

Testimony of Jonathan Gibson, Shrewsbury, VT
Senate Natural Resources Committee - Public Hearing, Feb. 2, 2022

Hello Senators, I want to offer brief testimony on the three wildlife bills the Committee is considering: S. 129, S. 201, and S. 289. I am a landowner in Shrewsbury where we have lived for 40 years. Our 120+ acre woodland is enrolled in Use Value Appraisal and sits astride a mapped wildlife corridor. Our management plan focuses on climate-conscious silviculture and enhancement of forest habitat for wildlife. We allow deer-hunting by a neighbor on the property and welcome visitors who share our land ethic.

I feel strongly that statutes governing the Fish and Wildlife Board should be significantly revised to make the Board advisory only and to remove regulatory and decision-making authority from the Board and vest this authority where it properly belongs - with the leadership and professional staff of the Department of Fish and Wildlife. This is what S. 129 will do. The Department has very competent people who work to serve Vermonters through education about, protection for, and management of our wildlife. Please approve S.129 so as fully to empower the Department to do the good natural resource conservation of which it is capable.

A few comments regarding the other two bills, S. 201 and S. 281: Other states and countries have banned leg-hold traps because they are inhumane and indiscriminate in causing injury and suffering to non-target species. Vermont should join them.

About coyote hunting, the obvious point is that coyotes are wildlife, and their populations should be managed like any other wildlife - with seasons, limits, reporting, and other conditions to be determined by the Department instead of the totally unregulated, year-round shooting and hunting with dogs from public roads that now occurs. Hunting in the best sense of the word, like turkey hunting or deer hunting for example, requires genuine skill, stamina, patience, and knowledge and appreciation of wildlife. You know as well as I do that there is nothing "traditional" about coyote hunting using dogs outfitted with sophisticated modern technology such as radio transmitters that report location to people waiting by their trucks to shoot the coyotes as they're driven close to or across public roads. The ban on hunting with dogs in S. 281 is a much needed first step toward regulation in the public interest. I hope each Senator on the Committee will support it.

Public opinion has shifted and that shift is accelerating toward greater understanding of biodiversity and greater appreciation of wildlife for its non-consumptive value - for observation and human enjoyment, for science, for ecological services, and for just knowing that we in Vermont are lucky to live side-by-side and can beneficially co-exist with wild creatures. It is time for the Legislature to get in step with public opinion in favor of banning leghold traps. And with regard to coyote hunting with hounds, there is increasing dismay and anger where we live about this practice, about the killing of animals that we view as part of the natural ecosystem, and about the violation of people's property rights that accompanies this activity. If coyote hunting with dogs is not stopped, I believe we will see more and more landowners posting their land, with less and less land being open to legitimate hunting, fishing, and recreation all across Vermont. We may even eventually see citizens urging their towns to pass ordinances prohibiting hunting from their town roads. Banning the practice now will avoid these undesirable results.

Thank you for taking my testimony and that of other members of the public on these important bills.