

A Death Of Ethics: Is Hunting Destroying Itself?

From killing baboon families to staging predator-killing contests, hunters stand accused of violating the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. Now they're being called out by their own

by [Todd Wilkinson](#)



Coyote taken in a winter predator hunt in Wyoming. Photo credit: #chasin_fur Instagram
Right now, as you read these words, it is perfectly legal in the state of Wyoming for a person to climb on the back of a snowmobile and chase down wild wolves, pursuing them until they drop from physical exhaustion. And, if that's not enough, you can then run them over relentlessly with the machine, injuring them until they die.

You don't need a hunting license, nor even a bullet to kill a wolf. You can do the above with impunity across roughly 85 percent of Wyoming which, as the "Cowboy State" encompasses almost 98,000 square miles, including vast sweeps of public land and excluding only federal wilderness and places where motorized restrictions apply.

You don't need a reason to justify your actions either. Even if game wardens were to bear witness, it is highly unlikely you would catch any flak—unless your conduct happened to startle a deer, elk, pronghorn or domestic cow or horse, and then you might earn a scolding for harassing wildlife or livestock.

In fact, wolves, which were recently taken off the list of federally-protected species and their management handed over to the state unconditionally in 2017, can be killed by virtually any means, any time of day, any day of the year, without limit in most of Wyoming.

Never in the proud modern history of American wildlife conservation has an iconic animal commanding such mystique as a wolf been the subject of overt government policies encouraging its re-eradication after millions of public dollars were invested in species recovery.

It isn't even that, as charismatic social animals, wolves in Wyoming are treated as *worthless*. Their status, by intent, is actually *lesser* than that because they are relegated pejoratively to "predator" classification—another word for vermin—reserved for feral cats, skunks, and exotic rats.

Lawmakers in Cheyenne, the capital, have long resented wolves being brought back to their state. They regard the native canids as unwanted liabilities imposed upon them, though the presence of wolves in Wyoming's top two tourist destinations, Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks, helps generate tens of millions of dollars annually for local economies because they attract legions of avid wolf watchers.

Echoing a mentality that first rose on the 19th-century frontier and still continues, Wyoming's attitude toward wolves is driven by deep-seated antagonism and defiance. Accused of "devastating" big game herds and wreaking widespread havoc on the livestock industry in spite of scant evidence to support these claims, lobos in the vast majority of Wyoming (except for just 15 percent of the state that includes Yellowstone and Grand Teton) share despised company with another canid unique to North America, the coyote.

Snowmobiles aren't the only non-firearms tools hunters can employ to destroy these carnivores; lobos, coyotes and their young offspring can be felled with poison, flattened by ATVs, snared, and incinerated live by pouring gas or dynamite into their dens and then lighting a match—acts that most would consider barbaric. If a person doesn't want to do the killing himself, he can summon gunners employed by a federal agency called Wildlife Services, a division within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to shoot wolves and coyotes from the sky using aircraft.

One former state wildlife professional in Wyoming told *Mountain Journal* that “what happens with wolves is kind of our dirty little secret—and if the public only knew this is allowed, people would be outraged, deservedly so.”

Today, critics partially blame the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—ironically the very federal steward in charge of nurturing imperiled species toward recovery—for allowing it to happen. Former national director of the Fish and Wildlife Service Dan Ashe told *Mountain Journal* last summer the agency must abide by states’ rights and the way the Endangered Species Act is currently written, respecting the wishes of whatever states decide to do after an animal is returned to their custody. (The same rationale would apply to the hand over of Greater Yellowstone grizzly bears from federal to state jurisdiction).

In autumn 2018, Chief U.S. District Judge Dana L. Christensen in Missoula, Montana, citing deficiencies in the government's bear recovery strategy, ordered that grizzlies be returned to federal protection under the Endangered Species Act. Still, in light of what's happening with wolves, there's little wonder, observers say, why conservationists have dubious trust that state management in Wyoming will work out well for bruins.

The Fish and Wildlife Service initially told Wyoming it would demand that wolves be classified as a game animal across the entire state, thereby ensuring they be managed professionally, like other major species, with hunting quotas and seasons, the same as they are in Montana and Idaho. The Wyoming legislature and governor, however, defied the demand and the Fish and Wildlife Service capitulated.

A former senior official with the Fish and Wildlife Service, who does not want his name used because he is a friend of Ashe, said, “The Service knew Wyoming would allow the same disgraceful things that happen with coyotes to also happen to wolves, which it knew was wrong and inconsistent with the intent of recovering a species, and yet the Service let it happen anyway because of political pressure.”

According to Wyoming statute, wolves in 4/5ths of the state can be killed “with, from, *or by* use of any aircraft, automotive vehicle, trailer, 35 motor-propelled wheeled vehicle or vehicle designed for travel over snow.” Predators are exceptions to protection under animal cruelty and wildlife harassment codes.

How do we know some hunters make sport out of running down wild canids with snowmobiles? Besides [boastful evidentiary comments](#), chatter that happens often in saloons, and occasional photographs surfacing, it's more common than one thinks in western states—and it's [documented on social media here](#) (**WARNING:** the footage is disturbing) and below.

Not long ago, amateur footage documented a bearded hunter, appearing like a character lifted out of *Mad Max*, roaring on his snowmobile, purportedly across Wyoming’s open, frozen, snow-covered hinders, chasing down coyotes. The video was sound-tracked with a Country-Western tune.

Viewers see the driver throttling toward a coyote then run it over, allowing the traumatized animal to get up and try to flee so he can chase it again. (**Note:** the rider denies that he ever shot

the coyote and we don't know what happened to the animal after it was run down. Since this story appeared, video footage and photos have been removed from social media, and some have claimed that neither the chasing of coyotes by riders on snowmobiles nor the killing of coyotes ever happened; that's why *Mountain Journal* is keeping them up as visual evidence and for readers to draw their own conclusions.)

Still the footage yielded praise from several viewers declaring how fun it is to slay 'yotes. One commentator, however, representing the disgust of others, wrote: "I'm a hunter and a trapper n [sic] don't agree with running them over with your sled. That's not a humane dispatch. It's clear you didn't grow up with a Dad teaching you about hunter ethics. Sorry man."



Last view of a doomed coyote: This photograph of a crushed coyote, run over and killed by a Wyoming snowmobiler, was circulated on social media to tout the spoils of a successful hunt.

Photo: #chasin_fur on Instagram

Notably—and this is important—the film mentioned above, titled on Youtube “Running coyotes@wyohoundsmen,” wasn’t the product of a covert investigation conducted by an animal rights organization; it was carefully produced by a “hunter,” freely shared and promoted ostensibly to attract personal attention—and glory.

For perspective, were a citizen to treat a domestic dog, cat, horse, cow, lamb, wild deer, elk, or pronghorn this way the individual would likely face animal cruelty charges or be arrested on

violations of game laws, bringing fines and potential jail time. (Read the Wyoming statutes [here](#).) He would also earn shame in his community.

Yet in Wyoming and other states in the American West, persecution of coyotes isn't encumbered by any animal welfare statutes but venerated as a cultural tradition.

If you can, take a look at the photo and video, above. They offer brutal glimpses at reality, and they speak not only truth on the ground but to the fact such behavior is condoned by political and social leaders in Wyoming, who let them happen without comment.

