Dear Legislators, January 16, 2015

On behalf of Project Coyote’s Science Advisory Board and the undersigned scientists we express our support for prohibitions on wildlife killing contests (WKC), derbies and tournaments, including prohibition on contests focused on coyotes, like that being considered by the New Mexico State Legislature.

The most general reason to prohibit WKC is that hunters and wildlife managers believe, as a community, that killing an animal without an adequate reason is unjustified and unsportsmanlike. Killing an animal for a prize or trophy constitutes killing without an adequate reason. Insomuch as WKC are primarily motivated by killing for a prize or trophy, they are wrong.

Some advocates of WKC argue that they are important for achieving management objectives for other species, especially game species. There is no credible evidence that indiscriminate killing coyotes or other predators, would effectively serve any genuine interest in managing other species. If leaders in the hunting and wildlife management community believe that WKC, in general, serve important objectives, then the principles of wildlife management mandate that (1) these objectives be articulated and vetted by the best-available science, and (2) some reasonable, science-based case be made to justify WKC as an appropriate means for achieving these objectives. In the absence of such an evaluation, WKC should be prohibited.

Advocates of WKC might argue that they – when directed at predators, especially coyotes – are an important means for realizing one or both of these objectives: (1) decrease the loss of livestock to depredation, and (2) increase the abundance of prey species in the interest of maximizing hunting success by humans.

With respect to objective (1), a great deal of science has been developed on how to effectively manage depredations, including both lethal and non-lethal methods. Lessons from that science include:

(i) Indiscriminate killing is ineffective and it is plausible, perhaps likely, that when associated with a WKC it would lead to increased risk of depredations. A primary reason for this concern is that only some, often only a few, individual predators
participate in depredation. Indiscriminate and “pre-emptive” killing of predators associated with WKCs can lead to the disruption of predators’ social structure and foraging ecology in ways that increase the likelihood of depredations. In hunted coyote populations, for example, the number of surviving pups that must be fed by the alpha parents increases, and the number of transient individuals may increase. These factors may predispose more coyotes to depredate livestock.

(ii) When not killed (exploited), coyotes self-regulate their populations by means of dominant individuals defending non-overlapping territories and suppressing subordinate pack members from breeding.

(iii) The indiscriminate killing associated with WKC does not target: (a) the offending predator, (b) the site where depredation has occurred, and (c) the time when depredation has occurred. This renders WKCs ineffective as a means of depredation control.

While managing to reduce the loss of livestock is a common goal for all stakeholders, WKCs do not contribute to this goal and may work against it.

With respect to objective (2), a large body of science indicates that killing predators, especially under circumstances associated with WKCs, is not a reliable means of increasing ungulate abundance. The circumstances most likely to result in increased ungulate abundance are also the circumstances most likely to impair important ecosystem benefits and services that predators provide. Even when predators are killed to the point of impairing the ecosystem services, there is still no assurance that ungulate abundance will increase. The reason being is that ungulate abundance is frequently limited by factors other than predators – factors such as habitat and climate.

Beyond objectives (1) and (2), which focus on affecting game populations and livestock depredations, lies a need to better recognize and celebrate the predators' valuable contribution to the health and vitality of our ecosystems. For example, predators serve human interests through rodent control and disease prevention and promoting diverse plant communities and soil fertility. Thus, reduction of the distribution and numbers of apex predators can have significant detrimental effects.

The Boone and Crockett Club was founded by Theodore Roosevelt in 1887 "over the concerns that we might someday lose our hunting privileges and the wildlife populations for future generations”¹, is still considered one of the most respected sportsmen’s institutions in North America. The Club “does not support programs, contests or competitions that directly place a bounty on game animals by awarding cash or expensive prizes for the taking of wildlife”² because WKCs contravene the club’s “fair-chase” motto.

¹ From B&C’s website: http://www.boone-crockett.org/join/associates_faq.asp?area=join
Thank you for considering these concerns on this important issue. If the legislators are interested to know about the support for any of the claims in this letter, we would be honored to further present and discuss the science and scholarship with the New Mexico Legislature.

Respectfully submitted,

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