

January 25, 2018  
Testimony on House Bill 60

Hello,

My name is Jennifer Lovett and I am a conservation biologist living in Stamford. I would like to thank Chairman Deen and the other Members of the Committee, for giving me the opportunity to testify.

I have read Commissioner Porter's report and would love to respond to it in depth. But, with only a few minutes to testify, my hope is that you will all read the material I submitted last week on behalf of the VCCC and that the many differences in our replies to your queried points will be obvious.

One day last August I was walking my dogs on posted property we own near the river that runs through the center of town, when I encountered two strangers. They were about 100 yards away, had just emerged from the dense shrubs along the river, and were carrying rifles. I asked them what they were up to, and they responded, "hunting coydogs". They claimed they didn't know they were on posted land, then turned back, and disappeared into the brush.

Ever since that day, I have wondered what might have happened if my dogs had not barked when they saw these hunters who were headed right for us in extremely shrubby terrain with poor visibility. I was in that brush with two coyote-sized dogs.

This was in the center of town, in an area frequented by hikers, dog walkers, and kids who play in the river, in the middle of the summer! When I told my neighbors they were shocked, angered, and frightened. Not one person that I spoke with knew there was an open season on coyotes and that hunters could shoot these animals on any un-posted land in town. We already have to avoid the forest during the various iterations of deer season but now that I have encountered coyote hunters in August I feel the woods may never be safe. Is it right that those of us who spend time in the field, or simply enjoy the outdoors, have to fear running into coyote hunters all year long?

The current open season is based on two flawed assumptions: First, that the coyote population is known and stable. Second, that year-round unregulated hunting will not impact the population in any negative way.

The VT population study, which Commissioner Porter cited several times, is no longer relevant. The data was collected in 1984/6 and no further research has been conducted on VT's coyote population in the subsequent three decades. This absence of valid current data is complicated by the open season and lack of mandatory reporting of killed coyotes by hunters and trappers.

The Department's claim that hunting keeps coyotes wary is based entirely on fiction, not fact. Coyotes are born wary of humans. They lose their fear if they are habituated with food. Many studies demonstrate conclusively that killing a 'nuisance coyote' only serves to open a niche for another animal to take over that role. On the other hand, when scared through non-lethal hazing, the offending animals will not only learn avoidance but will take that lesson back to the pack and the entire group will then consider the protected property off-limits. Hunting coyotes diminishes their natural wariness and serves to increase aggression and the likelihood of confrontation with humans or livestock.

Coyote killing contests are another aspect of the constant persecution of this species. Although they do not officially endorse, support, or encourage killing contests, the department does nothing to condemn these events. The over 1600 VT voices that resonate from a recent petition to cancel a statewide killing contest, indicate distaste for senseless, wasteful, and wanton killing of wildlife. I was approached by four local landowners for help posting their land in response to this petition.

Commissioner Porter claims to represent all VTers. I would strongly disagree. The sad reality is that wildlife and public lands belong to hunters and trappers. The fact that the entire F&W Board consists of trappers and hunters attests to this fact. There are no checks or balances from any voice that does not consider wildlife a commodity. There is not one Board member with any background in ecology, wildlife biology, conservation, or any related field. They simply hunt and trap. Those are the credentials for deciding wildlife management policy in VT.

The commissioner could not recommend one single change to the current management of coyotes. But two obvious steps might begin to repair relations with many of his constituents and protect a beneficial species from exploitation. First, ban coyote killing contests. They are not supported by the department, are sadistic, and unpopular. Secondly, establish a closed season on coyote hunting. This would satisfy the department's need to keep the animals "wary" of humans but would be consistent with current science. Hunting coyotes is counter-productive as a control on population or aggressive behavior toward livestock, pets, and people. Any hunting season should avoid the spring and summer months when pups are born and raised. This would also provide a period of respite in the summer so people could enjoy the woods in peace, quiet, and relative safety.

Thank you,

Jennifer Lovett  
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