Longtime Wyoming wildlife conservationist Lisa Robertson shared the images on Facebook along with this short narrative: "Would anyone like to know the story behind this photo? Do you have any idea what it could be? Believe me, you could never imagine what I am going to share with you. If you can't stomach reality, please read no further.

"This...coyote is one of thousands that are being persecuted by killers in our state who practice the sport of Yote Whackin'. It includes coyote killing contests and snowmobiles. This coyote is plastered in the snow under a snowmobile after just being chased until it could no longer escape. The snowmobiler arranged his camera on the 'bile to film himself as he grabbed the coyote by the tail and swung the coyote to beat its head against the 'bile, again and again, until the job is done when he tosses the coyote on the back of the 'bile, as he smiles into the camera."

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When it comes to ethics in hunting and the principle of "fair chase," is there a common playbook that prescribes how humans ought to conduct themselves when stalking wild animals for food, trophy *and thrill*?

Consider the circumstances of still another incident involving a sportsman from the northern Rockies whose controversial conduct made headlines around the world: The case involves a (now former) Idaho Fish and Game commissioner named Blake Fischer.

Mr. Fischer headed off to Africa with his wife on a sport hunting safari, killed an entire family of baboons with bow and arrows and then posed in a photograph with the primate corpses of adult baboons and their multi-age offspring. He circulated images of his exploits among friends. Quickly, shortly after he pressed "send" on his keyboard, he received warnings, including stern advisements from fellow wildlife commissioners who correctly predicted his actions would cause a firestorm and bring unwanted scrutiny down upon hunting itself. One commissioner called what Fischer did "revolting."



Former Idaho Fish and Game Commissioner Blake Fischer posing in the photo that resulted in his resignation and set off a global firestorm. Following his outing, he circulated the photo with the message: "I shot a whole family of baboons."

Indeed, the media and animal rights activists eventually got hold of Fischer's pictures and the images went viral, meeting with widespread condemnation, rivaling the viral uproar created by the killing of Cecil the African lion by a Minnesota bow hunter.

Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, saying he was embarrassed by what Fischer did and under pressure, called upon the commissioner to tender his resignation, which he did with a tone of contrition. Fischer then, reportedly, received death threats purportedly from animal advocates.

One of the arguments made in Fischer's defense is that killing a family of baboons is perfectly legal—an accepted practice in African nations like Namibia where it happened. Essentially, it's

no different from what occurs with coyotes, bobcats, foxes, prairie dogs and other species on a daily basis in the West.

Fischer himself told *The Idaho Statesman* newspaper that he “didn’t do anything illegal...I didn’t do anything unethical. I didn’t do anything immoral.”

Just because something is legal does that mean it’s ethical and moral? And, if something isn’t ethical or moral, should it then be legal? Dog and cockfighting used to be legal, so did slavery and denying women and non-white minorities citizen status and the right to vote.

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The question of what is legal versus what is ethical and moral in hunting figures prominently in a growing national discussion. It comes at a time when hunter numbers are in steady decline nationwide and have been for decades. More Americans are living in metropolitan areas and aren’t embracing the outdoor past-times such as hunting and trapping.

By extension, state wildlife agencies, which rely upon revenues generated through the sale of hunting licenses, are struggling mightily with funding woes. Meantime, lines separating what’s legal from what’s ethical, moral and socially acceptable are the subject of individual tribal interpretation and fierce debate.

Topping it off is social media. Such information sharing platforms did not exist a generation ago and today are powder kegs, inflaming passions and heightening the level of divisive discourse that exists among hunters, trappers and non-hunting citizens. Non-hunters often feel strongly that killing animals for sport, using them as target practice, as objects to turn celebrity-seeking hunters into social media stars, or to have animal antlers and stuffed heads on the wall, is anachronistic.

Despite the unified public front of hunting, the so-called “hunting community” is hardly a monolith. Still, it is taboo to speak a discouraging word about hunting if you hunt. Hunters who raise an objection about dubious behavior often are castigated as traitors, or worse, as “antis.”

Around the globe, the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is held up by hunters as the Bible. Seven tenets are set in place that spell out clearly what the pillars of ethical hunting are. The principles, notably, were first nascently championed by the Missoula, Montana-based Boone & Crockett Club, an organization founded in 1887 by sportsman turned President Theodore Roosevelt.



The famous cartoon by Clifford Berryman portraying Theodore Roosevelt as an ethical hunter who believed in fair chase and respect for animals he hunted. Although he has a less than evolved attitude toward predators, hunting historians today say Roosevelt, as a student of science, would embrace the knowledge that touts their important ecological role. They say he would be opposed to predator-killing contests and be appalled by the practice of running down wolves and coyotes on snowmobiles.

TR, George Bird Grinnell and others were alarmed by how the absence of regulations, along with the slaughter of animals for short-term profit, the problem of habitat loss and there being no rules governing personal honorable behavior led to the decimation of many species, including the near extinction of bison. He condemned the wild-West mindset that allowed a person to kill bison without limit, any time of day, any hour of the day, without a reason. TR warned that unless rules prescribing ethical wildlife stewardship were implemented, hunting itself could be lost.

In the 21st century, has the poignance of Roosevelt's concern come around full circle?

These are the modern precepts articulated in the North American Model which were evolved and championed by Canadian biologist Dr. Valerius Geist, Shane Mahoney, John Organ, Ian McTaggart-Cowan and others.

1. Wildlife are a public resource, held in public trust, to be managed by governments for the benefit of all citizens, present and future.
2. Unregulated commercial markets for wild game that historically left wildlife populations plundered were eliminated and continue to be prohibited.
3. Regulations exist, developed by citizens and enforced by government agencies, that mandate hunters and anglers secure licenses and they make clear how many animals can be killed via quota and the proper method for harvesting them.
4. The freedom to hunt and fish—as well as viewing wildlife—should be an opportunity made available to all citizens. Those opportunities are enhanced in the West by the presence of public lands.
5. Wild game populations should not be killed casually and only for a *legitimate purpose* as defined by law.
6. Wildlife is considered an international resource because animals migrate across political boundaries.
7. Science is the basis for guiding wildlife policy and management, not opinion or conjecture, in order to sustain healthy wildlife populations.

None of the tenets stands on its own; each is interrelated. The Boone & Crockett Club [devotes particular attention to “fair chase,”](#) which it describes as “the ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit and taking of any free-ranging wild, native North American big game animal in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper advantage over such animals.” It also places a strong emphasis on treating hunted animals with respect, minimizing pain and suffering of an animal by killing it as quickly as possible, and not wasting it.

Talk to most hunters, government wildlife agencies, and hunting organizations such as the Boone & Crockett (the official keeper of big game hunting records), Safari Club International, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Ducks Unlimited and the National Rifle Association and they say they are devoted to upholding and advancing the North American Model. (Note: the author of this story has been a lifelong hunter and angler and went through hunter safety at age 12 in 1974).



