Creatures Of Habitat

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The legacy of predator control

STATE-RUN ANIMAL FARM

Some animals are less equal than others. It’s government policy.

Take predators. Until as recently as the 1960s, Utah’s predators were officially considered vermin. Grizzly bears, wolves, and wolverines have been wiped out. Most of Utah’s surviving four-legged carnivores—such as cougar, black bear, and fox—are still trapped and hunted both for sport and to keep their populations low. The coyote is officially considered a pest and is actively exterminated still.

On the other hand, Utah’s wildlife managers have encouraged the growth of prey herds, such as elk and mule deer, for the enjoyment of human hunters. Game officials have imported exotic prey species, like pheasant and mountain goats, and have decimated native predator populations to ensure that hunters’ targets will flourish.

But are pheasants more important than fox? Are mule deer more important than cougar? Government officials decide every day. Wildlife managers promote or suppress various populations on the premise that wild animals are crops to be “harvested” from the state’s animal farm. Hunters pay the animal farm’s bills. All but $4 million of the Division of Wildlife Resource’s budget of $28 to $32 million comes from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses.

But further reduction of Utah’s remaining predator populations may be devastating to the balance of natural landscapes, scientists say. If predator populations are not maintained to keep deer and elk numbers in check, we risk transforming entire biological communities in Utah.
How many of Utah’s native predators remain? It’s an official guess. To estimate fox populations, for example, the state’s Division of Wildlife Resources counts the number of fox pelts taken by trappers each year. DWR also monitors fox sightings, the animal’s prey base, and reported encounters with livestock growers. No estimate of total population is made, but a “harvest” is recorded. Boyde Blackwell, DWR mammal project coordinator says 500 kit foxes and 1,000 gray foxes are taken each year on a 10-year annual average. Red fox populations, which thrive in agricultural settings, are growing. Blackwell says increasing red fox numbers are inferred from the fewer number of days it takes to trap more red foxes each year. In 1982, 564 red foxes were caught. The number has steadily increased to 4,000 in 1996.

“We don’t hear much about fox in Utah because not much is known about them,” observes Dick Carter of the High Uintas Preservation Council. “The premise of the few studies done is, ‘Do we have too many fox?’” When you begin from that perspective, he notes, you don’t get the data you need to know if the population is viable over time. A Utah State University (USU) study proposed to exterminate every fox and ground-based predator in 16-square-mile zones to study the decline of Utah’s pheasant populations. They intended to compare later the number of pheasants in those predator-free zones with other study zones that have the usual complement of predators. “This ‘study’ is not science,” Carter, a USU graduate, wrote to the school. It amounts to simply killing predators to see what happens. The research is funded by upland game—that’s bird—hunting licenses and is mandated by the Utah legislature. Pheasant and other game birds are the third highest money generator for DWR after mule deer and elk.

The way we view predators is as important as the habitat that we leave for them, Carter says. For example, USU also has a cougar study going on, paid for by DWR and the state legislature. “The question they’re asking is, ‘Are there too many cougar?’ We should be asking, ‘Is the cougar’s genetic base dangerously reduced?’ Rather than, ‘Are cougars causing problems with deer and elk?’ which make money for the state government through the sale of hunting licenses.”

Local extinctions of predators from specific areas can happen more easily now because Utah’s wild areas are fragmented and small groups of predators are cut off from each other. Though to a layperson one cougar looks like another, cougar populations in one location have slightly different genes than groups in other places. That genetic variation in the larger population
is essential to avoid inbreeding and to avoid a catastrophe such as a single virus wiping out an entire population that’s genetically similar.

Blackwell reports that research shows 20 percent of a cougar population is about the maximum you can kill over time and keep a viable population. However, if prey is low, human contact is high, and reports of cougar eating livestock are frequent, that 20 percent can be raised for a time, then reassessed. The DWR believes Utah has 2,000 to 3,000 cougars, Blackwell says. In 1995–96, DWR issued 872 cougar hunting permits and hunters killed 452 cougars. Total known mortality, including poached, killed by government animal control, and road kill, was 510 that season.

Cougar killing has steadily increased this decade. The 1995–96 number of 510 cougars killed is double the number of each year’s take from 1990 through 1992. It’s also grown from the annual number killed from 1993 to 1995. In one season, an entire cougar population in a given area can be killed off through overhunting, Craig Axford of the Utah Cougar Coalition suggests. “In the Henry Mountains, we think the DWR has allocated more
cougar hunting permits than there are cougar. They’ve allocated 10, and so far have only taken one cougar. Between 1989 and present, a total of only 10 cougar have been taken in the Henry Mountains area.” A recent cougar hunting regulation change allows unlimited access to 13 of 39 hunting areas. The goal is to hunt cougar in those areas until 250 are killed.

Carter claims “it’s irresponsible to guess” how many cougar are left in Utah. “DWR is just guessing. The data that exists doesn’t suggest—doesn’t come close to suggesting—1,500 or 2,000 Utah cougars. But total population size is irrelevant anyway. What’s relevant is how many cougars there are in particular, distinct populations. What’s important is the number of cougars within those groups that are of reproductive age. Evidence shows the ratio is not good. Some populations are mostly females of breeding age; others, mostly male.”

