

PROJECT COYOTE

F O S T E R I N G C O E X I S T E N C E



Dear Commissioners,

April 16, 2014

On behalf of Project Coyote's Science Advisory Board and the undersigned scientists we express our support for a prohibition on wildlife killing contests (WKC), derbies and tournaments.

The most general reason to prohibit WKC is that hunters and wildlife managers believe, as a community, that killing an animal without an adequate reason is unjustified and unsportsmanlike. Killing an animal for a prize or trophy constitutes killing without an adequate reason. Inasmuch as WKC are primarily motivated by killing for a prize or trophy, they are wrong.

Some advocates argue that WKC are not primarily motivated by killing for a prize, but rather are important means for achieving other management objectives. For many species, such as mule deer or ground squirrels, that claim appears incredulous. If leaders in the hunting and wildlife management community believe that WKC, in general, serve important objectives, then the principles of wildlife management mandate that (1) these objectives need to be articulated and vetted by the best-available science, and (2) some reasonable, science-based case needs to be made to justify WKC as an appropriate means for achieving these objectives. In the absence of such an evaluation, WKC should be prohibited.

Advocates might also argue that WKC – when they are directed at predators, especially coyotes – are an important means for realizing one or both of these objectives: (1) decrease the loss of livestock to depredation, and (2) increase the abundance of prey species in the interest of maximizing hunting success by humans.

With respect to objective (1), a great deal of science has been developed on how to effectively manage depredations, both lethal and non-lethal. Managing to reduce the loss of livestock is a common goal for all stakeholders. As such our scientific opinion is that WKC do not contribute to this goal and may work against it. Lessons from that science include:

- (i) Indiscriminate killing is ineffective and it is plausible, perhaps likely, that when associated with a WKC it would lead to increased risk of depredations. A primary reason for this concern is that only some, often few, individual predators participate in depredation. Indiscriminate and pre-emptive killing of predators associated with

WKC can lead to the disruption of predators' social and foraging ecology in ways that increase the likelihood of depredations. In coyote populations, for example, the number of surviving pups that must be fed by the alpha parents increases, and surviving pack members that become transient individuals, may be predisposed to depredate livestock.

- (ii) The indiscriminate killing associated with WKC does not target: (a) the offending predator, (b) the site where depredation has occurred, and (c) the time where depredation has occurred. This renders WKCs ineffective as a means of depredation control.

With respect to objective (2), a great deal of science has been developed which indicates that killing predators, especially under the circumstances that are associated with WKCs, is not a reliable means of increasing ungulate abundance. The circumstances most likely to result in increased ungulate abundance are also the circumstances most likely to impair important ecosystem benefits and services that predators provide. Even when predators are killed to the point of impairing the ecosystem services, there is still no assurance that ungulate abundance will increase. The reason being is that ungulate abundance is frequently limited by factors other than predators – factors such as habitat and climate.

Beyond objectives (1) and (2), which focus on the valid concern of WKC affecting game populations and livestock depredations, lies the need for increased recognition of the valuable role predators play in maintaining healthy ecosystems and their contribution to ecosystem services. When not killed (exploited), they self-regulate their populations by means of dominant individuals defending non-overlapping territories. This structure can be disrupted by killing as little as one individual, which can then result in dispersal of remaining individuals that may seek novel prey items including livestock. There is also an extant scientific literature on the ecosystem services they provide to humans through rodent control and disease prevention. Recent research has also shown that apex predators play a vital role in maintaining ecosystem structure and function by facilitation of 'trophic cascades' leading to positive changes in plant communities, soil fertility, and physical processes (e.g., erosion and stream geomorphology). Thus, reduction of the distribution and numbers of apex predators can have profound negative effects that contribute to ecological instability and loss of services to humans.

The Boone and Crockett Club, founded by Theodore Roosevelt in 1887 "over the concerns that we might someday lose our hunting privileges and the wildlife populations for future generations"¹, is still considered one of the most respected sportsmen's institutions in North America. The Club "does not support programs, contests or competitions that directly place a bounty on game animals by awarding cash or expensive prizes for the taking of wildlife"² because WKCs contravene the Club's "fair-chase" motto.

¹ From B&C's website: http://www.boone-crockett.org/join/associates_faq.asp?area=join

² See: http://www.boone-crockett.org/bgRecords/position_statements.asp?area=bgRecords

Thank you for your consideration of these concerns on this important issue. If the Commission were interested to know about the support for any of the claims in this letter, we would be honored to further present and discuss the science and scholarship with the Commission.

Respectfully submitted,

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