Wolves in 85 percent of Wyoming can be killed for any reason, at any hour of the day, any day of the year, by any means and with no limit. No license needed either. In the history of the Endangered Species Act, never has that happened with an iconic animal after its management was turned over to states by the federal government. Critics call it a deliberate attempt by Wyoming to allow the re-eradication of wolves in all but a little corner of the state because it still resents lobos were brought back. Photo courtesy Jacob W. Frank/NPS

Mountain Journal contacted several widely respected experts on hunting, all of whom have spent their lives killing animals for food. One of them is Montanan Jim Posewitz, a member of the Montana Outdoor Hall of Fame and founder of [Orion—The Hunter's Institute](#), who wrote a book titled [Beyond Fair Chase](#) that for years has been distributed to students young and old who enroll in state-sponsored hunter safety courses. He is also an authority not only on the hunting values of Theodore Roosevelt but in interpreting the North American Model.

Here is what's poignant: Posewitz and others identify several legally permitted hunting activities in America that, in their determination, grossly fail to pass the rule of fair chase and ethical standards laid out in the North American Model. Those contradictions are giving hunting a bad name, they say, resulting in it losing its appeal and credibility among the overwhelming majority of Americans who do not hunt.

From Wyoming's controversial promotion of open season on wolves to predator derbies and wildlife killing contests held across the country targeting animals ranging from coyotes to rattlesnakes; from baiting black bears that enables hunters to literally shoot food-habituated bruins over a barrel, to captive "canned" hunts staged behind fences, to using domestic hounds to chase down certain game animals, those we interviewed say such activities are harming the public perception of hunting at a pivotal time when the public image of hunting matters more than ever.

Many see the Fischer baboon saga as providing a moment for reflection. Before going further, let's take a snapshot at where hunting is today, provided courtesy of the National Survey of Hunting, Fish, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation assembled by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service every 10 years.

As of 2016, about 11.5 million people in America considered themselves hunters. That may sound like a lot, but it's less than four percent of the total population. As a percentile of citizens and in number of participants, the number is dropping each year and the slide shows no signs of self-arrest.

According to hunter Natalie Krebs writing in *Outdoor Lifemagazine*, "hunting participation peaked in 1982, when nearly 17 million hunters purchased 28.3 million licenses. Hunter numbers have steadily declined since. We lost 2.2 million hunters between 2011 and 2016 alone." The five-year drop is more than four times the total current population of Wyoming.

Few experts believe the trend line will ever be significantly reversed. Most agree that, if hunters refuse to take heed, hunting faces a reckoning. A major challenge is holding the line on existing hunter numbers. Hunting arguably enjoys a disproportionate amount of political clout in Congress but that clout is concentrated in a demographic that is mostly white, male, gray haired and fading. Maintaining its influence, people like Posewitz say, means that hunting must be perceived as a virtuous, defensible activity.

"Those of us who value hunting don't need PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and the Humane Society to give hunting a black eye," Posewitz told *Mountain Journal*. "We're doing that all by ourselves, against ourselves, with the proliferation of self-promoting videos on Youtube and selfies of people posing with dead animals on Facebook and other forms of social media. We've become our own worst enemy."

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Amid fallout from the Fischer incident, Keith Balfour, a spokesman for the Boone & Crockett Club, answered a barrage of media questions. "Hatred vented toward hunting by the anti-hunter

establishment is one deal. What does even more damage to the reputation of hunting is the hatred and knuckleheadedness that exists among members of the hunting community sometimes toward each other," Balfour told *Mountain Journal*, adding:

"I think the incident involving the Idaho game commissioner and the baboon photo was beyond stupid. For me to even be saying this will cause some to say that Boone and Crockett is just as bad as the Humane Society of the US. They'll claim, 'You shouldn't be calling out other hunters. You've providing ammo to the other side.' I've heard a few people respond by saying, 'You can't tell me what to do because freedom of expression is my right. If I want to show blood and guts and dead animals with tongues hanging out of their mouths in my photos I'm gonna do it.' To an extent they are right, but unfortunately what some hunters do reflects poorly on all of us."

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"Chest-beating trophy shots" are today prolific, part of the modern age of self-expression on social media with some hunters, yet Balfour believes something in recent years has become lost in translation. "It seems like we've let a whole generation grow up without understanding there are honorable sideboards for how you present yourself publicly as a hunter. Some people seem to have never learned or have forgotten about that. We've never told people, for example, to think hard about posting images on social media and warned them about what the potential negative consequences could be."

Val Geist told *Mountain Journal* says the phenomenon of hunters seeking public attention is degrading the face of hunting. "The brutal killing of wildlife for entertainment or self-aggrandizing," he said, "is pathetic, as is virtually every attempt of self-aggrandizing."

Posewitz and Balfour say tribalism in the hunting community has created an atmosphere of intolerance toward those who insist hunters adhere to higher standards. And Posewitz notes that it isn't really about hunters getting busted posing boorishly for selfies; that's merely evidence, he says. Rather, it's the conduct and the mindset causing breaches in ethical hunting behavior to happen that warrants soul-searching for the hunting community.

"The optics of running down wolves and coyotes with snowmobiles or posing with a dead baboon family are just not good. Predator-killing contests aren't doing us any favors either," Balfour of Boone & Crockett says. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out hunting is in the spotlight more than ever before. Because of online media, because of Cecil the lion and other things, all hunting seems the same to people. The non-hunting public don't differentiate hunting for ducks, quail, deer, and elk to put food

on the table from killing elephants and giraffes in Africa or prairie dogs and coyotes in this country. They see something that sickens them and they'll conclude that all hunting must therefore be bad."

During the special election in 2017 held to fill the vacated U.S. House seat of Congressman Rep. Ryan Zinke of Montana, who today is President Donald Trump's U.S. Interior Secretary, then-candidate Greg Gianforte attracted national attention when he body slammed a journalist with *The Guardian* newspaper after the scribe enraged the candidate by asking a question Gianforte didn't want to answer. He pled guilty to misdemeanor assault.

Amid his stumping for votes, Gianforte made news another way. To win votes among rural Montanans, he invited Donald Trump, Jr. to join him on a prairie dog hunt in which the ground squirrels, which aren't eaten or stuffed as trophies, were used only as live targets, shot and then left to rot. At a rally, Gianforte shrugged off heat brought by animal welfare advocates. "You should try it, because it's fun," he told one reporter, believing it would enhance his prospects of getting elected, not hurt him.

The President's son had himself been the subject of controversy when he posed with a knife in one hand and the tail of an African elephant he shot clutched in another. If political candidates and high-profile individuals are engaging in activity that attracts public attention and negatively inflames Americans, can defenders of hunting complain?

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Camilla Fox is a plucky carnivore advocate. The daughter of a veterinarian father who was a canid researcher and went on to become a former vice president of the Humane Society of the US, she grew up with a pet timber wolf rescued from a research facility. She knew she faced a formidable test launching a coyote-advocacy campaign from her own state.

California, where she now lives (but spent many of her childhood years in Maine), is the most populous in the U.S. and second largest geographically, behind Texas, in the Lower 48. Although most of California's nearly 40 million residents live within 100 miles of the Pacific Coast, most of the state is rural. There, the attitudes ranchers have toward predators is no different from their counterparts in Western interior, she says.

"I founded Project Coyote because I wanted to change the way society thinks about North America's most maligned and misunderstood native carnivores and stop the demonization of them," she said. Coyotes are the most abundant and widely-dispersed predator of size on the landscape and a native North American canid found nowhere else. They are adaptive, living in wild areas and cities. In spite of

the lore of respect they command among indigenous people, who have lived with them for thousands of years, they are the most persecuted public animal in America today, she notes. "It's true that coyotes come into conflict with sheep and other vulnerable domestic animals, but it's also true that we can co-exist with them through smarter animal husbandry techniques and only recently have we come to understand and appreciate the important ecological role they play."

