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Ranchers shift from traps to dogs to fight coyotes

Marcia Barinaga was hustling around making cheese, answering phone calls and handling business at her ranch in Marshall the other day, but the real work was going on in the lush green fields, where most of her 230 sheep were grazing.

There, spread out in several pastures among the woolly flock, were four big, white dogs, seemingly lolling about as if they didn't have a care in the world, but, in rural western Marin County, they are the difference between success or failure, life and death.

The 80- to 115-pound dogs — Oso, Big Otis, Shep and Gordy - are Great Pyrenees, one of the most dedicated livestock guardian breeds in the world.

Their presence reflects a radical change in the livestock industry, which has, for a century, relied almost exclusively on traps, bullets and poison to control canine predators. The practice of using the dogs is not only encouraged in Marin County, in some cases it's subsidized.

"There is no other program like this that we are aware of in the country," said Camilla Fox, the executive director of Project Coyote, a national nonprofit headquartered in Larkspur. "We believe it sets a model for other communities to emulate and tailor to their needs."

Marin's nonlethal predator control program is important statewide, Fox said, especially now that the first gray wolf since 1924 has been tracked to California. The wolf, known as OR7, is now in southern Siskiyou County.

Barinaga says that without her Pyrenees, probably neither the sheep nor Barinaga Ranch would survive.

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“There is a mountain lion that has been seen on our ranch quite a bit, and we hear the coyotes every night,” Barinaga said. “I see coyotes on the ranch all the time. But we have lost no sheep at all to predators.”

Llamas work, too

More than two dozen ranchers in the rugged coastal hills and prairies of rural Marin have purchased guardian dogs and, in some cases, llamas to protect their flocks over the past decade, a time that coincided with a huge increase in the number of coyotes in the county.

Unlike coyotes, wolves were wiped out in the lower 48 states by a campaign of trapping, shooting and poisoning. They were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park and Idaho starting in 1995 and are now thriving.

Fox said the powerful agricultural and hunting lobbies have embarked on a national campaign against wolves, winning approval for hunting and trapping in Idaho and Wyoming and pushing for more control measures, such as aerial gunning, at taxpayer expense.

“There is still a very deeply entrenched vilification of predators and a view that they are either vermin to be exterminated or trophies to be hung on a wall,” said Fox, who acknowledges that wolves are tougher than coyotes but contends that aggressive guardian dogs can still be effective.

“We need a new paradigm in the way we coexist with native carnivores,” she said.

Dogs as saviors

The dogs in Marin have reduced predation and, according to the sheep ranchers, saved an industry that 14 years ago was struggling mightily just to remain viable.

“They’ve been a savior,” said Joe Pozzi, a fourth-generation rancher who grazes sheep and cattle in Sonoma and Marin

counties and has six dogs guarding them. “I think most ranchers would agree that if it wasn’t for the guard dogs that we all have, the sheep industry would look a lot different right now.”

Things were different in West Marin as recently as 1996. At that time, federal trappers were in charge of capturing and killing coyotes.

Guardian dogs were discouraged out of fear that they would be captured in traps or killed by poison laid out for the predators.

In 1996, a furor erupted in Marin County over the proposed use of livestock protection collars - containing poison - on sheep. At that time, coyotes were killing hundreds of lambs and ewes every year. The collars, which contained bladders full of lethal Compound 1080, or sodium fluoroacetate, would poison the coyotes when they attacked.

It was around this time that Fox created the Marin Coalition for California Wildlife and began pushing the county to adopt nonlethal predator control methods.

Fox, who co-wrote the book “Coyotes in Our Midst,” said she believes the nationwide effort to exterminate coyotes has actually caused their population to increase by disturbing the pack hierarchy and, in turn, allowing more coyotes to reproduce. In a pack, only the alpha coyotes mate. When the alpha is killed, all the animals disperse and breed.

Banning traps, poisons

The effort became a movement in 1998 when California banned the use of steel-jawed traps and poisonous collars. Over the next two years, the county formed the Marin Livestock and Wildlife Protection Program, which essentially used the money once paid to federal trappers to help ranchers build fences, night corrals and lambing sheds, and purchase guardian dogs.

The program now has 26 ranchers employing 37 guard dogs and 31 llamas to protect 7,630 animals on 14,176 acres, according to Stacy Carlsen, the Marin County agricultural commissioner.

The number of sheep killed by coyotes in Marin has decreased steadily since the program began, Carlsen said. In the fiscal year 2002-03, 236 dead sheep were reported. In 2010-11, 90 sheep were killed, according to county records.

The numbers have fluctuated over the years – 247 sheep were killed in 2007-08 – but very few ranchers suffer the kind of heavy losses that were common a decade ago. Records show one rancher lost 57 sheep in 2002-03. Last year, 14 of 26 ranchers in the livestock protection program did not have a single loss. Only three ranchers had more than 10.

“For me, it has changed the whole outlook of raising sheep out here,” Pozzi said. “It gives us a fighting chance.”

In addition to the dogs, which can cost \$500 each, the program helped pay for 30 miles of fences, electrification, noisemakers, lights and motion sensors. The budget has nevertheless been reduced. It was \$50,000 in 2001 and is now down to \$20,000 a year, Carlsen said.

‘My dogs are professionals’

Besides Great Pyrenees, Marin ranchers also use Akbash, Maremma, Anatolian shepherds and komondors, all large breeds that instinctively bond with and protect sheep.

“I like to say that my dogs are professionals. My sheep are the entire focus of their lives,” Barinaga said. “They’ll defend the sheep till their death if they have to.”