

PREDATOR

A coyote faces a human intruder; *(inset)* another lies dead after being shot from a fixed-wing aircraft.



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CONTROL

DECADES OF USELESS SLAUGHTER

Each year millions of wild animals—coyotes, raccoons, mountain lions, ravens, and many other species—are slaughtered under the Animal Damage Control (ADC) program. ADC is administered by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The U.S. government carries out the indiscriminate destruction of wildlife supposedly to minimize predators' damage to livestock, especially sheep. The HSUS has always been opposed to ADC because it is an ineffective program that causes unnecessary animal suffering and death on a massive scale—a tragic waste of taxpayers' dollars. Yet the USDA continues to implement the program aggressively.

ADC has a long and convoluted history. In 1909 Congress funded the USDA to conduct "experiments and demonstrations in destroying noxious animals." Six years later Congress provided \$125,000 to the Biological Survey, a branch of the USDA, and authorized it to direct the war on our predatory wildlife. (The Biological Survey later became the Interior Department's branch of predator and rodent control, which in turn became the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife.)

Because the 1909 law left the federal government's statutory authority to dispose of "noxious animals" unclear, in 1931 Congress enacted a law directing the secretary of agriculture "to determine the best means of eradication, suppression, or bringing under control . . . mountain lions, wolves, coyotes, bobcats, prairie dogs, gophers, ground squirrels, jackrabbits, and other animals." Thus Congress decreed which species of wildlife were unwanted and should be controlled—or exterminated. Although a more enlightened public and most members of Congress now realize that such myopic legislation is counterproduc-

BY DICK RANDALL

tive, Congress has failed to change the 1931 law (largely because domination of relevant congressional committees by western interests made change impossible). Over the years Congress has provided hundreds of millions of tax dollars to fund federal programs that exterminate wildlife. Why?

Most predator control takes place in the western states, and much of it takes place on public lands overseen by the Bureau of Land Management or the U.S. Forest Service. As noted above, the ADC program is supposed to protect livestock, especially sheep, from predators. To get an inkling of how well the "controllers" have fulfilled their mission on behalf of the western livestock industry—while destroying predator-prey relationships that are vital to a functioning ecosystem—consider the following.

In 1957 the predators ADC reported it had removed (killed) consisted of 55,402 coyotes, 2,790 red and lobo (grey) wolves, nearly 20,000 bobcats, 1,039 bears, and 267 mountain lions. In the same year ADC conducted a massive campaign to poison prairie dogs, ground squirrels, pocket gophers, jackrabbits, field mice, kangaroo rats, and porcupines—animals that normally serve as prey for the wildlife species that were killed by ADC.

In 1962 the reported kill of predators reached 200,000. Ninety percent of the "controlled" animals were west of the Mississippi. Of the western animals killed, half were coyotes. The rest of the western group included foxes, bobcats, skunks, raccoons, opossums, badgers, wolves, bears, and mountain lions. During the same year ADC distributed 1.34 million pounds of poisons and 356,000 gas cartridges on more than three million acres of public and private lands in the West to kill rodents. If enough predators are destroyed, the resulting eruption of rodent populations can cause considerable damage to rangelands. To protect the nation's rangelands, the government spends millions of dollars on poisoning rodents that "controlled" predators would have gladly consumed for free. This is the kind of massive waste of tax revenues and wildlife that predator control involves.

If you have any doubts as to who reaps the few benefits from ADC's destruction of predatory wildlife, consider a passage from the 1970 Wyoming annual report of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife. The

bureau stated that the primary objective of predator control in Wyoming was to "enhance and contribute to the state's economy and the responsible management of its resources by managing depredating populations of predators within acceptable levels to the livestock industry." Clearly the special interests of ranchers and cattlemen are the driving force behind the program of predator control.

Over the years there have been small changes in the way federal predator control is conducted, but even those minor reforms



Above: Dozens of fox and bobcat pelts lie stacked and tagged. Opposite: A coyote in a steel-jaw leghold trap awaits its fate. Thousands of predators in the West have been exterminated in a federal program that has cost millions of dollars.

are principally the result of gross abuses that received widespread public attention. For example, an incident in Jackson Canyon, near Casper, Wyoming, made headlines in 1971: About 50 dead bald and golden eagles were discovered. The eagles had apparently been poisoned by a rancher who had illegally killed antelope and laced their carcasses with thallium sulfate, a deadly poison. About the same time, evidence that sheep ranchers had purchased the death of more than 500 bald and golden eagles, which had been shot-gunned from helicopters in Wyoming and Colorado, caught the interest of the public and Congress.

As a result of such incidents, Congress passed amendments to the Bald Eagle Act that included stiffer penalties for the destruction of our national bird and its cousin the golden eagle. In 1972 the use of some predator toxicants on public land was banned. Although that decision was based on years of research into what animals the toxicants were killing, for whom, and for what purpose, reports of the dead Jackson Canyon eagles and other victims helped grease the skids.

Ever since the 1972 decision, western livestock interests and ADC personnel have advocated a return to more—rather than a change to less—use of poison.

Poisons are indiscriminately destructive; no poison will kill only certain species of wildlife. However, poison is the cheapest means of killing massive quantities of wildlife, regardless of species—which, in my view, is a principal reason that the Wool-growers and Cattlemen's associations are both on record as advocating a return to the days of mass poisoning.

The Environmental Protection Agency has allowed ADC to poison wildlife on public land by putting sodium cyanide in devices called M-44s. The M-44, formerly known as the Coyote Getter, is a spring-loaded tubular container driven into the ground. A small stake that has been smeared with an evil-smelling (to humans) attractant protrudes. A slight tug on the stake releases a charge of cyanide into the mouth of a coyote, bear, bobcat, or mountain lion, and death comes shortly thereafter.

