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'War on predators' wrong approach says biologist

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<http://ecareview.com/war-on-predators-wrong-approach-says-biologist/dr-gilbert-proulx/>

Dr. Gilbert Proulx, wildlife biologist and Director of Science for Alpha Wildlife Research & Management, gave a presentation to Buffalo Lake Naturalists Club on the use of bounties as a control for wolf and coyote populations. Livestock predation by the wild canines has led some municipalities to institute bounty programs to help reduce their numbers, which Proulx believes is an ineffective strategy. ECA Review/D.Johnston.

For Dr. Gilbert Proulx, wildlife biologist and Director of Science for Alpha Wildlife Research and Management, finding ways to deter wolves and coyotes from preying on livestock without placing a bounty on their heads is critical to proper wildlife management.

Proulx attended the monthly meeting of the Buffalo Lake Naturalists Club Feb. 18 to talk about wolves and coyotes and the use of bounties to reduce their numbers.

Bounty programs have been in place in Alberta since 2007 and in Saskatchewan since 2009.

Proulx believes the bounties are not helping to solve the problem of livestock predation but rather has caused more damage to the ecosystem.

Canids, which include wolves, coyotes and foxes in Alberta, have compensatory litters, stated Proulx. So, the more that are killed, the larger litter they will have in the following years to replenish numbers.

“There is a problem in Western North America now that any predator is a good predator if it’s dead,” stated Proulx.

“There’s a lot of killing going on. It’s a war on predators.”

Despite the fact that a large number of wild dogs have been killed – 1400 wolves and 25,000 coyotes in Alberta over the last five years – we haven’t solved the problem of predation, argues Proulx.

To put those numbers into perspective, according to Lisa Glover with Alberta Environment and Parks, there are approximately 7000 wolves and 300,000 coyotes in the province. Glover says that while coyote populations tend to rise and fall, wolves are more stable. Wolf numbers are on the increase and inhabiting more areas.

Bounties ineffective

“Bounties were abandoned in the 50’s and 60’s almost everywhere in Canada and many places in the States. It’s because they don’t work. The reason for this is because they have not focused on the problem animals,” explained Proulx.

Instead of indiscriminately killing all wolves or coyotes in a problem area, focusing on the animals known to be causing the problem would make more sense, argues Proulx.

Proulx also takes issue with killing methods used on the animals . Typical methods include shooting, poisoning and snaring.

“Shooting is not a good thing.” Proulx described the lingering death an animal will suffer from an abdomen shot,

“This is not a way to shoot an animal. If you want to kill an animal with a quick death, it is the head or at least the lung area.”

Poisoning with strychnine is indiscriminant and has an effect on other wildlife besides the target animal as well as causing a long, difficult death for the animal.

Snares are inefficient on canids due to their thick tracheas, which don’t compress well enough to kill the animal quickly, leading to a death that could take hours or even days.

Proulx also claims that the bounty system is rife with fraud with hunters bringing in only ears from an animal to claim the bounty, or bringing in animals from other districts where no bounty is paid. The bounties are a way to make money and are simply a ‘political solution to a wildlife management problem’ says Proulx.

Lack of information

“There is no data. We have no data on those bounties in Alberta,” stated Proulx.

Proulx has set his sights on a project to provide that data with a project beginning this March and April. The first phase will be to collect and analyze scat from coyotes and wolves to determine if their diet does in fact include livestock. Following that, Proulx hopes to interview and survey producers about their experiences with and solutions to predation. Proulx will then publish the data.

“There is a lack of education. There is so many things we can do to stop the use of bounties and still have no issues with livestock depredation. It’s just a question of doing good stewardship and good management of your farm.”

A few of the suggestions Proulx makes to minimize predation is burying or burning livestock carcasses to prevent predators from becoming accustomed to their taste, or using cameras to identify problem predators.

One district’s experience

The Municipal District (M.D.) of Bonnyville has offered bounties for wolves and coyotes for the past few years as one tool for reducing livestock predation.

The M.D. pays \$15 per coyote and \$75 per wolf for an entire, unskinned carcass. The program runs from October to March, according to Assistant Agricultural Fieldman Janice Boden.

The Wolf Lake Grazing Reserve falls within the M.D. and covers 29,447 acres, of which nearly 14,000 acres is developed tame pasture. Around 2,000 head of cattle pasture the area each year from May through October.

Last year, 55 head – both cows and calves – were killed by predators despite the addition of extra range riders to patrol the area.

The province has a compensation program in place for the loss of livestock to predators but the producer must prove who the culprit was. Often not enough of the carcass remains to do that. Consequently, only 2.5 of the 55 animals qualified for compensation.

According to Glover, across the province there were 196 confirmed wolf kills of livestock in 2015 and 231 in 2014 for which the province paid compensation. The minimum payment for a confirmed kill is \$400.00.

The M.D. has formed a resolution to take to the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties convention in March to lobby the government for changes to the way compensation is determined.

Sixty wolf carcasses have been turned in thus far, up from the typical 30 to 40 the area generally sees. Boden stated that farmers have seen increased number of wolves this year but are unsure why.

For coyotes, 1000 have been turned in, many showing signs of mange.

Cost to producers

According to a survey of 672 beef producers conducted by Alberta Beef from 2011 to 2013 and published in “Impact of Wildlife to Beef Producers in Alberta: Starting the Conversation 2015”, these producers lost over 2200 animals annually worth over \$2 million to depredation.

Extrapolating the data to represent all beef producers, the survey concludes an annual loss by predation of over \$22.6 million, primarily from wolves and coyotes.

Sixty-two per cent of producers surveyed had not reported their losses to Alberta Environment and Parks for compensation.

They cited reasons as: the onerous burden to prove a predator attack, amount of compensation was not worth the effort needed to file paperwork, an impression of inaction or non-responsiveness from the ministry, unaware of the compensation program, chalked up to cost of doing business, or the producer simply felt there was no need to bother.

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