A BARBARIC BLOODSPORT: End Wildlife Killing Contests

“Wildlife killing contests are symptomatic of a broader problem of misguided wildlife governance by state agencies that fails to recognize and value the crucial ecological roles of native predators.”

- Dave Parsons, MS
Wildlife biologist & Project Coyote Science Advisory Board member

ABOUT

Most Americans are shocked to learn that thousands of animals die every year in wildlife killing contests—barbaric events in which participants win prizes for killing the greatest number or the largest of a given wildlife species. Bobcats, cougars, coyotes, foxes, porcupines, prairie dogs, rabbits, raccoons, and even wolves die in these tournaments. Coyotes are the most common victims. Following the weekend-long events—such as the “Santa Slay” coyote tournament in Arizona or the “Squirrel Slam” in New York—participants gather at check-in locations to celebrate and count the slaughtered animals. State and federal wildlife agencies do not monitor the contests, which are legal in nearly every state.

A BLOODSPORT LIKE DOGFIGHTING

Wildlife killing contests are no different than dogfighting and cockfighting, which have been outlawed nationwide. Contest participants proudly post photos and videos on social media of winners posing with
piles of dead animals—stacked like cords of wood—before disposing of the animals in “carcass dumps,” away from the public eye. In some contests, children as young as 5 are encouraged to participate, and contestants receive hunting equipment and high-powered rifles—including AR-15s—as raffle prizes.

CRUEL AND UNSPORTING

Countless animals may be injured or orphaned during these events. Participants often use electronic calling devices that mimic the sounds of prey or young in distress, thereby manipulating animals’ natural curiosity or compassion to lure them in for an easy kill. These events damage the reputation of sportsmen because they violate fundamental hunting ethics.

MYTHS FUEL THE KILLING

Killing contest organizers perpetuate myths to demonize coyotes and other targeted animals, claiming that their events will reduce conflicts with wildlife. Scientific studies refute this claim. There is no evidence that killing coyotes permanently limit coyote populations, increase the number of deer or other game species for hunters, or reduce conflicts with humans, pets or livestock.

CONTRARY TO MODERN, SCIENCE-BASED WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

Randomly shooting coyotes in these events may increase coyote populations and lead to more conflicts. Coyotes self-regulate their populations when left alone, but lethal control can disrupt pack structure, allowing more coyotes to reproduce and increasing pup survival due to decreased competition for food and habitat. Contestants may also kill the more mature pack members who would pass down appropriate hunting behavior and knowledge to younger animals, increasing the likelihood that adolescent animals will prey on easy targets like livestock just to survive.

A SYMPTOM OF MISGUIDED WILDLIFE GOVERNANCE

Coyotes and other targeted animals receive almost no protections under the law because they are deemed vermin—a view perpetuated by special-interest agricultural and trophy hunting groups. This attitude persists in part because it is considered more expedient to kill than to implement responsible, science-based conservation and stewardship. State wildlife management agencies—beholden to these interest groups because they rely on them for funding—provide almost no protections to these animals. In most states, unprotected species like coyotes can be killed year-round and using almost any method.

DESTRUCTIVE TO HEALTHY ECOSYSTEMS

All wildlife species provide a crucial role in ecology. Coyotes, for example, provide a range of benefits to ecosystems including controlling rabbit and rodent populations, restricting rodent-borne disease transmission, cleaning up dead animal carcasses, and limiting populations of mesocarnivores—including raccoons, skunks and foxes—that prey on songbirds and consume their eggs.

A VIOLATION OF THE PUBLIC TRUST DOCTRINE

Wildlife killing contests are a violation of the Public Trust Doctrine, a foundational judicial principle mandating that governments hold natural assets, including wildlife, in trust for the general public and future generations. Allowing a minority of the population to slaughter wildlife en masse contravenes the rights of the majority of Americans, who value the intrinsic, ecological and aesthetic value of wild animals, and damages the reputation of state wildlife management agencies and sportsmen alike.

OUTLAWING WILDLIFE KILLING CONTESTS

In 2014 and 2018, respectively, California and Vermont banned wildlife killing contests, and the National Coalition to End Wildlife Killing Contests will work with local citizens in states across the nation to outlaw these events in 2019. In January 2019, the New Mexico State Land Commissioner prohibited killing contests for unprotected species on 9 million acres of State Trust Lands. In 2018, the city councils of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Dewey-Humboldt, Arizona, passed resolutions condemning wildlife killing contests. The city of Tucson and Pima County in Arizona passed similar resolutions in recent years.

“There will always be an element of society that has no regard for the living world and you will never change their minds... They may derive a lot of personal delight in blowing away these animals but when you ask them why they do it, they can’t provide a good answer because there isn’t one.”

- Chairman Mike Finley, Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission