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Bounties for Killing Wild Animals*

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Introduction and Summary

\*Bounties are rewards paid by government for evidence (heads, paws) that predatory animals or birds have been killed by a hunter within a particular political subdivision. The practice may seem remote to an increasingly urban population, but.....

Two recent events indicate the need for scientific information on this subject. On October 30, 1969 Mr. Robert Bickel, Livingston County News Service (Gannett Newspapers), wrote a documented feature on the bounty for foxes in Livingston County. In spite of this information the County Board of Supervisors voted to retain the bounty. Sixteen New York counties pay bounties and Livingston County pays the highest annual total (\$1270.00 for 1968). Shortly afterwards, on November 18, NBC Television featured a shocking "special" on the impending extermination of wolves. While extermination was the central issue, the bounty system was involved.

The bounty system has often been used to attempt control of "varmints" and predators. In most of its long history it has been unsuccessful and the cost to the taxpayer or agency involved has been far in excess of the little gain in control. Extermination results primarily by removal of food, destruction of habitat or efficient killing methods such as aeroplane hunting, not simply bounty awards. Extermination raises ecological and ethical questions beyond the bounty problem.

ALL NATURAL POPULATIONS PRODUCE IN EXCESS AND THEIR NUMBERS ARE SELF-REGULATED

Some time ago Durward Allen noted in Our Wildlife Legacy, "the bounty system is a means of subsidizing the taking of an annual surplus of predators that would be eliminated naturally anyway". Any environment is able to support only a limited number of foxes or other predators. The surplus beyond this number usually succumbs to disease or starvation. Bounty payments encourage hunting or trapping at times of high population and, in most cases, the animals taken for bounty would have died naturally. With one or two doubtful exceptions it is unlikely that bounties have ever encouraged enough hunting or trapping to remove this annual surplus and actually reduce the breeding stock.

Iowa concluded in 1946, "It can be flatly stated that any reasonable fox bounty paid one winter will have little to do with the number of foxes the next winter, for nature makes up for winter losses until populations reach, or approach, maximum densities".

In Ontario, Dr. Anton de Vos pointed out "It should be realized that only two pups in a litter must survive to reach maturity and breed if the population is to remain constant (over several generations). Normally the surplus is killed off by disease and other factors. Apparently the effects of the bounty system is not enough to upset the normal balance of the wolf population".

After 10 years of bounty offers, the total wolf population was greater than at the start. Ontario had paid more than half a million dollars in bounty on wolves (and coyotes) with no effect on the population. E. C. Gross estimated, in "Rod and Gun in Canada", that to bring about actual reduction in the number of wolves it would require killing more than 30 thousand wolves at an annual cost of more than 400 thousand dollars!

Long ago, in 1927, Richard Gerstell, of the Pennsylvania Game Commission, concluded that, "It appears that the bounty system has not to any noticeable extent, if at all, controlled the weasel even though two thirds of the system's cost has been expended in payments on weasels".

#### PEOPLE KILL ANIMALS FOR OTHER REASONS

Clayton B. Seagars of the Conservation Department has discounted the value of bounties in New York, "In the first place, large sums must be expended for bounties on foxes which would be taken anyway before a penny can be expended on foxes because of the bounty. Here's how it works. Assume that an average of at least 19,000 foxes have been taken without bounty each year in New York for the past quarter century. This would mean that a minimum of \$75,000 would be spent uselessly, before bounty money began to cut the figure at all!

To sum up, there's not one shred of evidence to indicate that the bounty system does anything but increase private incomes from take of fox pelts at the expense of either the taxpayer or the sportsman's license dollar, according to who pays the bounty freight."

#### SKILLED PROFESSIONAL TRAPPERS ARE FAR MORE EFFECTIVE THAN BOUNTIES OR LOCAL OFFICERS

Eugene Parks of the New York State Conservation Department reported that of the three programs being carried on in New York for control of rabies, the most effective was fox trapping by state trappers, administered by the Conservation Department. Trapping by county employees has been of limited value, and bounty payments by counties have been totally ineffective!

#### WASTE AND FRAUD ARE ENCOURAGED

Another problem with the bounty system is that bounty hunters, like any businessmen, tend to operate most intensively when profits are high. This occurs in the fall when there are many foxes left from the warmer summer days. The thinned-out population of spring would be much more vulnerable but results are so meager that it simply does not pay to hunt.

It may appear that this problem could be overcome by offering larger rewards to encourage hunting at times of low yield. However, this has been tried and such systems often bring about "management" of the predator resource. Frauds often occur. A case in point, when New Hampshire was paying bounty on porcupine noses, it was common practice to remove the pads of the feet and burn two holes in them. They were then left in a jar for a good while and turned in with the real noses. No town clerk was apt to look through the smelly jar, and thus one porcupine was worth five bounty payments!

In 1922, Michigan realized that "The payment of bounties for the killing of such predacious creatures as may be destructive to wildlife and domestic stock of this State has in recent years become so saturated with fraud, collusion and trickery that our legislature sought some means of substitution for this expensive and worthless system."

"The history of the Michigan bounty law on predacious things is dotted with the work of those who padded bounty orders, manufactured woodchuck scalps by sewing ears on pieces of pelts, collected bounty on housecats claiming them to be 'wildcats', of substituting blackbird heads for baby crow heads, of claimants stealing from township clerks the once bountied and discarded scalps and heads, and of others who purchased Wisconsin weasel, where no bounty is paid, and collected a bounty in Michigan on them, falsely swearing they had captured in this State."

