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## D.C. BACKGROUND ON PREDATOR CONTROL LEGISLATION

by

Michael Frome<sup>1/</sup>

The tragic fiasco of federal predator control as we have known it is finished. The American people will no longer tolerate it. In this age of environmental concern, the people will not allow their tax dollars to be diverted for such a destructive and wasteful war against living wild creatures for the exclusive benefit of the sheep industry. There is now no turning back to old ways.

Indiscriminate trapping, shooting and poisoning have reduced some of the rarest, most beautiful and superbly adapted species of our wildlife heritage to the brink of extinction, although they constitute a resource that could be enjoyed by all and harvested by sportsmen under sound management principles. The war on predators has been waged with little scientific knowledge of their beneficial role in the biotic community, and without moral or ethical consideration for man's responsibility in preserving natural life as an integral part of the environment.

As I wrote in the January, 1971, issue of Field and Stream, the Division of Wildlife Services, an agency of the Interior Department, has had one prime goal at the root of its existence: to kill wildlife. It has for years gotten away with murder -- the murder of wolves, mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats, foxes, badgers -- as well as anything else that might be handy.

For years sportsmen were led to believe that elimination of predators would result in an increase in game. Certainly a given range will support only a certain number of animals, whether game or domestic stock; but, as we have learned, predators take only small numbers from the animals they prey upon and are probably essential to maintenance of a healthy, viril population. These lessons were made abundantly plain through scientific observation of moose and wolves at Isle Royale National Park, Michigan. Wolves were noted to claim the old, diseased, heavily parasitized, and the weak young among the moose. As a result of natural selection, the closely cropped herd is healthy and among the most productive on the continent, bearing a high proportion of twin calves.

Isle Royale may be isolated, but principles learned there apply to predator-prey relationships the world over. Hunting plays an important role in helping to remove excess population, but, unlike natural predation, hunting does not select the weak unhealthy specimens. When predatory population is excluded from a natural community the weaker members remain, weakening future generations of the species. But natural predation keeps the old and weak individuals

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to a minimum, benefitting the hunter as well as the herd. Predation maintains qualities of wildness in game species that we admire. Fleetness, grace, alertness and deception give the feeling of challenge and pride not found in killing a chicken or cow. The animals that have these qualities are the product of centuries in their struggle of survival from predation.

One of the finest achievements of the Nixon Administration in the resource area has been its positive program to bring poisoning to a halt and to restrain the Division of Wildlife Services in its operations on public lands. Until now there has not only been an abrogation of responsibility in diverting public funds to serve a special interest, but that interest, the sheep industry, has caused more damage to the land through the years than almost any other force. Overgrazing, first at lower elevations, then on alpine meadows, has ruined millions of acres, removing plant cover, disrupting animal communities, and devastating the watershed.

Overgrazing sets vegetation back to early stages. On such misused land, ground squirrels, rabbits, woodrats, hares and pocket gophers are abundant, very probably contributing to rising numbers of coyotes. Beyond a doubt, the first consideration in "animal damage control" is good land management. This doesn't mean the elimination of livestock on public lands, but it does mean serious restraints to insure that stock is brought within the carrying capacity of the land. Unfortunately sheepmen are incredibly ill informed on these questions. They grasp at straws to hold back the great movement toward environmental ethics and morality. Some sheepmen haven't the foggiest notion of wildlife ecology, or animal behavior, though they have lived in the company of animals all their lives.

It is specially significant that this animal control workshop should be held here in Kansas, where control is conceived as a part of management to help the landowner solve his own problems through sound conservation practices. Through the Extension system, farmers and ranchers are shown how to concentrate on catching the individual coyotes and other predators guilty of killing livestock, while those without damage do not waste their time and money chasing down imaginary or harmless predators. Publications and films explain predation as a necessary, beneficial part of life. The federal government has no documents like these.

The nation has a long way to go toward developing sound management of its predator resource, but we are on the way and there is no turning back to devastating ways of the past. Prohibition against the use of poisons is one positive step. Acceptance of the Extension system by other states would be another. So would placing sport hunting of predators on a sustained-yield basis. All these are in keeping with the change in values that mark the new Age of the Environment.