wildlife fauna.

Guidelines and good intentions will no longer suffice. The federal-state predator control program must be effectively changed. It must take full account of the whole spectrum of public interests and values, not only in predators but in all wildlife. This will require substantial, even drastic, changes in control personnel and control methods, supported by new legislation, administrative changes, and methods of financing.

Among other recommendations, the Cain Report urged an immediate prohibition of all existing poisons used for predator control. Subsequently, the use of poisonous baits was banned in 1972 because of concerns about misuse and the widespread killing of non-target animals.

Two decades later in 1994, the Thoreau Institute released an economic audit (O’Toole 1994) of the USDA’s Animal Damage Control Program and concluded that there was “...little legal or economic justification for continuing a federal animal damage control program. Few benefit from such a program and those who do ought to pay for the program themselves. In any case the federal government should not be involved in what are essentially state and local problems.”

But even Congressional directives failed to change policy. A 1995 Government Accounting Office (GAO 1995) report concluded that:

ADC personnel in western states use lethal methods to control livestock predators despite written USDA policies and procedures giving preference to the use of non-lethal control methods where practical and effective.

Past and present critics of the federal program argue that it perpetuates an endless cycle of conflict and killing with an emphasis

on non-selective methods, that it lacks accountability to the public, needlessly kills millions of animals for the benefit of a relatively small number of ranchers and commercial agriculturists, and fosters a dependence on taxpayer-funded assistance instead of promoting effective long-term solutions to conflicts (O’Toole 1994; Fox and Papouchis 2005; Robinson 2005; Berger 2006; Feldman 2007; Fox 2008; Keefover-Ring 2009). Moreover, such programs generally fail to consider the ecological value of maintaining large carnivores and strongly interacting species and fail to manage for ecological effectiveness (Soulé et al. 2005). Soulé et al. (2005:175) postulate that the failure of many wildlife management agencies to incorporate a doctrine of “best conservation practices based on the best science,” is because such agencies still function under anachronistic laws and policies that are based on old and simplistic scientific concepts (i.e. predators are bad and need to be eradicated).

In response to such criticism, WS has put more resources into researching alternative methods through its research arm, the National Wildlife Research Center, and has acknowledged that public scrutiny of its programs and shifting public attitudes regarding the welfare of animals demands that “new, innovative solutions to these problems be identified and that each response to wildlife damage be conducted professionally, and in an ecologically valid and biologically sound manner,” (Clay 2007). While the research arm of the federal agency has spent significant resources toward researching non-lethal methods for reducing human-wildlife conflicts, the emphasis is still on lethal predator control as evidenced by the agency’s annual kill data (Table 1) (Fox 2008). Moreover, in a recent trap inventory conducted by WS, the federal agency determined that it has more than 62,000 leghold traps in its possession, which are largely used for predator control, and acknowledges that only 59 percent of them are compliant with the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies’ best management practice trap recommendations, which have been condemned as weak ineffectual, and lacking scientific rigor (AWI Quarterly Summer 2009). Until annual kill reports reveal

a clear shift toward implementation of non-lethal controls in the field, public and scientific criticism will likely persist.

PARADIGM SHIFT

Despite clear scientific evidence demonstrating the futility and counter-productiveness of indiscriminate lethal predator control, WS continues to rely heavily upon non-selective killing methods, thwarting contemporary ecological theory and conservation biology practice. An increasing number of scientists, however, have begun to speak out publicly against such an approach and their research demonstrates that maintaining native carnivores on the land is vital to healthy, fully functioning ecosystems.