"I wanted to change the way society thinks about North America's most maligned and misunderstood native carnivores and stop the demonization of them." —Camilla Fox, founder of Project Coyote

Few wildlife conservationists in the West today devote more time to scrutinizing the killing of predators than Fox, Brooks Fahy, founder of Predator Defense, Wendy Keefover of the Humane Society of the US and Suzanne Asha Stone of Defenders of Wildlife. You could also add former government trapper and predator-control expert Carter Niemeyer and the staff of the Center for Biological Diversity. *Mountain Journal* will be exploring their relentless scrutiny of the federal agency known as Wildlife Services in future stories.

In 2017, Fox directed and produced the award-winning documentary, [*Killing Games: Wildlife in the Crosshairs*](#) to educate the American public about predator-killing contests. In the wake of the film's release, the National Coalition to End Wildlife Killing Contests was formed, with the goal of a wholesale national ban on killing contest. Several grassroots groups rooted in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, including Western Watersheds Project and Wyoming Untrapped, are part of the coalition.

Fox first started looking into a predator-killing contest in Modoc County, California, then home to one of the largest derbies in the country. What she discovered was a troubling reality. "I had no idea how pervasive predator-killing contests are. Monthly, if not every weekend, they are happening somewhere in the West, either staged as an official social event or held on the quiet," Fox said. "That so many of our state wildlife agencies have a policy of looking the other way is symptomatic of predator mismanagement as a whole. Predator derbies are one of the dirty little secrets those in charge of managing wildlife don't want to discuss."

She visited with many people and one of the first to listen was Michael Sutton, then president of the California Fish and Game Commission appointed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. "The first thing Camilla brought to my attention was coyote-killing contests," Sutton said. "The more I learned, the more convinced I became how these events have no place in 21st century America."

Sutton is a self-described "avid hunter and angler." He spent his youth growing up in and around Yellowstone Park and is a lawyer by training. Over the years, he's been a federal game warden with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service helping to prosecute poachers and served as park ranger in places ranging from Yellowstone to Yosemite. In recent years, he's had leadership roles with World Wildlife Fund as well as overseeing conservation programs for the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and serving as vice president of the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Today, Sutton is executive director of the Goldman

Environmental Foundation that annually awards the Goldman Prize—the “Nobel Prize for the environment”—to conservationists around the world who courageously advocate for resource protection. [Note, full disclosure, Sutton is also a board member of *Mountain Journal*].

In 2014, he and colleagues on the California Wildlife Commission voted to outlaw wildlife killing contests that offered prizes and inducements for taking coyotes, bobcats, foxes and other species. They also launched a comprehensive overhaul of California’s predator management policies. (By 2019, the state will also ban all use of lead ammunition because of its toxic effects on the environment and for wildlife, despite resistance from groups such as the National Rifle Association).

“Most people are outraged when they learn about all the different ways we abuse wildlife,” Sutton said, noting that in some parts of rural California the carcasses of coyotes are still hung from barbed wire fences as a social statement. “Anti-cruelty laws in many states don’t extend to coyotes. People can do practically anything they want to coyotes and post photos of themselves doing it on social media without repercussions, reprimand or penalties. Even in the most remote regions of the West, many ethical hunters I know are shocked this stuff still goes on.”

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Sutton knows how regulations can drive illicit activity underground. He worked as a federal game warden for six years tracking wildlife smugglers. A pilot, and in light of what happens with motor vehicles in Wyoming and other states, he says another loophole needs to be closed. “We probably need a terrestrial equivalent to the Airborne Hunting Act that would prohibit the running down of animals with a vehicle.” Yes, he notes, “it sounds absurd that Congress would need to act in passing a law preventing citizens from deliberately hunting wildlife using their vehicle as a weapon, but there’s a lot about societal attitudes toward coyotes that doesn’t make sense.

Fox called the California commission decision to ban contest killing historic and it was followed in 2018 by similar action in Vermont. Coyote contests may no longer be legal in those two states above, but they are in 48 others and even in California and Vermont they still can be killed in unlimited numbers without need for a license.

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At the same time, Dr. Fred Knowlton, a longtime coyote researcher in Utah, dismisses claims by wildlife advocates that killing contests can have devastating effects. He said that a coyote population can sustain annual losses of 70 percent and not be imperiled.

That's not the point, Sutton says; the persecution of coyotes, that results in hundreds of thousands of them dying each year, is a poor reflection on American character and values—the antithesis of the code of honor for hunting the Roosevelt envisioned.

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Defenders of coyote-killing contests and those who call in coyotes using electronic devices often say animal rights activists are out of touch with reality, that environmentalists don't understand the toll predators take. Coyote shooters are convinced that they themselves are fulfilling a noble conservation purpose. Plus, they note, stalking predators and killing them is challenging and makes for exhilarating entertainment.

Participants in derbies and prairie dog shoots tend not to be meek or ashamed and it's not hard to find individuals willing to share their opinions. Below is a description from Montana hunter Dustin Butler who is a regular on the coyote-calling circuit.

“A dozen years ago it was difficult to find a coyote-calling contest; it was even harder to get invited to one. Today there are contests all over the country. In my home state of Montana, it's easy to find a contest just about every weekend between December and March. Contests come in every size, shape and color, so it's important to understand what you're looking for. Rules, regulations and durations vary. Major calling contests are strictly regulated to ensure that all participants follow the same rules. Contest rules ensure a level playing field for all participants. If you're going to travel long distances to compete in a contest, it should be fair. How many baseball games have you attended where there wasn't at least one complaint about a missed call? Coyote contests are no different. Anytime there is competition with money and prizes involved, it's important to keep them fair.”



A pile of coyotes in the bed of a pick-up truck at a coyote-killing contest in Idaho a few years ago. Photo courtesy Project Coyote

He then shared this insight: “Please keep in mind that these are opinions I have formed over several years of participating in calling contests. I would never discourage anyone from attending any contest, but I do believe it’s important to know in advance what you’re getting into. Several years ago my close friend and I attended a calling contest. We assumed it was just that, a ‘calling’ contest. We had 24 hours of the best hunting I’ve ever experienced. We killed five coyotes and six fox in 24 hours. We were surprised to learn that another team had killed 13 critters in the same period of time. We were even more surprised to learn that they had used snowmobiles and not predator calls to harvest these animals. I have nothing against any method of coyote hunting; it’s personal preference. However, comparing coyote calling to chasing them on snowmobiles is like comparing apples and oranges. I should have better understood the rules, or lack thereof.”

Meanwhile, neighboring Wyoming has at least a half dozen large predator-killing contests each year. Most attract young men 40 and younger. A big one is the Wyoming Coyote Classic in Rock Springs. Contestant Eric Adams, interviewed by reporter Mike Koshmrl of the *Jackson Hole News & Guide*, shrugged off criticism as “just a bunch of guys hunting” and said the furs from killed coyotes aren't wasted but sold.

“Whether I’m hunting on the weekend or in a contest, whatever animal I’m going to kill, it is as ethically and humanely as possible,” Adams said. “Coyotes are so smart, and I treat them with just as much respect as I do deer or elk. This thought that we’re just a bunch of cold-blooded killers is nonsense. This is really, in my mind, no different than a fishing tournament.” [Note: the big difference is that most fishing tournaments, to comply with conservation standards, are catch and release.]

