



Response to the House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife: Questions Regarding the Management of Coyotes Populations in Vermont

Following hearings last year in the House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife, a letter (dated March 3, 2017) was sent by the Committee to the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department requesting that they provide to the Committee responses to several questions that arose from those hearings. This document provides VCCC's specific responses to the questions contained in that letter.

1. The long-term deleterious impacts coyotes have on Vermont's game populations, if any:

Hunters frequently rationalize killing coyotes because they claim coyotes decimate the deer herd. However, the VT Fish and Wildlife department (quoted below from their website) states emphatically that the deer population in VT is not endangered or even overly impacted by coyote predation:

“Coyotes are important members of the ecosystem and have evolved together with many of nature’s existing prey species. Conservation of the coyote is important to maintaining ecosystem integrity because of the vital role they play as predators...the eastern coyote is an omnivore; it is both a predator and a scavenger with a widely varied diet. The coyote’s diet and feeding habits can be more accurately compared to those of the fox than a wolf. ...At certain times of the year, deer meat can be a significant portion of its diet. Although a coyote may kill a fawn or deer in deep snow, it will also readily eat the carcass of a dead deer and other dead animals. Deer numbers are carefully monitored and there is no indication that coyotes are negatively influencing deer populations in Vermont...Research has shown that although the coyote does prey on deer fawns in the spring and deer in the winter, it is not a major controlling factor on deer numbers with the possible exception of areas where deer populations are already low or intense winters are extremely severe.”

The time has come to stop the policy condoning without reason the mindless killing of a valuable predator that provides critical ecological services to the landscape. Reason must trump the hate and ignorance codified in Vermont’s current public policies.

2. Justification for variance of Vermont's existing coyote management practices from the NAMWC relative to ethical hunting and Vermont's wanton waste law:

The Public Trust Doctrine is considered to be the cornerstone of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation (NAMWC). It is based on the concept that certain natural resources, like wildlife, cannot be owned by individuals but are to be protected and conserved by the government in a manner that benefits both current and future generations. According to Vermont statute 10 VSA 4081, and also in accordance with the NAMWC, wildlife belongs to all Vermonters. As stated in the Constitution of the State of Vermont, the fish and wildlife are held in trust by the State for the benefit of the citizens of Vermont and shall not be reduced to private ownership. But clearly Vermont's year-round persecution of coyotes does not represent the conservation ideals of many citizens nor does it protect, or manage, wildlife responsibly. In fact, by dismissing public concerns about management practices, this species has indeed been privatized contrary to Vermont's Constitution. The current unregulated approach appears to encroach on the public trust by enabling a minority of hunters to relentlessly pursue a species appreciated and beloved by many more individuals, all year long with no reprieve. It is clear, from the Vermonter Poll as well as the many active supporters of grass roots wildlife advocacy in Vermont, that many, if not most, of Vermont's stakeholders do not approve of or condone the treatment of these animals who are shot, hounded, chased, baited and killed in derbies and contests.

Per the NAMWC, wildlife should only be killed for a legitimate purpose and this is not happening with the current open season. The Model justifies killing wildlife only for food, in self-defense, for fur, and in the protection of property. Since most coyotes are killed for sport and not for fur, and are often left to rot where they die, coyote hunting is very rarely legitimate. Their pelts are only prime for a few short months during the late fall/winter season, so any coyote killed outside of that timeframe is a clear indication of wanton waste. Coyotes killed during the fall/winter season are often killed by people who are not interested in selling the fur. More often than not these coyotes are slaughtered out of pure hatred towards an animal perceived as competition over game species. The wanton violence directed at coyotes is evident from the numerous graphic photos and posts on social media from hunters who shoot every coyote they encounter and celebrate the cruel suffering and torture inflicted on these animals.

Hunters brag online of killing coyotes simply to relieve boredom. They may be calling an animal from their tree stand and if a coyote responds to the call, that animal is killed simply for being a coyote. Hunters often say, "I don't care what season I'm hunting, it's always coyote season." They refer to these animals as varmints, vermin, and deer poachers. Many coyote killers possess a passionate hatred of these apex predators. They vilify and objectify the species with a disturbingly intense hatred clearly based on myth rather than fact. Coyote killing contests and derbies make no sense scientifically, morally, or ethically. Hounding is also deplorable. It is particularly sadistic and inhumane, not only to the intended

victim of the hunt, but also to the many domestic dogs who are put in harm's way. If the goal of wildlife management is conservation, than hunting should only be legal if it supports or enhances conservation efforts and wide-ranging environmental programs. Wanton waste and persecution of predators is in direct conflict with the NAMWC, which prohibits the wasteful, frivolous killing of wildlife.

