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Re: Committee Hearing on Coyote Hunting

To the House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife

I am writing in support of the proposal to develop a limited season for coyote hunting in the State of Vermont, as opposed to the current open season. I would further ask the committee to ban the use of trapping, which causes undue suffering by animals. I am a professional ecologist with over 20 years working in the field. I am also a member of a hunting family. In this letter I wish to make three points to support my position of ending the open coyote season.

Ecology is the study of interactions between plants, animals, fungi, bacteria, and the non-living world. The basis for much of our work is the basic food web, where, for example, leaves are decomposed by bacteria, and that is eaten by worms, which are eaten by mice, which are in turn eaten by coyotes. Coyotes, in fact, are the only remaining top predator in Vermont, since the State no longer is home to wolves or catamounts. In the food web model, when one level is disturbed, the other levels respond – lose the coyotes and the populations of mice, rabbits, deer, etc... explode. While this may seem ideal to some hunters, eventually the over-browsing caused by too many deer wreaks havoc on vegetation and in fact can lead to debilitating disease – note the deer wasting disease prevalent in the Midwest, which has enormous deer populations. A healthy ecosystem has members from all levels and keeps itself in balance.

My second point addresses the suffering caused by the various trapping methods used. Every year not only wild animals but also domestic ones are maimed and killed by these trapping methods. The income gained from their pelts does not justify the suffering these animals endure during their slow deaths. Our own domestic dogs are not that far removed from wild dogs, like coyotes, and we know that they experience feelings, emotion, and pain.

My third point is more of a suggestion: that we can honor the long tradition of hunting in Vermont and at the same time can evolve as a society to learn to co-exist with wild creatures. The legendary Aldo Leopold, forefather of the conservation movement, evolved from a predator hunter for the U.S. Forest Service to a conservation advocate. Although he wrote of wolves, the same could be said of coyotes. His writing from a Sand County Almanac says it best:

Wolves and Deforestation

Thinking Like a Mountain By Aldo Leopold

A deep chesty bawl echoes from rimrock to rimrock, rolls down the mountain, and fades into the far blackness of the night. It is an outburst of wild defiant sorrow, and of contempt for all the adversities of the world. Every living thing (and perhaps many a dead one as well) pays heed to that call. To the deer it is a reminder of the way of all flesh, to the pine a forecast of midnight scuffles and of blood upon the snow, to the coyote a promise of gleanings to come, to the cowman a threat of red ink at the bank, to the hunter a challenge of fang against bullet. Yet behind these obvious and immediate hopes and fears there lies a deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself. Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf.

Those unable to decipher the hidden meaning know nevertheless that it is there, for it is felt in all wolf country, and distinguishes that country from all other land. It tingles in the spine of all who hear wolves by night, or who scan their tracks by day. Even without sight or sound of wolf, it is implicit in a hundred small events: the midnight whinny of a pack horse, the rattle of rolling rocks, the bound of a fleeing deer, the way shadows lie under the spruces. Only the ineducable tyro can fail to sense the presence or absence of wolves, or the fact that mountains have a secret opinion about them.

My own conviction on this score dates from the day I saw a wolf die. We were eating lunch on a high rimrock, at the foot of which a turbulent river elbowed its way. We saw what we thought was a doe fording the torrent, her breast awash in white water. When she climbed the bank toward us and shook out her tail, we realized our error: it was a wolf. A half-dozen others, evidently grown pups, sprang from the willows and all joined in a welcoming melee of wagging tails and playful maulings. What was literally a pile of wolves writhed and tumbled in the center of an open flat at the foot of our rimrock.

In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy: how to aim a steep downhill shot is always confusing. When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide-rocks.

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes - something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the

green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

Respectfully Submitted,
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