Ditto, Carter says for Utah’s black bear. But with black bears, it’s even trickier. “I know of no one who believes black bear populations are healthy in all of their individual locations in Utah. Hunters are finding only very young bears to shoot now. They’re taking very few old bears,” Carter notes. “Black bears don’t reproduce until they’re four to seven years old, then they have only one or two cubs. Scientists and wildlife managers can cruise along for years watching what seems to be a stable population of bears. Then, boom: almost no females in the Book Cliffs area, and almost no males in the Abajos.”

Coyotes, at least, are doing very well in Utah. Ironically, coyote populations have grown in size and spread in territory because of the elimination of another canine predator—the wolf—from most of the West. Some studies show humans would have to kill 75 percent of the coyote population over five years—without a let up of even one year—to permanently reduce the population. The number of coyotes killed in Utah has been steady, DRW’s Blackwell observes. Each year Federal Animal Damage Control hunters and trappers kill about 4,500 coyotes and others take about 4,500. “The Utah coyote population is steady,” says Carter, because the more coyotes you kill, the faster they reproduce. Carter said a Mt. Naomi, Utah, study showed coyote females as young as six months old were producing pups. In Yellowstone, where coyotes are not trapped and hunted, the average female coyote produces her first pups at two years old.

In Yellowstone, coyotes are no longer top dog. Since the reintroduction of the gray wolf into Yellowstone National Park, the park’s coyote population is plummeting, Carter said. The wolves kill and disperse bands of coyotes. Utah
may see this phenomenon as well. Utah wildlife officials announced that migration patterns suggest the gray wolf and the grizzly bear might return to Utah's Uinta Mountains from the Yellowstone area within the next several years.

In many ways, Utah's predator policies mirror citizens' concerns: Will predators eat the profit out of livestock growing? Will they leave enough deer, elk, and game birds for human hunters? Will a cougar or black bear "harvest" a picnicker or hiker?

If a predator kills a human, it's news precisely because it is so rare. Biologist Paul Beier studied every cougar attack on a human in the past 100 years in western North America. Beier found 53 attacks, 9 of which were fatal. By contrast, each year deer kill about 130 humans (mostly in car wrecks), bees kill about 45 humans, and dogs kill about 15 humans. Even rattlesnakes, spiders, and lightening are greater threats to human safety than predators. And game managers shouldn't hold out hope that hunting cougars will reduce the risk of attacks on humans. Beier's study showed that most cougar attacks were in British Columbia, where cougars are intensively hunted.

But Utah's predators do kill many sheep and cattle each year. Livestock grower groups complain they lose millions of dollars to predators. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal Damage Control's draft 1996 annual report shows that 12,398 cattle and sheep were lost in Utah to cougars, black bears, foxes, and coyotes. "I don't know any livestock growers who advocate extinction of predators," says Tom Bingham of the Utah Farm Bureau Federation. "But we need balance. We realize that even under the best circumstances, some losses will occur. However, losses to predators are right up there with the top two or three problems, like market prices and weather, that livestock growers face."

Utahns raising sheep and cattle point out that they tap a renewable resource providing both food and clothing for the rest of us. Perhaps more important, they maintain vital open spaces. If a rancher or farmer is driven out of business by predator losses and other contributing factors, their land is usually subdivided and sold. Each year America loses over a million acres of farmland to suburban creep. That's a bad deal for all wild animals.

It's often said that predators help maintain healthy herds of wild prey by killing the weak and the sick in them, but even that is controversial. Don Peay, of Utah Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, claims predators routinely take healthy prey as well as the sick and weak. "Predators are opportunistic," Peay says. He notes a study of a 300-member herd of bighorn sheep found 100 of them were killed by cougars. "That's more than the sick and young," Peay says.
But Cougar Coalition’s Axford says that predators’ year-round culling of deer and elk herds keeps them moving, which prevents overgrazing. Predators eat sick prey, which limits the spread of disease within a herd, he argues. Cougars do compete with human hunters for mule deer. Axford reports that a male cougar will take one deer every two weeks, while a female cougar with cubs will kill a deer every seven to ten days. If there are 2,000 cougars in Utah, then they kill and eat about 80,000 mule deer each year.

Some Utah hunters blame an increase in cougars for the recent drop in mule deer populations. In the past though, DWR officials have said cougar populations fluctuate with the deer population, but that it takes a couple of years for the populations to level out. Axford claims fewer deer should be killed to allow the herd to grow, rather than killing more cougars. But fewer deer licenses sold means less revenue for DWR.

Whatever else one says about Utah hunters, they have shown a willingness to tax themselves to improve their chances in the field. Peay points out that his group spearheaded the effort to require hunters and fishers to buy a $5 habitat authorization fee with their licenses. The $2.5 million revenue raised is spent on improving habitat for wildlife. Peay says that by protecting mule deer habitat you preserve cougars too.