"This thought that we’re just a bunch of cold-blooded killers is nonsense. This is really, in my mind, no different than a fishing tournament." —Eric Adams, contestant in a recent Wyoming coyote-killing derby

Both contestants in predator derbies and the wildlife advocates scrutinizing them, trying to get them shut down, share tales of how they've received death threats from menacing partisans on the other side.

• • •

As a boy in Medford, Oregon, Mike Finley was taught how to hunt and fish by his father. He roamed old growth forests of the Pacific Northwest in search of deer and elk and cast his line into fresh and saltwater. His love of the outdoors led him to a three-decade career with the National Park Service. He was the only person to serve as superintendent of Yellowstone, Yosemite and Everglades national parks. Following a decade and a half tenure as president of the Turner Foundation, where he worked with Jim Range, the late hunter and Republican conservation stalwart, to help establish the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, Finley returned to Oregon and today is chairman of the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission.

“I killed my first deer almost 60 years ago,” he says. “I’ve been proud to be part of a hunting tradition based on fairness, restraint in honoring limits and veneration for the animal.”

Referring to predator-killing derbies as “slaughter fests” and “stomach-turning examples of wanton waste,” Finley is deeply concerned about the image of hunting becoming tainted. “There will always be an element of society that has no regard for the living world and you will never change their minds; their ancestors were the same people who wiped out the passenger pigeon and put notches in their rifle stocks as buffalo hunters. They would've killed every last one had others not stopped them,” he said. “They may derive a lot of personal delight in blowing away these animals but when you ask them why

they do it, they can't provide a good answer because there isn't one. The excuses they make, the stories they tell themselves don't hold up. It's pathetic and it's sad."

"There will always be an element of society that has no regard for the living world and you will never change their minds; their ancestors were the same people who wiped out the passenger pigeon and put notches in their rifle stocks as buffalo hunters. They may derive a lot of personal delight in blowing away these animals but when you ask them why they do it, they can't provide a good answer because there isn't one." —Mike Finley, chairman of the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission and former superintendent of Yellowstone National Park

Oregon is wrestling with several issues that press the boundaries of ethical behavior and the norms of fair chase; they include hunters using drones in pursuit of animals to rifles with telescopic scopes and rangefinders that allow game to be taken from 1,000 yards, to high-tech bows that are a radical departure from archery implements of old which were given a special season because they were primitive.

"Sportsmen weren't asking for these things. Most of the new emerging technologies are being promoted not because they make the hunting experience better but because the manufacturers of these weapons and gadgets want to make a buck," Finley said. "Hunting isn't about the gear or the kill; it's about the communion with nature and meeting and matching wits with an animal on its terms. I don't kill anything I don't eat."

He and Mike Sutton are dear friends whose terms as commissioners in neighboring states overlapped. If he could, Finley would add Oregon to the list of states outlawing predator-killing derbies.

• • •

Friendly and articulate, Brian Yablonski is executive director of the Property and Environment Research Center, a national think-tank called PERC. Based in Bozeman, Montana, PERC is devoted to advancing the principles of market-based conservation.

Along with him being an avid hunter and angler, what few realize about Yablonski is that prior to recently taking the helm at PERC, he served as chairman of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; in other words, he, like Sutton, helped set wildlife management policy for one of the most populous states in America.

"Hunting has so many headwinds facing it and to have examples of poor hunting—or controversies purported to pass as hunting—does not serve and reinforce the conservation legacy of hunting, which is

hunting's strength. People who engage in unethical behavior are undermining it," Yablonski says. "We need to police ourselves and insisting that we all abide by and uphold the highest standards."

"Hunting has so many headwinds facing it and to have examples of poor hunting—or controversies purported to pass as hunting—does not serve and reinforce the conservation legacy of hunting, which is hunting's strength. People who engage in unethical behavior are undermining it." — Brian Yablonski, former chairman of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

While serving on the Florida wildlife commission, Yablonski and colleagues dealt with an issue as incendiary as Wyoming's policies toward wolves and predator-killing contests. The issue involved what is known in local vernacular as "fox and coyote penning." It was a pastime that largely had flown under the radar of public scrutiny. "I was a commissioner but I had no idea it was going on," Yablonski says. "'Penning' events were billed as a kind of hunting-related competition."

In fact, it was akin to a crude hybrid of Old World fox hunting and dog fighting. Basically, "penning" involves placing foxes and coyotes within a fenced enclosure then allowing human participants to unleash their dogs which then run the wild canids down and kill them. "The foxes and coyotes attempt to flee but they come up against a chain-link fence perimeter and get stopped. Then the dogs descend and rip them apart."

Before Florida commissioners voted unanimously to outlaw the "sport" in 2010, Yablonski toured one facility and while riding out into the center of the compound in a golf cart noticed that coyotes and foxes were trailing close by. They had been fed and were semi-tamed, he said. At a public hearing, proponents of "penning" turned out *en masse*. "I had to explain to them why we were going to impose a ban," Yablonski said. "The three seminal tests of ethical hunting involve fair chase, humane killing and no wanton waste/ I said not one of those three tests is met by penning."

In addition, a law enforcement investigation into penning operations resulted in the arrest of 12 people and the issuance of 46 citations for violations related to illicit trade in live foxes and coyotes for use in penning events.

Pondering similar issues in the West, Yablonski notes, "Sometimes you can only legislate morality so much but, at the same time, I think all wildlife, or whatever you choose to label it—including wolves when they classified as 'predators' in Wyoming— are entitled to humane killing, period. No right-minded person would want to see an animal suffer regardless of how it is classified. That's not a cannon of law. It's a statement of human nature, morality and decency. All life should be respected. I can understand the need for predator control but it can be done in a humane way, have logic and reason behind it."

• • •

For 39 years, John Fandek managed the Carney cattle ranch in Cora, Wyoming, a tiny outpost in Sublette County along the flanks of the Wind River Mountains and near the banks of the Upper Green River. During that time, he had a front row seat to what he calls provincial attitudes toward predators.

“It is very common for people to take their entire families out on snowmobiles and train their kids to run down coyotes. To them, it's considered just a normal activity,” he said. “There’s no question they do it with wolves too if they can. If they can’t run them down, they’ll chase them until they fall in the snow from exhaustion and then shoot them. It’s considered a fun wholesome weekend activity.”

Fandek adds, “It goes hand in hand with people driving four wheelers to hunt elk. We have a generation of kids who think it's perfectly normal to run down animals recreationally simply because they are there. What bothers me? The utter inhumanity of it all.”

"We have a generation of kids who think it's perfectly normal to run down animals recreationally simply because they are there. What bothers me? The utter inhumanity of it all." —John Fandek, Wyoming hunter and former longtime ranch manager

Fandek himself hunts every fall to put elk meat in the freezer. “I enjoy it but I like to do it in an ethical manner. I don’t think people, even in this state, realize what’s going on with these coyote-killing derbies and the work of Wildlife Services. When I was managing the ranch we had Wildlife Services come on without permission and kill wolves. Many of these snowboilers who chase wolves and coyotes, they’re trespassing on private property. They don’t care.”

