
PREDATORS

Killers or Kings?

A vicious mountain lion drove his stiletto-like teeth into the eye socket and brain of a child as she played in Casper County Park in southern California. She survived, but will never walk again.

Workmen on a Wyoming refuge watched as a pack of coyotes pursued a cow elk. Later, the refuge manager found the exhausted elk, still alive, with 11 coyotes ripping flesh from its hindquarter.

A rancher in Nevada found 60 lambs mangled, bleeding and dying an agonizing death from an attack by a single mountain lion.

On a Wyoming ranch, coyotes began gnawing on the head and feet of a calf as it was being born. Then they ravishingly turned to the hindquarters of the weakened cow.

Is there a need for predator control? Are predators, uncontrolled, good for people, wildlife or livestock?

Many people argue that predators are part of our ecosystem and provide a natural balance of nature. The benefits include sanitation — by eating animal carcasses, thus preventing the spread of disease and harmful bacteria. They also feed on rodents and help control deer overpopulation.

The preceding stories, which are not isolated cases, have many ranchers in the West convinced that there is a need for predator control.

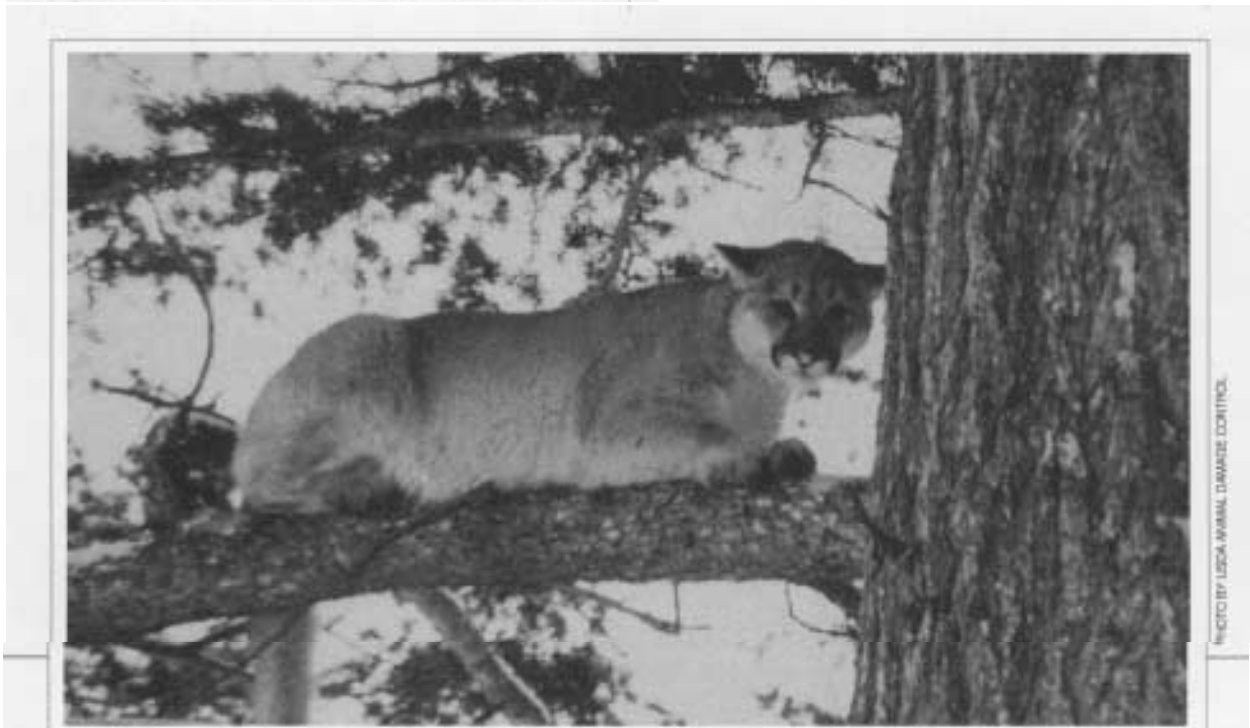
Studies indicate the coyote population in California to be as high as 800,000; in Arizona, 258,000. North and South Dakota have red fox populations estimated at more than 200,000. In eight Western states there is a combined bobcat population of more than 174,000. In nine Western states there is a combined population of 121,000 black bears and 22,000 mountain lions.

Other predators that have a marked effect on agriculture, wildlife and livestock include eagles, gray fox, wild dogs, striped and spotted skunk, opossum, racoon, mink, badger, muskrat, wild boar, razorback hogs, porcupine and beaver.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), more than half of U.S. farmers and ranchers experience economic loss from animal damage.

For example, birds cause an estimated annual loss of \$100 million due to grain loss, building and farm equipment damage, crop damage, and disease carrying problems.

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The mountain lion threatens California ranchers.



PHOTO BY USDA ANIMAL DAMAGE CONTROL

The remains of a 200-pound Angus calf killed by mountain lions

In the 17 Western states predators caused \$60 million worth of losses in sheep and goats, and \$20 million worth in calves in a single year.

While stockmen and hunters comprehend the need for predator control, preservationists, anti-hunters and animal rights activists are pursuing the preservation of predators.

California anti-hunters and animal rights activists were successful last year in passing Proposition 117, California Wildlife Protection Act of 1990, with 52 percent voter approval. This act sets aside \$30 million of tax payers' dollars annually for the next 30 years to buy habitat suitable for mountain lions.

Even though there is a healthy population of 5,000 mountain lions in the state, it makes them a protected species and permanently eliminates hunting them. California hunters will not only never be able to hunt lion within the state, but are also forbidden to bring home lions legally taken elsewhere. The mountain lion's future in California is secure.

