

In Defense of Coyotes



Hon. Mike Cardinal
Minister,
Renewable Resource Development

July 20, 2001

Dear Mr. Cardinal:

The videotape of the brutal killing of coyotes, seen on a recent CFRN TV newscast, has shocked and sickened many Albertans. I am certain the vast majority of people had no idea that it was legal in Alberta to hunt coyotes with trained dogs that tear them apart while still alive. Or that it is legal to bludgeon an animal to death with a hammer. That some people, obviously, view this as an enjoyable sport has added to the moral outrage.

There is a growing awareness that animals do suffer and to cause this suffering simply for convenience or sport is no longer acceptable to most. The outcry over this barbaric practice as portrayed on T.V. is an indication that people no longer accept glib justifications for inhumane and cruel treatment of animals.

The idea that predators must be eliminated is outdated. Study after study shows the integral part these animals play in a healthy ecosystem. In addition, complaints of depredation of livestock by coyotes prove to be highly exaggerated. In fact, a large majority of farmers and ranchers have positive opinions about coyotes, thankful for the rodent control they provide.

Government of Alberta biologists have done studies, as far back as the 1970s, examining coyote populations and farming practices, which clearly suggest economically and ecologically sound solutions to livestock owner's complaints. These studies have been ignored. Instead inhumane, recreational killing of coyotes continues to be an accepted method of "predator control".

This provincial government must listen to the thousands of people that phoned the SPCAs, our organization and elected representatives looking for answers after viewing this brutality. Laws regulating wildlife must reflect Albertan's wishes for an enlightened and more humane society that is in step with the 21st century.

On behalf of the members and supporters of Voice for Animals, an animal protection and advocacy organization based in Edmonton, we are asking the provincial government to put an immediate end to this barbaric sport. We believe the government must set an example by showing respect for Alberta's wildlife.

Sincerely,

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A New Awareness

An appreciation of nature and wildlife is no longer limited to a few naturalists. There is a growing awareness by the general public of the importance of a healthy environment, and an increasing sophistication of knowledge about the natural world. People understand that a healthy environment means healthy wildlife populations and recognize the important role of native species. The public now expects to have greater input in decisions on major wildlife issues with the needs of wildlife considered (5,6). Outdated and uninformed policies and laws that allow the systematic persecution of some species, such as the coyote, are no longer appropriate or in line with public opinion.

There is now a clear scientific consensus that all species native to an area play a part in maintaining the integrity of the ecosystem. To deny that this is true for the coyote, because of long held prejudices, is folly. A prime example of how human arrogance in regards to nature and in particular coyotes can lead to environmental disaster comes from Klamath County, Oregon as far back as the 1940s (1).

This county launched an intensive campaign to eradicate all coyotes from its lands. Within a few years, not a single coyote could be found. The mouse population, however, exploded in the absence of its natural predator. Population densities, at one point, reached an estimated 25,000 mice per hectare. Crop losses soared, the cost of these losses far exceeding the cost of damages that had ever been attributed to coyotes. In the end, Klamath County was forced to reintroduce coyotes to its farmlands to restore a balance. The lesson to be learned from what has become known as the "Mouse War" is that we must put our prejudices aside and replace ignorance with scientific evidence.

The Role of the Coyote

The coyote is mainly a predator of rodents. In fact, up to 80% of their diet consists of various species of rodents. This clearly makes them an indispensable part of the ecosystem as well as very beneficial to farmers. Claims of high losses of livestock due to coyote predation have nearly always exonerated this animal as a result of proper investigations.

In BC's Fraser Valley in the 1980s, local hobby farmers complained to the Fish and Wildlife Branch of inordinately high predation of sheep by coyotes. A two-year study was launched by researchers from the University of British Columbia to examine the diet of coyotes in this area (2). This study analyzing actual stomach contents and scat of these animals established conclusively that their diet consisted of:

- 70.2% small rodents
- 10.3% plant material
- 8.1% rabbit
- 4.7% other wild mammals
- 4.3% domestic livestock (including carrion)
- 2.3% passerine birds and miscellaneous

Domestic sheep, the major species named in the coyote predation complaints, constituted only 0.2% of scat volume. Obviously, most claims of predation by coyotes simply do not stand up to rigorous scrutiny.

Alberta's laws, highly discriminatory towards coyotes permitting the inhumane killing of these animals by dogs, appear to reflect the opinion of a small minority. Although it is often assumed that only "sentimental city folk" object to the extermination of predators, this is actually far from the truth. In the summer of 1977, a Calgary organization called Coyote Concern (3) undertook a widespread survey of farmers and ranchers soliciting their opinion about coyotes. The results showed that 87% of the people surveyed had few or no problems with coyotes. In fact, the farmers and ranchers valued the rodent control coyotes provided. This is corroborated by the research of A.W. Todd and L.B. Keith in a 1976 study (4). They found that 79% of farmers in their study area had moderately or strongly positive opinions about coyotes.

