



Susan C. Morse

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Dear Respected Members of the Vermont House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife:

I am sending you this document for your convenience as you consider and hopefully move forward on legislation that would create and regulate a coyote hunting season and prohibit coyote “killing contests”. It is a personal statement drawn from my over 40 years of admiring, studying, photographing and scientifically monitoring wildlife (including coyote) throughout North America. To say that this is a divisive and highly contentious issue is an understatement. I am nonetheless optimistic and look forward to your decisive and thoughtful action now that will enable appropriate changes in the law. I am also confident that such a decision will be welcomed by wildlife biologists and ecologists in Vermont’s Fish and Wildlife Department, as well as other natural resource agencies. I believe the ultimate outcome of your decision to protect Vermont’s coyotes will empower Vermont’s Fish and Wildlife department to do what many of us believe is morally right and biologically reasoned.

My brief comments start with an acknowledgement that clear thinking on this issue has been confounded by the fact that some Vermont hunters firmly believe that any change influencing what they believe to be their “rights” creates a precedent leading towards the ultimate prohibition of all hunting, trapping – even gun ownership. This is simply not true, and many other hunters, myself included, are totally supportive of restrictions that assure all of Vermont’s wildlife the respect and necessary habitat they deserve.

As for the rationale that coyotes need to be persecuted lest they destroy Vermont’s deer herd, research has demonstrated that coyotes (or other predators) are themselves regulated by the abundance of their food, and that while they do kill whitetail deer, they are not by definition going to cause the herd as a whole to decline. Numerous factors contribute to whitetail deer declines - most notably severe winter conditions and inadequate food. It falls upon us as wildlife managers and Vermont citizens to insist upon the conservation and stewardship of the healthy habitats that support deer and all wildlife. Anyone sensible would acknowledge that the ups and downs of deer populations experiencing the tough conditions up here in the north are unavoidable and natural. Killing coyotes is no substitute for what should be our mandate to regulate deer numbers through hunting so that populations do not exceed the carrying capacity of the habitat and hence harm the very forests that support them. To conclude, I would like to share with you this eloquent excerpt from The Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department’s publication entitled, “Eastern Coyote Issues – A Closer Look”:

“The Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department believes that both predators and prey species are vital components in a healthy ecosystem. Deer and other prey species evolve with predators and as such, we neither regard predators as undesirable, nor do we view them as a significant threat to game populations. In fact, predators can help maintain prey populations at levels that are in balance with their habitat”

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Some folks can't help themselves. They simply hate predators and enjoy killing them. They justify this behavior with the myth that coyotes are a menace to deer populations, pets, livestock and possibly even people. To the contrary, years of scientific research has analyzed the impact of excessive hunting pressure on mountain lions throughout the west; concluding that the more lions are inappropriately hunted the greater the number of depredations and interactions with humans. The reason for this is complex, but in a nutshell, resident males and females, established in their home ranges, are less inclined to kill livestock or come into contact with us in our environment because these mature cougars know their wild habitats intimately and are experienced hunters of the wild prey therein. The continual removal of these resident felids causes what researchers are convinced is considerable social disruption because of the influx of young inexperienced pumas seeking to establish themselves in these once stable territories. Younger lions apparently prey upon more livestock and pets and are more likely to explore opportunities for food closer to our farms and communities. In addition, from a management perspective, the mortality that this excessive hunting causes is totally unsustainable. Pumas killed are not limited to the "trophy" toms, or now even females because a reduced number of males means that the taking of females is acceptable to some hunters. In addition, incoming transient young lions are known to kill the offspring of females whose progeny were sired by the original resident tom. The outcome is very disturbing for we cannot argue that hunting enables us to manage healthy populations of pumas. Bottom line, for every resident tom killed, an unknown number of kittens are also killed. For every mature female killed, an unknown number of kittens die as well because an estimated 75% of all adult females in the habitat are either pregnant or has kittens waiting for her to return to the den site. To conclude, today's wildlife manager must consider all outcomes of hunting and harvests, as well as the cumulative effects of habitat loss, fragmentation and climate change.

Finally, competitive events aimed at celebrating killing is inappropriate and sends the wrong message to young aspiring hunters. Understandably, these contests are appalling to non-hunters. These are killing events and have nothing to do with properly managing coyotes. Instead, as it stands today, these contests are sanctioned opportunities for the killing of one member of Vermont's precious wildlife community – one unfairly vilified species that is singled out and killed excessively and at any time. Unlike other species that are managed through limited seasons and regulated harvests, there is no data, no biological knowledge gathered elucidating how this mortality is affecting the species, its prey or its habitat. These "contests" celebrate the hateful exploits of a few; the rest of us are ashamed, and wonder why these events are condoned at all.

THINGS WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT COYOTES AND WHY WE SHOULD RESPECT AND PROTECT THEM

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Coyotes enjoy life too, including the feeling of the warm sun on a cold winter morning



Male and female coyotes form pair bonds. They are devoted to one another during the breeding season and later after their pups have been born. Here, the male urine scent-mark is placed right beside her urine. Blood in her urine announces that she is in estrus. They are marking their territory in this way, and also proclaiming their commitment to one another.



Not a "coydog", Vermont's coyote is a new race of coyote! Having hybridized with eastern Canadian wolves in Algonquin Park, our coyote is bigger, more colorful and more wolf-like than western coyotes. It is properly called a "coywolf".



Canid researcher, Simon Gadbols, of New Brunswick, Canada, describes coyotes as the "jazz players of howling...their music is all over the place". Young pups soon participate in the pack's howling sessions. Howling is communication.



Infant pups solicit regurgitation of semi-solid food from their parents and other "helper" pack members -- siblings from a previous year's litter.



Pups lick their benefactors' muzzles and beg for the food's delivery. This early diet of semi-solid food helps wean the pup from milk to meat and other solid foods.



“Insert here” (inside the parent’s mouth) for delivery of a warm meal. Note mother’s expression!



Dad’s legs are spread apart and his expression indicates that he is about to lose his breakfast – providing same for his pup.



Dad has just vomited. Is the pup perplexed, surprised, or both?



In spite of the fact that the coyote is regarded as one of the most resourceful, adaptive and intelligent species on earth, they are the least protected of any mammal in the United States.