The NAMWC also dictates that science is the proper tool for the discharge of wildlife policy. The VT F&W department owes the majority of Vermonters responsible, fact/research-based policies and programs that will embody current predator and environmental science and will not be skewed to the desires of a demanding special interest group. No studies of coyote populations in Vermont have been conducted since the mid 1980s. The Department does not require reporting of coyotes who are killed each year and/or where they are killed. This is a clear abdication of proper wildlife "management".

3. An estimate (with methodology) of the population of coyotes in Vermont:

In Vermont, coyotes can be killed year round, in almost any manner. Hunters are not required to report coyote kills. Consequently, there is no current or valid estimate of their population. Kim Royar, the F&W Dept. furbearer expert, estimates there are between 4500- 8000 coyotes statewide at this point in time. This relatively wide range, which also appears on the F&W website, was derived from a study of the home range and habitat use of only 26 coyotes conducted in the Champlain Valley from July 1984 through December 1986. In the subsequent three decades since this relatively small study was conducted, no further research has been carried out on Vermont's coyote population.

4. Your scientific, biological, basis for current open season management practices:

There is no scientific basis for the open season on coyotes. In fact, all evidence conclusively condemns this approach as counter-productive. In most states coyote killing is done in the name of livestock or deer herd protection. The Fish and Game Department Commissioner, Louis Porter, and the Department's furbearer expert, Kim Royar, have both stated that the most important reason to hunt coyotes in Vermont is to keep them wary and fearful of humans. In fact, coyotes, like other wild animals, are born with a fear of humans and that has made coyote attacks on humans an exceedingly rare occurrence in Vermont. Information about coyotes on the VT Fish & Wildlife website attributes "instinctive wariness" to this species. In fact, the vast majority of reported attacks on humans in the entire United States have been attributed to animals habituated to humans through feeding and/or habitat encroachment. According to a New Hampshire sheep farmer, who coexisted peacefully with coyotes for 20 years after successfully utilizing the technique of hazing to scare them away from her flock, "A dead coyote learns nothing." Behavioral studies (see attached paper) on coyotes demonstrate conclusively that pack dynamics and structure affect coyote behavior dramatically. An experienced

alpha pair will reduce conflicts by influencing their pack’s behavior. But alphas are typically the hunters for the pack and therefore targeted by farmers and hunters. Science has shown that killing coyotes does not result in making other animals wary, but scaring coyotes away can effectively accomplish this goal. It is critical to point out that establishing an appropriate season or other regulations on coyote hunting would not infringe upon a landowner’s rights to protect their property.

5. A summary of how neighboring states regulate hunting of coyotes, including whether they implement regulated seasons, regulated night hunting, establish bag limits per day or per season, whether hunting coyotes with dogs is practiced, whether hunting is permitted during the intervening months between birthing and whelping.

	VT	NH	ME	NY	MA	CT	RI
Regulated or open season	Open	Open	Open	10/1-3/25 No Sundays	1/2-3/8/2017 and 10/14-3/8/2018 No Sundays	Open No hunting on Sunday	10/1-2/28 and 4/26-5/20
Night	No Lights	1/1-3/31 lights legal	12/16-8/31	Yes	Yes but no lights	No	No
Bag limits	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Dogs allowed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes except during deer shotgun season	No	No
Closed season	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

NOTE: In CT all coyote kills must be reported and specific towns may prohibit hunting within their borders (as Westport CT has).

6. Any differences in Vermont’s F&W’s management techniques of coyotes and its other furbearer species:

- There are set hunting seasons for bobcat, red and gray fox, raccoon, and muskrat.

- There are no hunting seasons on beaver, otter, mink, fisher, marten, lynx, wolf, or eastern mountain lion.
- There is no closed hunting season on coyote, opossum, skunk, or weasel.

