

Testimony regarding H 60 pertaining to coyote hunting

February 17, 2017 Robert Mullen

Thank you for this opportunity to address the Committee on the proposed bill H 60.

I am Rob Mullen from West Bolton. I am a wildlife artist and for 12 years have worked with the Smithsonian Institution's Arctic Studies Center on a Boreal Forest natural history, art, and anthropology exhibition. If we ever get it on the floor, I'll be co-lead curator. I graduated from Mt. Mansfield Union and then UVM with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology. I grew up hunting and fishing here and am a staunch supporter of hunting and fishing for food and conservative wildlife management purposes.

From that perspective, the current state of coyote hunting in Vermont concerns me deeply. H 60 is a welcome measure, though given the primacy of wildlife biology as the underpinning of the issue **I hope you will consider having the Fish & Wildlife Department (FWD) take the lead in writing the report** in consultation with the Fish & Wildlife Board (FWB) rather than the other way around.

Mammalian predator populations have self-regulated for tens of millions of years through a range of adaptations including, intense territoriality, socially restricted breeding, and environmentally sensitive litter size. Typically, this means that they are automatically limited by available habitat and prey density and need no hunting to manage their populations, though they can usually sustain some – and coyotes famously so. The FWD readily acknowledges both of these points with regard to coyotes and yet singles out coyotes for special treatment that no other large mammal in the state withstands, permitting an unrestricted open season 24 hr/day with no bag limits and no reporting requirements let alone having any idea of how many pups are left to starve during denning season.

In contrast, White-tail Deer, a prey species that will overpopulate and need predation/hunting, are strictly monitored (and properly so) with a short season, limited tags and mandatory reporting. We eliminated Vermont's native apex predators that could effectively prey on deer over 100 years ago so that human hunters have had to take their place and perform the role of apex predator. Predator hunting does not have that inherent ecological rationale. Even if there are social rationales for coyote hunting, permitting unlimited, unmonitored killing encourages disrespect and mistreatment of a sentient animal that is an important part of our natural landscape.

From supporters of the sport I've read that the unfettered killing of coyotes is necessary to:

- A. Protect the deer herd – presumably by reducing the number of coyotes by hunting.
- B. Protect pets and livestock – again presumably by reducing the number of coyotes
- C. Reduce overpopulated coyotes – same again
- D. Reduce or eliminate an “invasive species” and again

Yet at the same time, they turn around and justify limitless killing by citing FWD that hunting pressure has no significant effect on the coyote population (at least until 75% of the population is removed repeatedly year after year). This of course, severely undermines all of the previous

rationales that were predicated on significantly reducing the population, while relying on the shaky proposition that just because you can do something you should.

- a) Re protecting deer: not only are efforts to reduce coyote numbers in the long-term futile, but they are most often unnecessary. As the FWD states, coyotes have no significant large-scale effect on the deer herd and are not a limiting factor.
- b) Protecting livestock and pets is a moot point. Farmers and landowners already have carte-blanche to protect their livestock from raiding predators so hunting regulations are irrelevant. Pets are an owner's responsibility and again, defense is allowed.
- c) Coyotes are not overpopulated. To the best of the FWD knowledge, their population varies naturally (due to high pup mortality) within a stable range.
- d) Coyotes are not an invasive species in any management sense. They have migrated into the vacant apex predator niche; a vacuum we created (we all know what Nature thinks of vacuums). This is a perfectly natural process. Legally, federal law uses the following definition of an invasive species:

1. It is nonnative to the ecosystem under consideration, and
2. Its introduction causes or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health.

https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/uploads/eo_13112.pdf

Backing that up, the FWD states:

"...the coyote plays an important role in the ecosystem. It is one of Vermont's major large mammalian predators."

<http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/cms/One.aspx?portalId=73163&pageId=148991>

The one point coyote hunters use to justify the open season that is backed up by the FWD is that hunting has no long-term effect on the population. This point was underscored on Monday's VPR Vermont Edition program when Commissioner Porter said that if the Department felt coyote killing contests would affect the population, they wouldn't allow them.

That comment raises specific questions that I hope H 60 will help answer:

1. **Is the coyote population level the only metric the FWD/FWB considers in making management decisions** (and how are population estimates made)?
2. **If it is not, given the total lack of oversight, does the FWD/FWB have any idea whether animals killed throughout the year are utilized in any way as opposed to discarded in the woods?**
3. **If they do not, or are aware of waste, how does the FWD/FWB square this wanton waste with the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation** that is cited as a foundational document guiding the Department's philosophy and which prohibits **killing except for food, fur, or defense?** (To cut through the hearsay and whitewashed claims that imply coyotes are used for pelts to some significant degree; of all the coyotes shot and trapped throughout the state in much of last year, there were only 34 presented at the 2016 VT Fall Fur Auction, yet one hunter alone boasted on social media of killing over 50. Average price for a coyote pelt was \$13.88 with highest being \$15; admittedly, not much incentive).

http://www.vermonttrappers.com/VTA_2016_Fall_Fur_Auction.pdf

4. **What is wrong with a closed season** that avoids the denning months, and insists on **bag limits, and reporting requirements**? They could be generous (anything would be an improvement).

All of this aside, I have always been generally very impressed with the professionalism of the Fish & Wildlife Department, especially their work with the deer herd, moose, fisheries, habitat, and non-game wildlife. The coyote is a sad exception. Permitting an open season, no limit killing, no reporting requirements, and to top it off, killing contests not only seems an abdication of the FWD's obligations to the rest of us who don't shoot coyotes for "something to do in the winter" but a flagrant waste of a wonderful animal that often crosses into joyous cruelty (coyote hunters' social media postings can be bad). The FWD/FWB should carefully reconsider abetting this behavior. I've heard an argument that this report will waste valuable Department time. Sitting on the status quo and asserting that these depredations don't threaten the coyote population is not enough. Getting out in front of this issue is very much worth the Department's time. That this unrestricted open season and killing contests serve no management purpose, yet are permitted have considerable potential to undermine trust in the Department (or bring the FWB to center stage). If the FWD/FWB insist that the current situation is the best management option, then they should justify it with whatever science (not politics) dictates its necessity.

Again, I appreciate this opportunity to address the Committee and am heartened that you are considering H 60. I hope you will consider strengthening and broadening the data and viewpoints available to the FWD/FWB by allowing testimony from a range of outside experts and informed stakeholders. I think that alerted to the current situation, most Vermonters will insist that coyotes deserve the same respect we accord deer, bear, moose, and all other animals we share our state with.

Thank, you,

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