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Avoiding Controversies that Impede Wildlife Damage Control

B. W. O'Gara[1/]

Controversies regarding wildlife damage control often result from incorrect perceptions by the general public or conservation groups. Such controversies can usually be settled to most people's satisfaction by indisputable data. In the past, however, data were often lacking. The ban, by Executive order in 1972, of chemical toxicants for predator control on federal lands and by federal agencies is a good case in point. Indisputable data were not available concerning the level of predation. The only data were derived from questionnaires filled out by livestock producers; Government officials and the public simply would not accept such data as unbiased.

After the ban on toxicants, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service supported 8 intensive field studies which indicated that levels of predation were as high as reported by stockmen, and that few sheepmen could survive financially without predator control. Following these studies, the public generally accepted control as vital to the sheep industry. However, one of the most efficient tools for coyote (*Canis latrans*) control, compound 1080 (sodium monofluoroacetate) had been lost, perhaps permanently. This was a case of getting one's "ducks in a row" too late.

The situation with golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) was quite similar, ...we did not have "our eagles in a row." Control actions preceeded adequate documentation of the magnitude of the problem. In 1970, this resulted in the Secretary of the Interior allowing control of golden eagles only on individual ranches after documentation of substantial losses. The permit could only be issued from the Secretary's Office and no permits have been issued. Had levels of predation been documented when control began, as they were during the 1970's, we would probably have a workable eagle management program. Since 1970, ranchers have had little recourse other than to "eat" losses to eagles or conduct their own "management." Forcing a rancher to lose money or break the law seems unethical, and more raptors of all kinds are being killed than is necessary.

Wolf (*Canis lupus*) recovery in the Northern Rocky Mountains is a controversial subject pitting conservationists against livestock producers. While the controversy rages, the wolves are recovering themselves. The Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Team proposed immediate control of wolves that kill livestock, and the Fish and Wildlife Service personnel involved have had the courage to authorize control when needed. Also, members of conservation organizations and ranchers served on the Recovery Team and others attended many meetings. The conservationists came to recognize that control of problem wolves will enhance the survival of the remaining wolves.

The difference in the wolf and eagle situations is striking. After including conservationists in planning for wolf control, little resistance was raised to removing 6 wolves, an officially listed endangered species, from a population of perhaps 30. On the other hand, golden eagles, which perhaps number more than 100,000 and kill a hundred times as much livestock, have not been lethally controlled since 1970. The eagle impass developed because the public was offended by control measures without documentation of levels of predation, and the results may be with us for a long time.

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