But scientific evidence is not enough. What is needed is a new paradigm for the way we treat native carnivores—indeed all wildlife—one that recognizes the ecological importance

Mammalian Carnivores Killed by USDA-APHIS-Wildlife Services (WS)						
2008						
	Trap	Shoot	Other	Poison	Den	Total 2008
Badgers	507	72	2	0	0	581
Black Bears	305	88	1	1	0	395
Grizzly Bears	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bobcats	1,512	309	58	4	0	1,883
Cats	915	340	15	5	0	1,275
Coyotes	22,889	51,830	3,012	11,569	410	89,710
Dogs	256	158	2	68	0	484
Fishers	0	0	0	0	0	0
Artic Foxes	51	18	25	0	0	94
Gray Foxes	1,410	99	216	626	0	2,351
Kit Foxes	8	4	0	6	0	18
Red Foxes	1,265	589	8	585	121	2,568
Swift Foxes	2	0	0	27	0	29
Mountain Lions	151	222	0	0	0	373
Minks	40	0	0	0	0	40
River Otters	527	1	0	0	0	528
Raccoons	12,991	1,158	143	288	0	14,580
Ringtails	6	0	0	0	0	6
Skunks (All)	7,998	917	65	106	14	9,100
Weasels (All)	1	2	0	0	0	3
Gray Wolves	216	178	1	1	0	396
Mexican Wolves	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	47,606	55,985	3,548	13,286	545	124,414

Table 1. Mammalian carnivores killed by USDA Wildlife Services 2004-2008 (printed with permission from: www.goagro.org)

of these species as well as their intrinsic value as individuals. If the money and efforts used to kill predators were redirected toward cost-effective, non-lethal methods, such as public education, better landscape development, improved fencing, and guard animals, conflicts could be significantly reduced without the need



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to kill indiscriminately. Ultimately, wildlife managers will be forced to make this ethical shift as communities across North America demand humane solutions to wildlife conflicts that consider the importance of individual animals as members of a larger integrative community that includes both humans and non-humans alike. 🐾

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You Can Make a Difference

Support federal legislation to restrict poisons used by WS to kill coyotes and other native carnivores. See page X.

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Teddy Goldsmith (1928-2009)

WITH THE DEATH OF TEDDY GOLDSMITH on

August 17, a towering tree has fallen in the thin remaining forest of visionaries and inspired amateurs who pioneered today's environmental and humane movements.

Teddy graduated from Oxford in 1950 disillusioned with what he had been taught and spent years, enabled by family money, reading voraciously and traveling with naturalist John Aspinall to "get it right". In Africa—subsequently Asia—he became convinced that tribal societies were the only truly sustainable societies. "The more I thought and read and saw" he said "the more I realized how wide the problem was. Here were people talking about how these poor people needed development yet development was destroying them. And it became clear to me that this applied to wider society as a whole."

In the late 1960's, after Bernard Lewis's exposure of the Brazilian government's genocide of Amazonian tribes, Teddy helped establish the Primitive People's Fund, now called Survival International. In 1970, assembling a group of similarly radical thinkers, he founded the Ecologist magazine and edited it-- often single handedly-- for the next 20 years. Blueprint for Survival, first published in the Ecologist in January, 1972 for the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, sold 750,000 copies in book form. In *The Stable Society* (1975) Teddy elaborated his opposition to capitalism and his conviction that a market economy is incompatible with ecological and social stability. The Great U-turn (1988) returned to this thesis, arguing that humanity can find a sustainable future only with "small, self regulating, self sufficient, self respecting societies". *The Way* (1993), was designed as a summary of his world view.



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Almost every major environmental issue and trend within the movement bears evidence of Teddy's influence. He was the central figure in founding the world's first national green (initially People) party in the UK on 1973, inspiring similar parties across Europe. He grasped early in his life that the very future of life on the planet depended on preserving of tropical forests and was an ardent supporter of the Chipko tree huggers who have expanded from the Himalayas to become India's most effective forest protectors. In the 1980's the Ecologist opened a hard hitting campaign against the grotesquely destructive (and invariably corrupt) big dam projects funded by the World Bank and other development agencies. Teddy opposed globalization, characterizing it in a seminal 1996 essay as a new and pernicious form of colonialism via transnational corporations. He was an early and adamant foe of industrial agriculture and factory farms.

The Ecologist persists today—although only in electronic form—with Zac Goldsmith, son of billionaire James Goldsmith, as editor. Teddy and his wife Katherine, lived in his last years on Sienna, Italy, an ancient Italian city, steeped in its history and republican tradition, that they regarded as an enclave of stability. 🐾 —by Tom Garrett