I asked Fandek why the Wyoming Game and Fish Department remains silent. “That’s a good question. It has to do with the livestock lobby and the picture they play of vicious predators depredating on livestock. The truth is that Game and Fish takes its marching orders from the livestock industry in the state.”

• • •

Earlier in 2018, I had a phone conversation with Brian Nesvik, chief game warden with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. We chatted about the high-minded principles of the North American Model. When I told him about videos circulating on social media showing people on snowmobiles literally running down coyotes— and that there were comments in on-line hunting forums claiming the same thing was happening with wolves—he told me he was unaware.

When I noted that the footage for the coyote film suggests it had been made in Wyoming, he was left speechless. He called it “unfortunate.” When I asked him if that kind of treatment of wildlife comported with ethics championed in the North American Model, he said, “I personally can’t defend that kind of conduct. But state law allows it to happen. The decision of whether to permit it or ban it does not reside with the [Wyoming Game and Fish] Department; it resides with the state legislature, the governor and the Game and Fish Commission.”

I then reached out to a state lawmaker from Jackson Hole, where the value of carnivores (wolves and bears) is a major driver of nature tourism, and asked what he thought about Wyoming's permissive policies. “I did not know you could do that [run over wolves and coyotes and kill them with a snowmobile or ATV],” Sen. Andy Schwartz replied. “I don’t think that is particularly in the Wyoming tradition of hunting. If it is documented on video, I don’t want to see it.”

Hundreds of amateur and professional hunting videos exist on social media platforms, almost always portraying the host heroically stalking the quarry, getting in place for the kill shot, pulling the trigger, and then posing with dead animals afterward. Some of them are even featured in the varmint hunting section of national outdoor hunting retailer Cabela's.

Seldom do any of the films tout the virtues or natural history of the animal or what its living presence had meant to the land. In the case of coyotes and prairie dogs, it is not uncommon for their carcasses to be spread out or stacked like cord wood, much like the photographs of old when anglers would catch and kill dozens of fish on a single outing, or when hunters would wingshoot dozens of birds way over today's limits. No longer are such photographs from the olden days in fashion but selfies showing dead wolves, coyotes and bears are.

• • •

Debates over fair chase hunting and wildlife take many forms. In Wisconsin, it’s legal for hunters to use bear dogs to pursue and tree black bears until a hunter arrives to shoot the bruin and watch it tumble to the ground, similar to how hounds are used to chase cougars in some states.

It's ironic. In some states if a domestic dog chases a deer, it can be shot and the owner fined. In North Dakota during a recent hard winter, a state wildlife official warned coyote hunters using snowmobiles not to chase them through wooded areas or dense cattails because it might scare, stress, or harass wildlife. Coyotes, their advocates say, are wildlife too. Why are predators capriciously put into a special category of disdain as if they are not?

A huge row exists over whether the use of hounds to chase non-avian wildlife is ethical and those who do it say carnivores are so elusive they'd never be able to kill them. California recently outlawed the use of hounds to hunt bears by statute, over the objections of local houndsmen and their organizations. In other states, hounds can be turned loose to run cougars and bears merely for practice before hunting season begins.

And this leads to another question: should a hound owner receive any compensation if a dog is killed by a wild predator? Moreover, in Wyoming, if a pack of hounds, say, tangles with a female grizzly bear and cubs, and the bear tears into the dog, can the houndsman then kill the bear, arguing it was done in defense of personal property?

When I asked Wyoming Chief Game Warden Nesvik that question, he said any incident would be approached on a case by case basis. It is legal in Wyoming to run hounds in portions of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem known to be inhabited by grizzlies.

Another ethical, controversial gray area involves bear baiting. Here, stinky putrid baits—the smellier the better— are put out to create artificial bear feeding stations which lure bruins in so they can be easily killed as a hunter lies in wait. There are dozens of videos on social media showing hunters—including sometimes sub-teenage kids— shooting bears literally over barrels at feeding stations from mere feet away.

Bear baiters are supposed to use non-human foods, though it's a regulation known to be regularly flouted, with such delicacies as sugar donuts, bacon and potato chips set out to entice them. An outfitter in the Bridger-Teton National Forest, who runs 35 bait sites over a 40-mile area in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, [told a reporter for *Field & Stream* magazine](#) that he cooked up 50 55-gallon bags of popcorn and left them out to lure in bears.

An outfitter in the Bridger-Teton National Forest, who runs 35 bait sites over a 40-mile area in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, told a reporter for *Field & Stream* magazine that he cooked up 50 55-gallon bags of popcorn and left them out to lure in bears.

It runs directly counter to the widely-circulated slogan of ethics—"a fed bear is a dead bear"— that is invoked by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department in its public education efforts. A non-hunting tourist could be fined for deliberately habituating wildlife with food because it's bad for the animal and creates potential dangerous conditions for people; in Yellowstone and Grand Teton, for example, sloppy disposal of food or trash on the trail or in camp could result in a visitor being fined and potentially banned from entering the parks.

While Montana prohibits black bear baiting because it is deemed inconsistent with fair chase and hazardous, Wyoming allows it, including in parts of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem known to be inhabited by grizzlies. Nesvik told me that if a black bear hunter sees a grizzly frequenting a bait station,

the person must immediately stop the feeding and report it to the Game and Fish Department. However, just because the baiter didn't witness it doesn't mean a grizzly hadn't visited the site and got it hooked.

Nesvik said coyote-killing contests also fall under the purview of the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission, whose political appointees made by the governor and, arguably without exception, have advanced the interests of livestock as much as wildlife..

• • •

Late in April 2018, in a part of Park County, Wyoming just east of Yellowstone National Park, an event called "Predator Palooza" was staged by a local saloon in collaboration with gun enthusiasts. But this was not a music festival held in celebration of wildlife predators. Lethally targeted were wolves, coyotes and bobcats in an event billed as providing family entertainment and helping kids get interested in hunting.

Delving into the history of predator-killing contests, Fox says she believes the first official one was held in 1957 in Chandler, Arizona outside of Phoenix. Fascinating perhaps is that they've become more numerous in recent years as hunter numbers nationally are receding. Why does that say?

"It means that as the pool of hunters continues to shrink, the number of those partaking in ethically-questionable events is growing and that doesn't bode well for hunting," Sutton says.

As you read these words, another new derby, "The United States Predator Challenge" is getting underway. And it is has attracted ridicule from the National Coalition to End Wildlife Killing Contests and its more than 30 member organizations.

The event involves two-man hunting teams (yes, it specifically says teams of men) traveling to two of three different regions of the country and killing as many coyotes as possible. Those who kill the most will win tournament prizes, including a champion belt buckle. Contestants can kill coyotes on both public and private lands, which adds to the controversy—federal land agencies like the Bureau of Land Management often directly approve the events or they condone them via indifference.

