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# PREDATOR POLITICS: PERSONAL THOUGHTS AND PERCEPTIONS

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**Abstract.** My career as an extension wildlife specialist and a university administrator has allowed me to monitor both the public and private sectors' perspectives on coyotes (*Canis latrans*) and their associated management policies. Selected experiences described herein illustrate the problems (current and future) that characterize emotionally-charged conflicts like those typified by coyote control efforts.

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When Dale Rollins first approached me with an invitation to participate in this symposium, I was unsure about other commitments, but hopeful that I could return to Texas, see old friends and be a part of the program. By the time we got around to finalizing the arrangements in early August, Dale let the other shoe drop by saying "Oh, by the way, you have to write a paper and it has to be in no later than September 1 "

In our first discussion, he described a panel with Bill Sims and Dede Armentrout. Naturally, I assumed we would each deliver some prepared remarks and then share experiences and observations which, if worthy of note, would be recorded in some form of a panel summary statement. Apparently not so.

As I set about the task of preparing this manuscript, I began to rummage through papers, contact colleagues whom I had "bequeathed" my old predator files to when I moved into administration full time, and go through old calendars from my specialist days. It didn't take long to realize that I could spend a great deal of time chronicling events and laws that have already been recorded by others. In fact, Dr. Dale Wade, whom I consider to be 1 of the best experts on wildlife damage control anywhere, has already done this extremely well in at least two of his publications (Wade 1980, 1982)

With that in mind, I decided to address events and activities that I have personally been a part of with respect to predator politics and to share thoughts and perceptions as related to current issues facing agriculture across our nation. As the saying

goes "these are my own opinions and do not necessarily reflect those of anyone I have ever worked for."

## Early career influences

In 1964, I began my graduate career at Iowa State University. The Leopold Committee Report on "Predator and Rodent Control in the United States" was made public, declaring that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-Animal Damage Control program was indiscriminate, nonselective and excessive in its predator control programs. The report did, however, view Compound 1080 as a relatively humane and effective means of coyote control (Leopold 1964).

I must admit that, as graduate student of the 1960s, I was not particularly impacted by the Leopold Report except as a source of intellectual debate. I had grown up in a family where wildlife was a source of food for the table as much as anything else. One of my prized possessions today is a membership card for my great grandfather in the Illinois Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs from 1930, on the back of which is a Sportsman's Creed. The Creed exhorts members to obey laws, show respect for property, protection of wildlife and, as a last entry "I will do my best to kill a pest." That was the natural order of things from the time I was a child.

In 1971, the Cain report, "Predator Control-1971" was produced. This report indicated that chemical controls were likely inhumane and nonselective and recommended that individuals with predator problems be instructed on the use of leg-

hold traps as the major method of damage control (Cain et. al. 1972) I remember being struck by the fact that both the Leopold and Cain reports condemned existing predator control programs, but came to somewhat different conclusions on the relationship between chemical and non-chemical controls.

Some of my colleagues in graduate school with different backgrounds than mine took these reports at face value. Today, many of them are full professors in wildlife departments at major universities. I have often wondered whether or not these early career experiences influenced their attitudes towards predator management as a part of their profession.

### 1970s and toxicants

On Feb 8, 1972, President Nixon issued Executive Order No 11643, cancelling the use of specific chemicals for predator control on federal lands and in federal programs (Nixon 1972). This action was followed by EPA registration cancellation and suspension notices for Compound 1080, strychnine, sodium cyanide and thallium sulfate (Ruckelshaus 1972).

On May 16, 1972, I began employment as an area wildlife specialist with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service in Uvalde, Texas. Needless to say, the reaction of ranchers concerned about protection of their livestock, particularly sheep and goats, was dramatic. As a newcomer it was clear that the loss of control techniques was viewed as a threat to the existence of the ranching industry and, of perhaps greater importance, a way of life.

On October 31, 1972, Charles Ramsey, Extension wildlife specialist headquartered at Texas A&M, and I met with San Angeloans Bill Sims and John Cargile at their request to discuss what could be done about the situation. I have often thought in recent years how they must have walked out of that meeting with no sense of accomplishment, and probably the perception that the university was deserting them. At that time, there was little we could do from a research and extension standpoint.

From 1972 until 1974, there was much talk and little action at both the state and federal levels. A number of congressional hearings on predator and

rodent control were conducted. Many requests were prepared and submitted for reregistration of various toxicants. Finally in February of 1974, an experimental use permit for sodium cyanide in the M-44 Device was granted to Texas by EPA.

I recall the implementation meeting held at the Texas Department of Agriculture headquarters in Austin on January 23, 1974. Representatives of TDA, the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station and EPA were all present. The plan presented by EPA was, in the opinion of several of us, flawed at best. Nevertheless it was presented as a "take it or leave it" proposition. In retrospect, I believe that posture was a bluff--which worked.

In February 1974, we completed development of the training materials for the program in selected counties. We could not totally complete the materials until final approval was received from EPA. Charles Ramsey, Wallace Klussmann and I had divided up responsibility for the counties and had scheduled meetings in late February and March to get the tools in the hands of applicators as quickly as possible.

On February 28, 1974 the first meeting for which I had responsibility was held in Bexar County. The Extension Service was charged with conducting the training and TDA was to certify the applicators and allocate numbers of devices to be purchased on an acreage formula.

At the outset, there was a fair amount of confusion. We completed the meeting in Bexar County and moved to Uvalde County for a March 1 meeting. This was followed the next week by training on March 4 in Sterling county and March 5 in Mitchell and Taylor counties. That is as far as I got.