With such sharply conflicting opinions, you may think that DWR would increase its reliance on science to make wildlife policy. No such luck. There are many allegations that within Utah’s DWR, science must follow politics. In an anonymous letter to Outdoor Life magazine, a group of employees of DWR wrote that Governor Mike Leavitt and his appointees “have destroyed a professional wildlife-management agency and its dedicated personnel . . . Morale has never been lower or prospects for scientific management bleaker.” According to Hartt Wixom, a longtime Utah wildlife writer, biology is not allowed to conflict with politics in the DWR now. For example, all DWR personnel who investigated trout whirling disease, which spread from the Leavitt family’s trout hatcheries, were terminated or hounded out of their jobs. DWR professionals were cautioned not to speak out against a scientifically risky livestock industry attempt to legalize elk farms. Wixom’s remarks were printed in a Salt Lake Tribune op-ed piece.

With Utah’s increasingly urban population, nonconsumptive wildlife activities, such as birdwatching and wildlife photography, are becoming more popular. But state wildlife officials are still conditioned to respond to consumptive users—hunters and livestock growers. And even as the controversy
over the health of Utah’s cougar population raged, the Utah legislature reduced the penalty for poaching cougar from a felony to a misdemeanor. Legislators offered no scientific basis for the change.

TOUGH TIMES FOR ADOLESCENT PREDATORS

“Look it straight in the eye,” is the advice of wildlife experts if confronted by which one of the following predators?

A. Grizzly Bear  
B. Cougar  
C. Coyote  
D. Jackalope

Think about it. As Utahns move into native predators’ shrinking habitat, encounters with them are more likely. That’s true for at least one generation of predators in an invaded area. Then, the loss of habitat will usually keep the animal from successfully reproducing and rearing offspring. Soon after, they’ll disappear from the area.

Ironically, intensive hunting may make human-predator encounters more likely as well. Biologist Paul Beier’s study of cougar attacks on humans in western North America showed many attacks came from juvenile cougars. Most of the cougar attacks were in British Columbia, where the relentless cougar hunting often prematurely orphans juveniles. Beier theorized the juveniles were probably not fully trained by their mothers.

At best, a male predator’s young life is not easy. “Betas—young male bears and cougars—are chased out of the territory in which they were born as soon as they reach the age they can reproduce. This is because, evolutionarily, they shouldn’t mate with their sisters, who stay in their home areas,” notes Dick Carter of the High Uintas Preservation Council. “Looking for a territory of their own, these roving male juveniles are treated by other members of their species in the same way you or I would treat a burglar in our homes. If they kill a prey in another bear or cougar’s territory, they’re treated as if they stole something from that predator to whom the territory belongs. “Predators are space dependent in this way,” Carter says, not dependent on the amount of prey in the area.

Craig Axford, of the Utah Cougar Coalition, points out that “juvenile cougars may have to travel 300 to 600 miles to find a territory that’s not occupied by other cougars. For juvenile cougars, hunting in those circumstances is
Cougar, also known as mountain lion.
difficult because they can’t cache a kill for a second meal, so they kill more prey when transient.” When humans build homes or cabins on the finger ridges of mountains, they cut off critical traveling corridors for these juvenile cougars.

Once, huge areas of backcountry gave predators security. Not anymore. Technology has reduced the effectiveness of predators’ habitat as protection. “Cougar hunters are not chasing their dogs in the backcountry on snowshoes. They’re driving snowmobiles. This renders ineffective what little habitat cougars have left. Habitat is not only lost directly by such things as building subdivisions in winter range. Habitat is also rendered ineffective by the intrusion of snowmachines and dogs,” Carter comments.

Likewise, black bears are hunted in Utah by dog teams wearing radio collars. Lack of effective habitat may be the reason that there aren’t as many cougar and black bear in the Uintas and Wasatch as experts say there should be, Carter argues.

Occasional attacks notwithstanding, humans aren’t cougar prey. “Cougars evolved to hunt ungulates with long necks,” Axford notes. “Human necks are short.”

Coyotes, on the other hand, will mug your cocker spaniel, but they won’t hurt you. Government predator control programs, though, might foster adolescent coyote attacks on domestic animals, Conger Beasley, Jr., wrote for Buzzworm. “Stable, undisturbed populations of coyotes tend to live in packs and forage cooperatively . . . When extensive culling throws their social equilibrium out of whack, younger, restless leaders emerge who do not know how to forage efficiently, and are much more likely to go after livestock.” Beasley said some biologists think that predator-control projects were responsible for the creation of “a ‘supercoyote’: stronger, smarter, tougher, more apt to succeed in bringing down domestic livestock when it suits its purposes to do so.”

“Coyotes are the most researched animal in the U.S. on how to kill them,” says Carter. Still, studies show that killing coyotes in one area prompts immigration into the area by other coyotes and promotes the fertility of female coyotes at a younger age.

The answer to the quiz at the beginning is B. Experts say that if you find a cougar is watching you or stalking you, talk loud, and stay upright, above the lion. Don’t even consider running, as cougar prey would do. Even Olympic sprinter Marion Jones can’t outrun a cougar. 🏃
Hunter in the field.