

Lost in the 21st Century-Vermont's Department of Fish and Wildlife

It was but one paragraph in a 19 page report to the legislature, but that one paragraph offered unique insight into the mindset of the leadership of the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW). Their January, 2018 report shared the DFW's perspective on coyote management, as well as on the coyote killing contests that creep up every winter. The killing contests touched a raw nerve with many Vermonters who wrote to express their disapproval, shining a light upon current public policy that allows for the 365/24/7 shooting of coyotes. Vermont's House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife asked the DFW a year ago to offer its views so that the committee could better assess whether legislation is necessary to better address the growing public debate. One side calls for ending killing contests and mainstreaming or normalizing coyote management by instituting the kind of typical, defined hunting season that applies to all other game animals. The other side says nothing is broken with Vermont's public policy – stay the course.

The DFW's report walks both sides of the fence. It recognizes-the ecological importance of coyotes, "...the coyote (is) a permanent and valuable resident of the state, one that provides important ecological functions." It further acknowledges that the predator has no substantive impact on the state's deer population (something coyote shooters reject as blasphemy). In the end DFW rejected public concerns and embraced the status quo. Although they do not endorse the killing contests, in an overt show of where their bias lies, they are unwilling to ask the legislature to end this blood sport.

But as to that curious paragraph -- in the laundry list of arguments about coyotes management, the DFW includes this statement about their role, "....Government's role is to protect the rights of the minority as designed by the Constitution." Now it is true that trappers and hunters are clearly in the minority and most citizens would agree that government should protect minority rights. But this argument is a red herring of the first order. It is so misleading that it brings to mind the adage...a half truth is a whole lie.

What the DFW fails to acknowledge is the fact that trappers and hunters are unlike any other minority one can imagine when the word "minority" comes to mind. Two foundational issues set them apart. One, most minorities don't have a governance body that determines public policy on their issues, staffed 100% by representatives of that minority. Think about that. In this case, the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Board (FWB) which is composed entirely of a representatives from trapping and hunting interests (one from each county), makes the regulations and public policy on all species that are trapped, hunted or fished. Further, Board members are uncredentialed, unelected and unaccountable to the governor, the legislature or the public, yet they control and craft public policy! Instead of being in the back of the bus, trapping and hunting interests are driving the bus and in fact, own the bus! While the DFW nominally serves all the public by its mission statement, in reality it has one primary customer and that is trappers and hunters. Its "Don't Worry-Be Happy" coyote report simply affirms that.

The DFW needs to evolve to broaden its constituencies to include the public at large. The national industry voice for all state fish and wildlife agencies has called for transformation of state wildlife agencies; the wildlife profession and academia are calling for change; and clearly citizens of Vermont are calling for change. And it now seems that the legislature is on the verge of acting on public concerns since DFW won't. The fact that the legislature is dealing with this specific issue rather than the established bodies charged to do so, is clear evidence that our wildlife governance system is in need of major repair.

Walter Medwid lives in Derby, chairs the Orleans County Natural Resources Conservation Board and serves on the steering committee of the Vermont Wildlife Coalition