7. The impact an open season is having on Vermonters and whether it is polarizing the hunting community and the majority of Vermont citizens:

Most people assume there are set hunting seasons for all game and furbearing species and that they are regulated and monitored by the Fish and Wildlife Department. When people learn that this reckless, year-round activity, is allowed, it causes them to rethink what hunting means to them. Increasingly, people who have never posted their land in the past are posting it now in protest to what they consider is the irresponsible and wasteful killing of coyotes. This could have deleterious effects to the Fish and Wildlife Dept. in the future as more people post their land and more people associate responsible hunting with indiscriminate coyote killing.

Although there have been no polls about coyote hunting specifically, there was a recent poll that indicated changing attitudes in Vermont toward the management of wildlife. In February 2017, the University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies included two questions about trapping in their Vermonter Poll. Over 75 percent of the respondents expressed a desire to ban the use of leg-hold traps, body-gripping traps, and drowning traps for wildlife. Seventy percent of those polled also opposed the wanton waste killing of wildlife without intent to consume or use the remains, unless targeted wildlife was causing damage to property. These results echo fundamental cultural shifts that are well-documented in scientific literature, within the wildlife profession, and most particularly, in the industry voice for state Fish and Wildlife agencies that has called for departments to transform in order to engage all audiences. This is of particular importance and relevance as recreational hunting continues a decades long decline in Vermont and across the nation.

It seems that most Vermonters are unclear about hunting regulations and are ignorant about the manner in which our wildlife is managed. Whether or not a stakeholder is a hunter or non-consumptive user, the important decisions regarding wildlife should involve input from all participants. Greater public outreach by the department would be beneficial.

8. Is there a need to rebuild bridges between hunting and non-hunting communities; if so, what actions might we take:

There is a need to repair the rapidly growing divide between hunters and non-hunters. It is clear that many Vermonters are not satisfied with the manner in which wildlife management on public lands is conducted. Many people are completely uninformed about the workings of the Fish & Wildlife Department. Presently, the

Department primarily caters to hunters and trappers exclusively and does little to reach or represent the rest of their constituents. In fact this exclusion of the public in the decision-making process has been labeled in scientific literature: “The Iron Triangle”. This term describes a situation in which the Department is indistinguishable from the Fish and Wildlife Board and its associated lobbying groups.

As an example, a wildlife advocate recently asked Louis Porter why his Department doesn’t perform statewide outreach on coyotes in an effort to address the loathing toward these animals that results in much of the thrill killing we encounter. He refused. It is more than evident that the culture of violence toward coyotes, witnessed by the non-hunting public, is causing major distrust toward an agency that is mandated, per 10 VSA 4081, with the following: “ The Commissioner of Fish and Wildlife shall manage and regulate the fish and wildlife of Vermont in accordance with the requirements of this part and the rules of the Fish and Wildlife Board. The protection, propagation control, management, and conservation of fish, wildlife, and fur-bearing animals in this State are in the interest of the public welfare. The State, through the Commissioner of Fish and Wildlife, shall safeguard the fish, wildlife, and fur-bearing animals of the State for the people of the State, and the State shall fulfill this duty with a constant and continual vigilance.”

Below are several recommendations relating to H. 60 and Vermont’s policies regarding coyotes that would help restore the public’s faith that this species will be treated with the respect it deserves and that all decisions related to wildlife and public lands will be based on solid science not just the desires of any special interest group:

Recommendations:

- The current open hunting season should be reformed to include closed periods based on the species’ life cycle, specifically avoiding the spring and summer months when pups are born and reared.
- Activities that promote the wanton waste of an animal, including the all forms of wildlife hunting contests and derbies, should be prohibited.
- Mandatory reporting of coyote kills by hunters and trappers.
- Additional studies need to be conducted by wildlife biologists unaffiliated with the Fish and Wildlife Department.
- All policies regarding management should be designed according to and appreciating the current research findings that favor policies of co-existence.
- Wildlife managers should promote coexistence and focus on promotion and implementation of nonlethal solutions to predator control.

- The Fish and Wildlife Department should develop hunter education programming focusing on the important role of coyotes in ecosystems and as a top predator.
- The Fish and Wildlife Board should be restructured to include a representative number of non-hunting members. These individuals should have background in wildlife biology, ecology, conservation biology, and/or environmental science.
- The recommendations from the State Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (Vermont is a member) Blue Ribbon Panel Report (March 2016) should be assessed by the DFW and reported out to the FWC and Governor.
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