#### IF PREDATORS ARE A PROBLEM, THERE ARE BETTER MEANS OF CONTROL

These and many other studies emphasize the worthlessness of the bounty system as a means of predator control. Gerstell (Pennsylvania) concluded in his report that, "It is as yet impossible to prove that any system of general predator control can be properly included in a sound and comprehensive wildlife management program." The current view is that in certain cases predator control may be desirable. However, two factors need to be considered and weighed against each other; the cost and effectiveness of the control and the extent of the damage done to the predator population. If expenditures are far greater than benefits derived, control measures are not justified. When limited control measures operating against a certain nuisance population are ecologically justified then control methods can be applied which give better results than the bounty. These methods include poisoning, repellents, acoustic devices and biological control.

Durward Allen noted in Our Wildlife Legacy that, "Unfortunately the bounty is well adapted to the needs of the poorly informed, politically minded administrator or the table-pounding fireball in a sportsman's club. It is likely to be used, and once it is entrenched, the profits enlist loyal supporters."

#### IS ANY TYPE OF CONTROL MEASURE JUSTIFIED

In the vast majority of cases, no control is justified. Control of most "varmits" is usually neither ecologically sound nor desirable for any other reason. Man irrationally has regarded those creatures that make their living by killing other forms as "evil". The "cowardly" coyote or the "cruel" wolf. (e.g., Little Red Ridinghood, Goldylocks, or the Road Runner Cartoon). The popular view of predators is disdain or revulsion, apparently due to conditioning during childhood. Teddy Roosevelt described the cougar as "...the big horse-killing cat, the destroyer of the deer, the lord of stealthy murder, facing his doom with a heart both craven and cruel". Such loaded language does not enamor the predators to man.

The hunter has believed an additional mythology which has no ecological support: that a fox competes with him for each rabbit. The simple equation is not borne out in fact. On the contrary, both must share the population surplus, but not destroy the breeding stock, if a population is to continue within a stable natural community.

Without ecological insight, man has tragically over-simplified nature. He has discovered only painfully that rabbit, fox and a myriad of other organisms within a natural community have reached workable adjustments over eons of time.

A classic example of man's disruption of a self-regulating natural community is the case of the Kaibab Plateau in Arizona. In primitive times the Kaibab was a productive range. It supported a good deer population and a population of mountain lions and wolves which fed upon them. The plains Indians also occasionally took a few deer. In 1906, by presidential decree, the Kaibab was set up as a Game Preserve. Public shooting was terminated and government hunters began a systematic clean-up of predators. During the next 25 years the total of known kills was 781 mountain lions, 30 wolves (which were exterminated), 4,889 coyotes and 554 bobcats. In addition 15,000 cattle and 5,000 sheep were in the area by 1915. The protected deer, with the natural checks on their population removed, also increased. The annual increase of deer was nearly 20 percent each year - while it lasted. In 1818 there were too many deer and the food supply was in decline. Public sentiment prevented killing the deer. In 1924 the deer herd was about 100,000 in an area which had supported 4,000 deer before 1906. That winter the starvation started. The large herd ate every leaf and twig and completely denuded the area. This range has not entirely recovered to this day. This is often cited as the prime example of mismanagement yet in that day extermination of predators was the proper thing to do.

#### BEYOND THE BOUNTY-EXTERMINATION

There is always the danger of repeating such a mistake, especially when too little information is available. What will happen if the predator population is exterminated? Will there then be a plague of rabbits to be contended with, or perhaps a plague of rats or meadow mice which do serious crop damage? Or will we find unexpected results such as increased disease in the prey species, since the predator is no longer removing diseased individuals before the disease can spread.

Finally, there is the question of the value of the predator for its own sake. There are some who like to see a fox on a cold and frosty morning. Man must decide if he still wants the type of world which harbors other species. Or does he want a sterile world free of all but a few domesticated animals, with no wild things to thrill the imagination.

Species have been exterminated contingent to man's other activities, or with only the most limited reasons - "They are a nuisance", or because there was money as long as they lasted. Recently a combination of habitat destruction and modern technology has made possible very effective extermination. A Soviet fiat has decreed that wolves are to be exterminated from Siberia. Half of Alaska's wolves have been slaughtered very quickly, and Minnesota seems determined to destroy its remaining 300. Michigan may have waited too long to protect its remaining 100 wolves in the Upper Peninsula, because 100 wolves may not provide a breeding nucleus able to maintain the population.

Is the bounty system responsible for extermination? Apparently not. In the past extermination has been accomplished without bounty. In the case of the wolves, the reason now important is psychological: people like to kill wolves, which they think are bad, or even evil. Commentators on the situation point out frightful consequences of such an attitude which can be extended to a broad scope of human activity. However, a population in poor shape because of decimation from habitat destruction, loss of range, and 'sport' hunting by the use of the bounty may be pushed to extermination. There are two fundamental arguments against careless extermination of any species:

1. We may need them: The almost extinct Florida manatee may be the best way of controlling rampant growth of a water plant which presently requires heavy expense for unsatisfactory control.

2. If man is unable to share the world with other species, he probably cannot make the fine discrimination of sharing it with others of his own species.

The history of bounties and of their abuse leads to the conclusion that in most cases they should and can be avoided. There are other control methods available as outlined in Wildlife Investigational Techniques by Dr. de Vos, which yield better, more selective control, if control is ecologically necessary. These methods can be used without the undesirable result of total extermination due to much greater control over the effect. Control does not mean extermination. It simply means helping a wild population at a level which is not in excess of what the environment can support. Long range accomodation to the environment is a problem which man shares with other predators.