One of the implicit arguments made by organizers of the "Predator Challenge" is that participants will be aiding the cause of reducing predator numbers so that game animals can thrive. However, opponents

point to a letter signed by 70 wildlife scientists, including Michael Soule, Paul Paquet, Franz Camenzind, Chris Mowry John Yucetich, Dave Parsons, and Robert Crabtree, refuting the claim. Their collective research indicates that haphazard killing and wounding foments chaos in the social order of wolves and coyotes and can make predator conflicts worse. Also cited is a conclusion reached by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission in 2018 that examined the contention as it put together a state coyote management plan and delivered its findings in a report:

“While coyote population reduction (“coyote control”) is often the first and only management approach that people suggest, it has proven ineffective. There is no silver bullet that will eradicate or permanently reduce free-ranging coyote populations,” the North Carolina report states. “However, there are strategies that can address specific issues and concerns about coyotes that are more effective and cost efficient. Most of these strategies focus on implementing non-lethal techniques or, if necessary, removing individual problem coyotes. Strategies to address impacts of coyotes on other wildlife likely will require management actions directed at the species of interest rather than coyotes (e.g., emphasizing habitat productivity and quality or re-examining harvest season structures).”

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Flier for an upcoming predator-killing derby in Salmon, Idaho that is being touted as a fundraiser for cancer victims.

No sooner had the US Predator Challenge tournament begun than in Wyoming and Idaho, two contests were announced for February 2019: an annual tournament in Pinedale, Wyoming and the “Wolf & Coyote Derby” near the town of Salmon, Idaho. The latter offers cash prizes for the largest wolf and coyote killed as well as hunters who haul in the most predators by combined weight of total animals bagged. Organizers said proceeds would benefit local cancer patients and a poster advertiser the event printed the slogan: “Killin’ Cancer Throughout North Central Idaho.”

Fox called it was reprehensible that charity to help seriously ill people was being used to justify its purpose. It’s worth noting that Boone & Crockett is opposed to wildlife killing contests and derbies, seeing them as contrary to tenets of the North American Model, namely that there is no scientific basis and that monetizing animal killing is wrong.

“Predator-killing contests are abominations, an insult to the history of life on this planet,” says Mike Phillips, a professional wolf biologist, a citizen who has been elected to serve multiple terms in the Montana House and Senate and who is director of the Turner Endangered Species Fund in Bozeman. Phillips, who hunts deer and elk, was one of the scientists hand-picked to help complete the restoration of wolves to Yellowstone National Park.

“If you are going to remove wolves or coyotes because there are identifiable problems, okay, do it if it's necessary, but be strategic. Predator killing contests turn that on its head. When is needless, thoughtless killing ever justified?” Phillips asks. “I find its rationalization by those who claim to support professional wildlife management most curious. I would suppose that most of the people who participate in these contests of slaughter would consider themselves to be people of faith. What God worth worshipping would find it acceptable for His or Her followers to kill Her creation needlessly, senselessly and often out of hatred? Are these contests indicative of the values we want to be emulating for our kids?”

“I would suppose that most of the people who participate in these contests of slaughter would consider themselves to be people of faith. What God worth worshipping would find it acceptable for His or Her followers to kill Her creation needlessly, senselessly and often out of hatred? Are these contests indicative of the values we want to be emulating for our kids?” —Montana Sen. Mike Phillips, a wolf biologist and director of the Turner Endangered Species Fund

Phillips said that during the 2019 Montana legislative session he intends to introduce a bill that would outlaw predator-killing contests in his state. “I admit, I’m old school when it comes to hunting and I find the rise of popularity in varmint hunting and making a spectacle of it on social media to be disgusting,” he said.

“If you want to celebrate your prowess as an expert marksman shooting from several hundred yards, then set up dummy targets; don’t use live animals. I’ve watched some of the prairie dog and coyote-

shooting videos where the participants get excited by seeing the spray of blood and they feature the splatter in slow motion.”

Indeed, one of the groups organizing these hunts is known as “the Red Mist Society.” “In one second the animal is alive and in the next it’s dead. It happens over and over. Carcasses are left strewn about as if there has just been a battle and then the shooters walk away and go home to have a beer,” Phillips said. He doubts that few prairie dog gunners realize that the animals, along with bison, are keystone species, the foundations for more than 140 different animals important to biodiversity on the American prairie. “They have no idea what they are destroying and they don't care. To them, it's just target practice.”

Looking south across the state line, Phillips says the least Wyoming could do with wolves is make them a game species across the entire state, sell licenses to support scientific research into animal population the same way it does with elk, deer, pronghorn and other species.

“Most of these guys—and most of them are guys, I would imagine—who ride snowmobiles to kill these animals or shoot prairie dogs to see the blood spray go to church on Sunday. My lord, do they want to be a person standing at the Pearly Gates seeking their entrance and having to argue with God about their decision to treat these animals with such cruelty and no rational justification to back it up?”

• • •

Conservationists say it’s not only the kind of wildlife killing that is permitted in Wyoming but that, in the case of wolves, the state almost has a “look the other way and don’t tell us attitude.”

Wyoming Game and Fish with all big game species has management objectives, closely monitors populations and sets seasons. State biologists admit they really no idea how many wolves are being extinguished in 85 percent of Wyoming where they are classified as predators. Wolves there don't count toward the state's promise to maintain a minimum population. Notably, there are also zones in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem where the number of grizzlies don't count in the state's promise to maintain a viable population.

Wyoming has a grudge against the federal government and environmental groups for bringing wolves back and the fact that it doesn't extend them game status over all the state puts them in violation with the spirit of the North American Model, critics say.

And now with Chronic Wasting Disease rapidly expanding, and [scientists pointing out the role predators can play in slowing the spread of disease](#), Wyoming not only continues to artificially feed elk but it has an aggressive policy to keep wolves at the lowest numbers.

“Wyoming is one of those states that, unfortunately, has been slower to progress into the modern world. Whether it’s wolves or continuing to operate elk feedgrounds that it knows full and well are setting the state up for a disaster with disease, things are backward there,” Posewitz says. “It’s out of step with where it needs to be.”

“Wyoming is one of those states that, unfortunately, has been slower to progress into the modern world. Whether it’s wolves or continuing to operate elk feedgrounds that it knows full and well are setting the state up for a disaster with disease, things are backward there. It’s out of step with where it needs to be.” —Montana hunter and authority on fair chase ethics Jim Posewitz

Hostility toward predators may be *de rigueur* in the rural West yet it runs counter to changing sentiments in the country, some note.

In the late 1970s, the late Stephen Kellert, a professor at Yale University, gained renown for gauging public attitudes about the human experience in nature. One of his studies looked at feelings people had toward different animals. He interviewed 3000 people and identified a stigma toward wolves and coyotes. Recently, a group of researchers from Ohio State University revisited the data and provided an update [publishing the results in the journal *Biological Conservation*](#).

“[A]ttitudes toward two mammalian carnivores (i.e., wolves and coyotes) were substantially more positive in 2014 than 1978,” the authors wrote. “The proportion of respondents reporting positive attitudes toward wolves increased by 42 percent, and the proportion reporting positive attitudes toward coyotes increased by 47 percent.”

They noted, “More recently, research on wildlife values in the U.S. suggests a shift away from a ‘domination’ orientation, which emphasizes mastery over nature/wildlife, to a more ‘mutualist’ orientation, which emphasizes harmony, care-taking and empathy.”

• • •

Theodore Roosevelt was a product of his time. He may have been a founding father of the North American Model, but modern ecologists say he had his own blind spots with ecological thinking—in particular his belief that predators had to be erased to maintain healthy big game herds. It’s thinking that’s been roundly debunked.

John Laundre, a carnivore biologist who conducted field research on mountain lions for renowned researcher Dr. Maurice Hornocker, wrote a provocative essay recently about whether trophy hunters qualify as conservationists the way other hunters are.