"Now that the anti-hunters have succeeded with mountain lions, they are trying to get bear season closed, despite the fact that we have a healthy population of between 15,000 and 18,000 black bears in the state," says Red Hunt, wildlife management chief at the California Fish and Game Department (FGD).

California is just the beginning. Arizona, Oregon and Washington are next on the activists' hit list.

Approximately 800,000 deer can be found in California,

reports Doug Updike, associate wildlife biologist at California FGD. Doe normally produce twins, causing the deer population to double to 1.5 million animals. By the time the year is completed, however, an estimated 750,000 will die; 40,000 taken by hunters and up to 280,000 killed by predators. The predator kill is seven times the take of hunters.

More than 400,000 deer die from other causes—mainly starvation. When an animal is weakened from lack of forage, the predator problem becomes more serious. A side effect of the environmentalists' success in banning 2, 4-D and 2, 4, 5-D and the excellent fire control in California, is that forage has become too high and thick to be grazed by deer and other wildlife.

A study of the North Kings deer herd, a population of California mule deer, confirmed a herd decline from 17,000 in 1950 to 2,000 in 1988. The initial

decline was a result of over population in the '40s and '50s; the lack of recovery is related to heavy predation.

Seventy percent of fawns on the Steens Range in Oregon are killed by coyotes during the initial nine months of life.

The Anderson Mesa herd in Arizona gradually declined after 1955 and was reduced by 85 percent in a 1967 blizzard. By 1970, the 115 survivors had increased to 350. Intensive annual coyote control by toxicants was then terminated. The herd peaked at 481 in 1971 and the numbers remained constant.

When new predator control was started in 1979, the coyote population was effectively reduced. Soon after, the

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**— Ron Thompson,
California Animal Damage Control**

pronghorn population increased 400 percent.

In northern Minnesota wolf predation caused 90 percent of the natural mortality of radio-controlled deer. The estimated loss of 71 fawns per 100 doe was a direct result of wolf predation.

In the Northwest Territory, wolf populations were estimated at 55,000 in the early '80s. According to Alaska Fish and Wildlife research, wolves could average an estimated combined kill of 1,500 moose and caribou daily.

Because of wildlife conservation efforts, including predator control and hunting, U.S. wildlife numbers are up. Today, the whitetail deer population is estimated at 15 million. There are more than 1 million pronghorn antelope on the Plains where once only 13,000 survived. There are more than a half-million elk. Bison numbers, less than 1,000 at the turn of the century, are more than 75,000 today.

Ranchers have had a significant impact on wildlife by improving forage in riparian areas on public and private lands, salting, and creating and improving water storage facilities.

USDA's Animal Damage Control (ADC) is a government agency whose sole purpose is to "solve problems that are created when wildlife species cause damage to agricultural, urban or natural resources."

Control techniques used by ADC include cage traps, which are responsible for the capture of 54 percent of the total target predator animals taken. Steel-jawed traps capture 26 percent of the animals. Aerial and terrestrial shooting, M-44 sodium cyanide devices, calling, dogs, snares and denning account for another 20 percent.



The coyote is the most common predator livestock producers have to deal with.

Compound 1080 was banned throughout the United States in 1972, causing a significant increase in predator population by 1976. Since that time, due to the animal rights movement, ADC control methods have gradually been reduced. To add to the problem, ADC is currently required to go through lengthy planning processes, including public meetings, before conducting any predator work.

"People don't like to talk about predator control," says Ron Thompson, California ADC state director. "The Fish and Game Department uses selective control after problems occur. ADC prefers preventive control. Activists want to eliminate all control."

U.S. Rep. Pat Schroeder, Colorado, has introduced a bill to ban all steel traps in the United States.

"If they accomplish the steel trap ban we won't have a thing," says a Colorado trapper. "They don't want you to kill predators, but it's O.K. if a predator kills cattle and sheep."

In 1990 the California ADC had to reduce the number of traps being used because of new rules requiring daily trap inspections as opposed to the previous three-day inspections.

"The method of trapping animals is cruel and inhumane in the eyes of some individuals," says Updike. "I've seen animals dying of starvation in the wild. I say they're suffering more than if shot by a rifle. Man-caused suffering is the main issue with the activists."

In the first victory for California's Fish and Game Department, after five consecutive court defeats by animal activists, hunting of black bears with dogs and firearms was allowed to proceed this past fall. In the last five years, however, the FGD lost two proposed mountain lion hunts, an elk hunt, a bear hunt and one bear archery hunt.

Updike, like the majority of FGD wildlife biologists, believes in no hunting for some endangered species, but is a solid supporter of hunting for others. He believes a rancher has the right to kill predators that are destroying his livestock.

However, an increasing number of anti-hunters with a different philosophy are being hired by the department.

"Wildlife-type people are coming out of the forestry schools now," says Curt Mullis of the New Mexico ADC. "They are being taught predators are good. They have no ties to the economic end. I know because I was one. When I graduated and got a job in the real world, I had to learn things all over again."

Predator control is an emotional issue. It seems to have nothing to do with wildlife numbers or economic impact. Our adversaries refuse to hear the facts because the facts will not support their beliefs.

Although many will never see or hear mountain lions, coyotes or bears, they want to know they are there and that someone is not killing them. It's a totally different story to the person whose livestock is being killed by predators.

The Fish and Game Department is under tremendous pressure from sportsmen and the agriculture industry to maintain hunting and to control predators. The preservationists and animal rights groups are strong, but have growing conflicts among themselves regarding which species to save when one threatened or endangered animal is killing another.

Are predators kings of the wilderness or cold-blooded killers?

"The politics of it all," Thompson says, "is causing a great deal of heartburn for the Fish and Game Department."