An interesting finding by the Calgary group was that the majority of farmers who were pro coyotes also practiced good animal husbandry, taking measures to protect their animals. The small number of farmers who felt negatively about coyotes and had trouble with predation were found to have lower standards of animal care. For example, they provide less feed for their animals in winter and were less likely to protect their animals during calving.

Human Responsibility

It seems incredible that we are still waging an age-old war on wild predators. For instance, a sport such as killing coyotes with dogs, thinly disguised as predator control, continues to be legal. Prejudice, misconceptions and fear rule the day rather than taking into account the studies published by the government's own biologists (4). With a minimum of human effort, such as dealing with predation complaints through education, most problems associated with livestock-coyote interaction would disappear (7).

It has been known for a long time that where livestock carrion is routinely available it becomes a major food source for coyotes, particularly in the winter. A study published by Alberta Fish and Wildlife biologist Arlen W. Todd in 1976 (4) investigates the connection between carrion left to rot in the fields and coyote overpopulation and depredation. The question the authors wanted to answer was – how would carrion removal affect coyote populations and predation?

This study, carried out in the mixed farming community of Westlock, divided four townships into two areas. In two of the townships (control), farmers were asked to handle carrion as they had in other years. The farmers in the remaining two townships (experimental) were asked to keep their fields free of carrion. There was a high level of compliance despite worries that the coyotes would turn to preying on live animals or leave, resulting in high mouse populations.

What this research found was that during December and January there was a 93% decline in coyote population in the carrion free area (experimental) compared to an 18% decline where carrion was available (control). The consequence of this large decrease in the coyote population was, naturally, a resulting decrease in livestock predation and the

remaining coyotes returned to their more traditional diet of rodents. Significantly, there was no increase in livestock depredation in the control townships even though many of the coyotes leaving the experimental area went to the control area in search of carrion.

This study clearly shows that farming practices to a large extent affect coyote densities and behaviour; in other words humans (i.e. farmers and governments) are largely to blame for coyote problems. In the words of the author of this study; "Such a means of coyote control (carrion removal) would be economical and ecologically sound, and might be used to reduce intolerably high coyote populations." It would most certainly also be more humane.

Cruelty Issues

However, even if the scientific evidence showed that coyotes were not important to the ecosystem and surveys showed the majority of farmers to be anti-coyote, this barbaric method of coyote eradication could not be justified. We can only begin to imagine the fear and suffering these animals endure as they are chased by a pack of dogs and agonizingly flayed alive.

This practice is a blood sport, clear and simple. It is no different than dog fighting and cock fighting, which enlightened societies everywhere have banned. The U.K. is on the verge of banning the deeply entrenched blood sport of fox hunting, acknowledging that it is immoral and depraved. Meanwhile in Alberta we justify the brutal killing of coyotes with dogs on the basis of questionable complaints of a small minority of farmers.

Federal and provincial anti-cruelty laws (though highly qualified) and humane societies exist because we acknowledge that animals feel pain and that they do suffer. As an enlightened society, we understand that overtly cruel behaviour is immoral and ultimately a danger to the social fabric. It is difficult to comprehend that Alberta, with a population that is well to do, progressive, and well educated could harbour a law that allows such abject cruelty

The Trickster, as the coyote is known in Native American lore, is one of the most important figures in the legends depicting the relationship of native peoples to the earth. Today the coyote, with his hauntingly beautiful call, is a voice reminding us of that which is still wild and how much we stand to lose.

Our organization is asking you, as minister of Renewable Resource Development, to immediately put an end to this sadistic and morally repugnant practice. We understand that all it would take is an amendment to the current Wildlife Regulation Section 115(2).

References

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3. Coyote Concern. 1975. Survey of farmers and ranchers in an area south of Calgary.
4. Todd, A. W., and L. B. Keith. 1976. Responses of Coyotes to Winter Reductions in Agricultural Carrion. Alberta Dep. Rec., Parks and Wildl. Wildlife Technical Bulletin #5
5. Self, B. E. 1982. Public attitudes regarding selected wildlife issues in British Columbia. Province of BC, Fish and Wildlife Bulletin No. B-14
6. MoELP. 1993. Public response to *Managing Wildlife 2001*: a discussion paper. BC Ministry of the Environment, Wildlife Branch. Victoria, BC, Canada. 27 pp.
7. Atkinson, K. T. 1985. Relationship between coyote ecology and sheep management in the lower Fraser Valley, BC. MSc. Thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC. Canada.