

January 22, 2018

To Members of the House Committee on Fish, Wildlife and Water Resources,

I am writing to express my very strong support for a coyote hunting season, in contrast to the current wide open 24/7/365 season. I also support a law making killing contests illegal. I'll keep my remarks focused on several specific but related arguments.

First, the old standby argument often used in public by Department of Fish and Wildlife management that hunting coyotes keeps them fearful of humans and thus serves both humans and coyotes simply does not stand up to careful review.

It is well established that although coyotes do aggress against humans, they are naturally shy and, in fact, not generally aggressive towards humans at all. Aggression when it occasionally plays out is often the result of ill-informed people performing acts that essentially invite aggression by wild creatures who are doing what wild creatures do to survive. (Humane Society of the U.S.) I would further add:

1. The Department has never provided any documentation to support the idea that killing coyotes inhibits aggression by other coyotes towards humans. Without sound documentation, this is simply pop psychology applied to coyotes. One has to wonder whether fear is being planted in coyotes by hunters, or instead simply being acted out by humans who have an irrational, deep-seated response to creatures labeled as "vermin," a label inherited from the now largely eradicated wolf population.
2. The Department has never provided any documentation that this concept has proven effective with other hunted species. Deer, for example, that do much more damage to agriculture and private property are hunted regularly, but has that made them more fearful of humans? On the contrary, their boldness in approaching human habitations is an ongoing issue.
3. Coyotes function in family packs that have established a defined territory. The primary pair (who mate for life) keep other coyotes out of that territory and maintain an equilibrium within it. If you kill family members, it disrupts that pack and creates openings for coyotes from elsewhere to infiltrate. When that happens, the order of things is disrupted and those "unaffiliated" coyotes can potentially be problem-causing. Killing coyotes has little if any impact on repairing such a situation, but it can be a cause of disruption and promote problem behavior by maverick coyotes.
4. While killing the occasional aggressive coyote is both possible and justified (although it is extremely difficult for even a trained hunter to track down and take a specific, problematic animal, according to The Humane Society of the US), such thinking is increasingly being replaced by research into human-animal conflict and non-lethal ways to deal with it. Why isn't the VT Department proactively leading with this modern approach, rather than placidly and unconvincingly disavowing the contests?

5. In any case, implementing a regulated season would not end the killing of coyotes so nothing would be lost if killing actually does make them fear humans.

My second point pertains to killing contests. The context I want to reference is the North American Model of Wildlife conservation, which, as you know, is simply a set of principles established in the early 20th Century to address the widespread destruction of species underway at the time. The Model is generally regarded as the heart of established wildlife conservation. Managers at the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife often refer to the Model in arguing for the effectiveness of the conservation status quo.

There is currently much debate about the Model and its effectiveness across the country, and I'm not going to presume to delve into that debate here. Suffice to say that after 100 years or so, many very knowledgeable people find the Model to be lacking in significant ways and in significant need of updating. It shouldn't be a surprise that much has changed in the world of wildlife conservation in 100 years!

What I want to say is this – that the open season on coyotes and the killing contests are compelling and dramatic evidence that the system built around the Model is not functioning well.

First, the Model attempted to lay out a rational approach to wildlife management, yet the above activities largely stem from the emotional lives of a very small number of hunters who “hate” coyotes, as well as from the emotional lives of certain others who may or may not approve, but believe they need to offer support. Facebook tells us as much. There is nothing rational about singling out one species for very special and punishing treatment.

Second, the powerful reaction that much of the larger non-hunting public and even some hunters have towards these activities is recognition that something is really wrong here. That matters because tenet 1 of the Model is that wildlife must be managed for all citizens (not just coyote hunters). The fact that these contests are often underground makes clear they are being deliberately hidden from the public, and that even the hunters sense they have crossed a line.

Third, tenet 4 of the Model disallows wasteful and frivolous killing of wildlife. These contests are exactly that. Think of the decimation of the buffalo, of animals left on the plains by the tens of thousands to rot. The coyote numbers are fewer, but are the contests really different from a moral point of view?

Finally, tenet 6 identifies science as the proper tool for discharge of wildlife policy. Where is the science behind these activities? It's absent because the Department's stance is basically political. I have to wonder how Department scientists feel about killing contests.

There is much to consider in all of this. My conclusion is that if we are unable to address even these extreme examples of the failure of the existing system, then the underlying and necessary discussion must be about system failure itself. By “system,” I mean the Model as

applied by the Fish and Wildlife Department and Board in conjunction with its close allies. The Model offers some useful guidelines, but if the supporting institutions are in truth only there to answer to hunters and trappers, and, again and again, this seems to be the case, then the Model has little value.

I know that the open season and killing contests are not serving responsible, humane hunters who are trying to live in accordance with this 100-year old, hunter-generated ethic; they are not serving a public that increasingly is embracing its legal right to participate in wildlife management decision-making, only to be slapped down by a closed system; and, they are not serving wildlife.

It seems hypocritical of the Department to offer facile website tributes to the ecosystem role of the coyote while steadfastly singling them out as a species for extreme targeting. That stance violates the very standards the Department uses to define itself. The Department and Board are clearly not interested in addressing these matters. The task must fall to the Legislature itself. I ask for your support in changing this situation.

Thank you.

Jim White, Shelburne