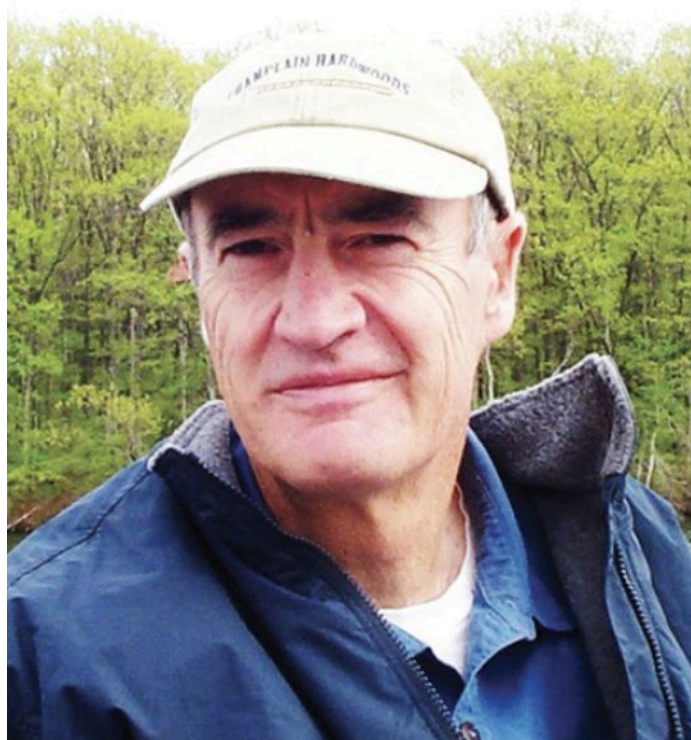

Guest Column: Killing wildlife to see who wins

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Would you like to earn money and prizes by killing coyotes, foxes, cougars, bobcats, wolves, raccoons, squirrels, crows, rattlesnakes, rabbits, prairie dogs, woodchucks or skunks?

If so, you can enter any of the thousands of wildlife-killing contests permitted and sometimes promoted by 44 state game and fish agencies. Such contests are legal in all Western states save California, Washington, Arizona and Colorado.

These events have names like “Song Dog Smackdown,” “Good Ol Boy’s Fall Predator Tournament” and “Predator Palooza.”

Names of competing teams are no less evocative. Placing high in a Lone Star Predator Calling Classic were “Beer Belly Varmint Hunters” and “Team Anthrax.”

Standard equipment includes reclining chairs, electronic predator calls, tripods and other gun rests, spotting scopes, spotlights, night-vision goggles, other thermal-imaging equipment and high-capacity assault rifles

equipped with telescopic sights. Prizes include cash - \$50,000 if you win the West Texas Big Bobcat Contest - and such paraphernalia as camo clothing and AK-47s.

Many contests have children's divisions. Sponsors include gun companies, sporting-goods stores, fire departments, 4-H clubs and chambers of commerce.

Body counts are impressive. One of the 717 teams in last year's Big Bobcat Contest turned in 94 foxes. Carcasses are piled, photographed and invariably discarded.

"Event coordinators are being hassled," lament directors of a killing-contest support group called Coyote Contest. "Help us promote those who still understand and value the services that predator hunters provide!" Commentators on the group's website explain these "services": "Save a fawn; kill a coyote," "Wanted dead or alive for the crimes of stealing fawns, turkeys, & livestock," "Saving livestock one bullet at a time!"

It doesn't work this way. Predators do kill game and livestock, but no game species in the United States is suppressed by predation, and overpopulated species like elk and deer lack the predators needed to maintain their health and that of native ecosystems.

Robert Crabtree, who did the seminal work on coyotes in central Washington and Yellowstone National Park, reports that to reduce a coyote population, at least 70 percent of the animals need to be eliminated - something he says "rarely, if ever, happens."

He found that where coyotes aren't persecuted, average litter size at birth is five or six, but because of competition for prey an average of one to two pups survive their first year. When coyotes are shot, trapped or poisoned, pup survival increases because competition is reduced.

So coyote "control" results in more, not fewer, coyotes.

What's more, Crabtree has found that indiscriminate killing of predators increases livestock loss. Because coyote "control" (which, again, doesn't approach 70 percent) reduces the number of adults able to feed young, packs tend to abandon their normal small-mammal diet and turn instead to larger prey, like livestock.

Carter Niemeyer, a retired predator-control agent, tells the story of the rancher who phoned him after one aerial operation. "Carter," declared the rancher, "do coyotes revenge kill? We haven't had trouble with coyotes all winter. We saw your helicopter the other morning and heard lots of shooting. Now we've got coyotes killing sheep. What the hell's going on?"

Here's the explanation: Random shooting of predators creates chaos by removing "desirables." Other predators fill the void including "undesirables" that do kill livestock

The public wearies of wildlife-killing contests. Three years ago they were legal in every state save California. Now they're also banned in Washington, Arizona, Colorado, Massachusetts and Maryland. New Mexico and Vermont have banned coyote-killing contests.

Competing to kill wildlife outrages the fair-chase hunting community. “We don’t like anything that smacks of commercialization with money or prizes,” remarks Eric Nuse, a hunter educator who serves on the boards of Orion - The Hunters’ Institute and the New England Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers. “Anything that doesn’t honor the animals grates on us.”

Wildlife-killing contests can erode “the public’s view of ethical hunting,” reports the Wildlife Society, comprised of 11,000 biologists and managers.

No trained wildlife professional believes that killing contests accomplish anything worthwhile. This from the Pennsylvania Game Commission: “The agency (has) finally accepted the reality that predator control does not work.” Yet the Commission still sanctions 27 major wildlife-killing contests that attract thousands of participants.

Why do 44 state game and fish agencies continue to allow these contests? Money. Employees are fed and clothed largely by hunting-license revenue; and wildlife-killing contestants must buy hunting licenses even though they’re not “hunters.”

More accurately, people who compete to kill wildlife are described by their critics as “assassins.”

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