We were instructed to call the administrative offices of the Extension Service at Texas A&M twice a day to determine the status of the program. When I completed training in Mitchell County I called in and was told there was an injunction against the program filed by the Humane Society of the United States and that we would train in Abilene, but could not certify anyone to purchase the materials. That cancelled the training I had in 13 other counties in March.

## Frustration mounts

While there are a lot of "war stories" to be told about the whole area of predator control, one sticks out in my mind because it truly reflects the frustration felt by the producer community. When I arrived at Abilene, the meeting was in the old courthouse in the main courtroom. Mr. H.C. Stanley was the county Extension agent, a man well respected in both his community and his profession.

As a side attraction, a local young man had provided the newspaper with emotional (but upon review inaccurate) descriptions of the dangers of the M-44. Emotions were high in the rancher community and the knowledge that they would be trained but not certified put the group in a fairly ugly mood.

As I passed out materials before the meeting, I noticed that one individual in a suit was not taking any. At one point as he passed the papers to his neighbor, his coat fell open and revealed a .45 semi-automatic in his belt. I felt compelled to advise Mr. Stanley of the situation. He calmly replied "Yes, that fellow's a deputy sheriff. There are several scattered around the room in case things get out of hand." As you might imagine, this bolstered my enthusiasm for getting up in front of the group.

As I began my presentation (which we had very carefully scripted to avoid any legal challenges to the training) I commented that the "M-44 is a spring-operated device designed for use with a toxicant in the control of coyotes. It is the most humane device yet developed----." At that point, someone in the audience said "We don't give a damn if it's humane." Another said "Let's use one on that G-- D--- hippie." I presumed he was talking about the local fellow and not me.

The point of this story is to demonstrate that these people, most, if not all, of whom were/are God-fearing, upstanding citizens of the community had reached a level of total frustration with regulations being thrust upon them by individuals who had never experienced firsthand the interactions between predators and livestock.

## Reflections

As a wildlife biologist, the entire set of experiences related to the M-44 training program gave me a broader set of perspectives of the complicated interface between politics, biology, and the social systems of our population. Since that time, a number of milestones in predator-livestock management have been reached.

All of the research and political activity surrounding the Livestock Protection Collar using Compound 1080 has resulted in the availability of this tool, along with the M-44 Device with sodium cyanide. Mis-guided projects like the use of sodium cyanide in toxic collars have gone by the wayside. The use of husbandry practices including guard animals and fencing, once ridiculed as poor solutions, have taken their place in the total management scheme to suppress damage. More positive dialogue has taken place in recent years than in the past among groups with widely divergent interests. And, from a personal standpoint, this author has moved on to worrying about farm bill issues, boll weevil eradication and waste management on livestock and poultry operations.

Nevertheless, there are still areas of major concern in dealing with the "politics" of predator management. Some which concern me most are as follows.

*1. Professional image.* The wildlife profession (my disciplinary home) has failed to actively embrace wildlife damage control (including the control of predators) as a legitimate part of its portfolio. A cursory review of the *Journal of Wildlife Management* or the *Wildlife Society Bulletin* (the "flagship" publications of professional wildlife managers) reveals some fair amount of work on predator-prey relationships, but little if any on the management/control measures needed to alleviate damage.

This situation is exacerbated by the seemingly low level of esteem in which the majority of the profession holds those individuals who chose to confront wildlife damage problems head on. We haven't moved far enough away from the demeaning term of "gopher choker" in recognizing the hard work and dedication of those in the animal damage arena.

2. *Supercivilized public.* We are moving farther away from a societal "land ethic" whereby our citizens not only appreciate the land but also recognize that management of our resources (including wildlife) is essential to our survival. The production of food and fiber is increasingly a remote concept in the minds of urban and suburban dwellers who have no vision of where their daily bread comes from. If we are not successful in stemming this trend we will face more, not less, land use conflicts in the future

3. *Man and Nature.* Too many people today ignore or refuse to accept the fact that man, as a species, must be included in any discussions of natural resource management and agriculture. It is simply not possible to "step outside of nature" and make value judgments as if man was not both a force and a species impacted on by natural resource management decisions. The current debate on the Endangered Species Act highlights the concerns for social and economic implications as well as environmental ones

4. *Life and death.* As a society, we have become so captured by a safe environment supported by food and medical sciences that we have perhaps lost our appreciation for a basic concept--that death is a part of life. At times we have to kill other animals for reasons of our own welfare--food, protection of property, and health. In my job I come in daily contact with people who have no concept that, at times, animals must die that others will live and thrive. If they do accept it, they want it to be shut out of their consciousness. To me, that is a serious concern

## Epilogue

Finally, let me comment on perspectives, using the coyote as an example. I remember watching coyotes hunt prairie dogs in South Dakota and admiring their skills. I have raced them horseback across the Dakota prairie and seen them with steamy breath on cold Arkansas mornings. In those situations, I respect and admire the animal. When, however, I encounter a coyote on my property near Doss, TX, I will destroy it if possible. Not because I have any hatred for the coyote, but because my neighbors are in the angora goat business and I want to help protect their livelihood. I've always felt comfortable with those seemingly contradictory

attitudes. Hopefully I recognize the perspectives of others in the same situation.

Should we wish for the elimination of all predators? Not unless we wish to include ourselves in that process. Is there room for both sheep and coyotes in the world? Absolutely . . . but not in the same pasture!

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