Laundre criticizes the introduction of exotic species to provide huntable fare and more trophy targets when wildlife managers know they compete with native wildlife, cause habitat damage such as the case of wild boar, and sometimes serve as disease carriers. Laundre directs his harshest words toward hunters and hunting groups that focus on helping animals good for the dinner table, yet discount the role predators play in regulating ecosystems, including, as in the case of Chronic Wasting Disease, limiting the spread of disease.

“It is the return of a few of the favored species that hunters hang their supposed conservation hats on...It is amply known in the true conservation community, and by many children that all native species have a part in ecosystems and that the predators, large and small, probably have the most important part,” he wrote. “They are the shepherds of ecosystems, keeping herbivores in their ecological place. Time after time, it has been demonstrated that removal of predators leads to ecological destruction. And returning herbivores without their predators, an ecological crime, a crime, hunters repeatedly commit, most recently, in the eastern U.S.”

Laundre is referencing the reintroduction of elk to old haunts east of the Mississippi River and allowing whitetail deer populations (linked to a corresponding abundance of tick-related illness) to explode while continuing to aggressively target coyotes, foxes and pulling the plug on red wolf recovery.

Laundre says the exalted legacy of TR is a mixed bag. “Even their hunting/conservationist hero, Theodore Roosevelt, advocated the removal of predators to ‘protect’ trophy species. Roosevelt’s actions and those of many hunters in his time were not to protect all wildlife or ecosystems but to protect trophy species so he could kill them.”

Posewitz convinced that Roosevelt, had he lived long enough into the 20th century and availed himself to science, would have evolved his thinking about the role of predators the same as pioneering ecologist Aldo Leopold did. Where Laundre and Posewitz agree passionately is that Roosevelt would not allow his name, nor the North American Model, to be invoked to justify predator-killing contests.

Those contacted by *Mountain Journal* say the war on predators is about more than running coyotes down on snowmobiles or killing contests; it is a fight for the survival of hunting itself. The controversy surrounding delisting of the Greater Yellowstone grizzly population is a prime timely example. More

than 650,000 people submitted comments on the Fish and Wildlife Service's plan to give states control over bear management, the vast, vast majority were opposed to sport hunting of grizzlies. Still, Wyoming and its seven-member Game and Fish Commission voted unanimously to let 22 bears be killed; they were spared by Judge Christensen's ruling in autumn 2018.

Sutton, who penned an op-ed in [The San Francisco Chronicle](#) following the death of Cecil the lion and who has been to Africa on law enforcement and conservation missions, observed: "Proponents of trophy hunting argue that high-dollar auctions of big-game hunting permits generate much-needed revenue for wildlife management, especially in developing countries. But in my experience killing trophy animals turns the public against all hunting. It brings out the worst in sportsmen and encourages illegal and unethical activity. It's difficult to see how killing for ego rather than food can be justified as part of modern sportsmanship."





The sport killing of Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe by a bow hunter from Minnesota ignited a firestorm about the ethics of trophy hunting. In the U.S., icons like Jackson Hole mother grizzly 399 (above with cubs in 2018) are seen as corresponding examples that animals are worth far more alive than dead. Concern for the fate of 399 and her cubs typified the huge public opposition to Wyoming's proposed sport hunt of 22 grizzlies, the first in the state in 44 years. Ultimately, the hunt was cancelled in autumn 2018 after a federal district judge ordered the Greater Yellowstone grizzly population be restored to protection under the Endangered Species Act. It set off a wave of anger in Wyoming where antagonism toward predators among rural folk is deep and pervasive. Photo of Grizzly 399 courtesy Thomas D. Mangelsen. Photo of Cecil courtesy Wikipedia.

As hunter numbers decline nationally overall, and as more citizens congregate in cities, the inability or refusal of hunting organizations and policy makers to heed the shifting demographics of public opinion comes at their own peril, he says.

Ironically, people like Sutton say, if legislators and state game agencies don't want to abolish activities that make hunting look bad, urban Americans with a weak stomach for animal killing may do it themselves. By referendum in different states and by public pressure, there have been successful voter-approved bans enacted on leg-hold traps, hunting with hounds, bear baiting and operating game farms.

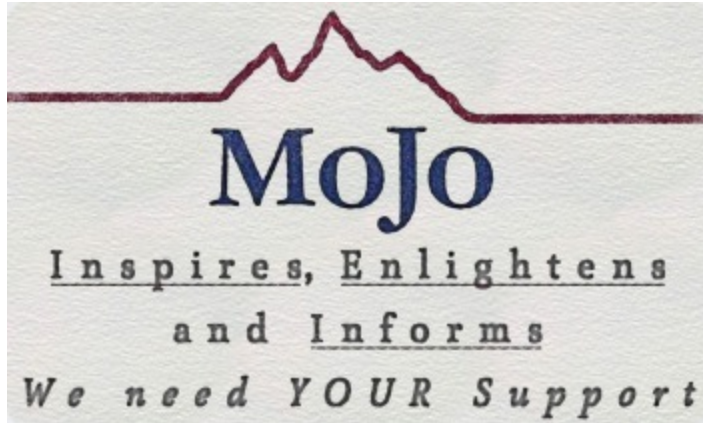
Some 50 years ago, when he was governor of California, Ronald Reagan signed a state statute banning the hunting of mountain lions and it has never been overturned.

For his part, Sutton says the North American model needs to be modernized so that what's ethical is legal and vice versa. "My problem with the old North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is that it assumes everything that can be hunted should be. And that's not true. We recovered bald eagles, golden eagles and peregrine falcons and we don't trophy hunt them. They are predators. They eat game animals (birds and young ungulate) and can eat livestock (lambs) but we don't declare open season on them," he said. "Whether to hunt something is a societal decision made by democracy, not by science. Science helps inform what our options are, but it doesn't tell us what to do morally."

An animal doesn't only possess worth if it can be killed and monetized nor, by extension, should it mean waging a war against the animals in the food chain that eat the ones treated as commodities. That's misguided, he says. In fact, the intrinsic value of animals, the economics of non-consumptive nature tourism and the changing winds of social values are rapidly taking such thinking in another direction.

He praises a grassroots citizen campaign launched last summer by five women in Jackson Hole, Wyoming called "[Shoot'Em With A Camera](#)" that encouraged non-hunting citizens to apply for grizzly bear hunting tags. Although the purpose of those seeking tags was to prevent bears from being killed, it served another role by showing that people are willing to pay to keep iconic predators alive. Not only do their voices deserve to be heard but it could be a creative way—part of a new movement— to generate money for cash-strapped game and fish departments that rely on hunting license receipts and a tax on hunting-related equipment, Sutton explained.

"Four percent of Americans hunt and it's declining. But everyone loves wildlife. People are willing to pay far more money to see animals live than the revenue generated by those who want to kill animals for sport. I am a hunter and I accept that reality," Sutton said. "We need to harness those non-hunters as a revenue stream to fund our fish and wildlife agencies. Hunting can remain an important part of the management mix but those of us who partake in it need to show it's an ethical, time-honored pastime worth defending."



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About **Todd Wilkinson**

Todd Wilkinson is an American author and journalist proudly trained in the old school tradition. For more on his career, click below. (Photo by David J Swift).

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