If you are one of the hundreds of thousands of Americans who enjoy the public lands in the West, you should be on the lookout for M-44s and the tiny warning signs that

are planted close beside them. If your outing includes the family dog, it will detect the odor from an M-44 long before you can read the sign, and you'll face the sad task of burying your dog. If your outing also includes your children, whose natural inclination may be to pick up an M-44 that they find—then what?

In 1985 the responsibility for administering ADC programs was transferred from the Department of the Interior to APHIS, a branch of the USDA. If you have read the propaganda recently generated by APHIS, you might believe that the agency practices selective control of predatory wildlife and champions the use of guard dogs, aversives, electric fencing, and better animal husbandry, rather than the slaughter of predators, to protect livestock. If so, you've been had.

Nearly \$30 million was spent last year to control so-called varmints. Of that amount, 87 percent was allocated for use in western states, and 90 percent of the western funds were allocated for lethal control. As it always has, ADC is relying on mass killing as its principal way of solving reported wildlife-depredation problems.





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ADC has killed not only fur-bearing predators but winged ones as well. An eagle lured by a rabbit carcass has perished in a leghold trap.

ADC's main target is the coyote. Given a chance, coyotes are territorial animals. They set up housekeeping in a given area and defend their territory against other coyotes. Suppose that a family of coyotes is going about its business—feeding on rodents, rabbits, and insects (coyotes love grasshoppers), rearing its pups, and ignoring any nearby livestock. Should that family of coyotes be killed? ADC's actions say yes.

Last spring a friend of mine was filming a coyote returning to her den with a jackrabbit dangling from her jaws (her pups would have been pleased) when an ADC aircraft swooped down and killed her. That incident took place on a cattle range, miles from the nearest sheep ranch.

Here's another example. This winter, thanks to a huge influx of tax dollars approved by Congress, we saw an increase in low-flying fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft hovering over our western rangelands and national forests, shooting coyotes. Although APHIS aircraft operate year-round, winter is the best time to raise the body count. When the brush is buried in snow and gullies are snowed in, there aren't many hiding places for coyotes. The problem with that method of predator control is that nonselective mass killing of predators in the winter has nearly no relation to stopping livestock from being lost to predators in the spring. In fact, years of experience in pred-

ator control have convinced me that the only time a lethal control method ever works is when it is directed at the animal actually doing damage. Indiscriminate destruction may make frustrated ranchers feel better, but it only creates more problems.

Even back in my predator-control days we were supposed to be practicing selective control. We got away with using methods that resulted in mass slaughter the same way managers do today—by claiming to be practicing "preventive control" in areas of "historic predation."

If a rancher reported that coyotes had killed his sheep—whether it was last month or last year and whether the kill had been verified or not—the territory became the site of "historic predation." An example: a General Accounting Office investigative report revealed that in 1988 no sheep had been killed by coyotes on 60 percent of the U.S. Forest Service's grazing allotments in Utah. Yet because of "historic predation," from January through March 1989 coyotes were shot from fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft. Areas of "historic predation" are an ADC loophole through which wildlife can be destroyed on public land, using taxpayers' dollars, to benefit a small group of ranchers.

What APHIS's ADC program overlooks entirely is that not all coyotes eat sheep and that it is in everyone's interest to keep coyotes that don't alive and healthy. What happens when APHIS kills a family of coyotes that was going about its business, helping to balance a very fragile ecosystem and not eating livestock? Another group of coyotes—perhaps one that has a taste for sheep—moves into the area. In that case, APHIS, in its infinite wisdom, not only has destroyed a valuable asset but also has

created a need for more predator control. It happens all the time.

When controllers, through their cyanide baiting, aerial hunting, denning, and shooting, deplete a population of coyotes, Mother Nature informs the survivors: "There's a void here. Get busy and fill it." Reproduction increases by 20 to 30 percent. More yearling coyotes breed. Litter size increases. The government has to kill more coyotes just to stay even. This is the tragedy of modern predator control.

In 1988 ADC brutally killed 76,000 coyotes, 1,200 bobcats, 200 mountain lions, 300 black bears, and innumerable nontarget animals, including dogs and cats. Millions of dollars in tax revenues are confiscated each year by western senators and representatives trying to appease a tiny, powerful group of western ranchers. To this day predator control remains nothing more than a war on whole species, and success is measured largely by the body count. It will remain so until all of us can convince our government that this needless, wasteful slaughter must cease. ■

What Can Be Done?

The HSUS is in the middle of one of the largest fights ever fought in the wildlife arena: the battle to eliminate the brutal, needless destruction of wildlife perpetuated by the government's predator-control programs. You can help. Please write to your representatives, your senators, and the secretary of agriculture, asking them to use their influence to get APHIS to do the following:

- Withdraw and redraft ADC's recently issued Environmental Impact Statement, which is inadequate in its scope and content.
- Implement a program that does not result in the wasteful slaughter of wildlife, "nontarget" animals such as dogs and cats, or threatened and endangered species.
- Commit the ADC budget to the use and development of effective, nonlethal control methods, such as livestock-guarding dogs, strobe devices, predatorproof fencing, and changes in animal-husbandry practices.

• Recognize that healthy, diverse populations of wildlife are an essential part of the web of life, realize the importance of maintaining such populations on public lands, and endorse policies that do so.

The HSUS is diligently working with federal agencies to reform the ADC program and with Congress to replace it. Your letters support our efforts. ■

In the late 1960s and the early 1970s Dick Randall worked as a predator-control agent at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He is a well-known wildlife photographer and a consultant to The HSUS. Recently he was the subject of the feature Portrait in U.S. News and World Report.