

# UC Agriculture & Natural Resources

## Proceedings of the Vertebrate Pest Conference

**Title**

New concepts in wildlife management

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9fp4574j>

**Journal**

Proceedings of the Vertebrate Pest Conference, 9(9)

**ISSN**

0507-6773

**Author**

McCann, Lester

**Publication Date**

1980

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS — NEW CONCEPTS IN WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

LESTER McCANN, Biology Department, College of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota

Rather than one who lays claim to being an expert in your science of Vertebrate Pest Control, it is only possible to say that I come with an appreciation for the work you are doing.

My valuing of pest control took a quantum leap recently. The occasion was the entering and occupying of our home in St. Paul by one of the area's wild squirrels. No doubt this sort of thing would be a small problem as your challenges go, but being an amateur it took me no less than a week to evict this wily intruder.

So you can see why I am a stronger believer than ever in the principle that man is man, and animals are animals, and never the twain shall meet, and am a firm supporter of people like yourselves who are trying to keep things that way.

Here at your conference today, I find myself wearing two hats. One is that of a hunter who loves the challenges and associations that come with hunting. The other hat is that of a biologist, with training and experience in the field of wildlife management.

First, may I speak to you wearing the hat of the hunter. Those of us who are hunters today have a somewhat harassed, beleaguered feeling, and for good reasons. There are something like 25 organizations existing today that are anti-hunting in orientation. Five of these alone raised over 14 million dollars to support their anti-hunting activities in one recent year. There is evidence that these people know how to use their resources effectively. A few years ago, they were able to stop the hunting of deer in the Great Swamp Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey. They came within an inch of stopping waterfowl hunting nationally during the 1974-75 season. It has been a battle to keep them from banning all hunting on all of the federally owned lands, which comprises the large share of many a western state. They carry on a constant program of maligning the hunter, so that today three-fourths of all college students, in a recent survey, are opposed to all sport hunting.

The sanguinary nature of the anti-hunting attack is indicated in one of the leaflets distributed by one of these organizations. Among other things, it admonishes people to do the following:

1. Ask your PTA to press for non-employment of teachers who hunt, and bar any invited speakers representing an organization favoring hunting.
2. Ostracize socially those who hunt.
3. Patronize only businesses, doctors, lawyers, and veterinarians who do not hunt.

However vexing the newly created antagonistic climate toward the hunter might be, hunting is in more serious trouble for other reasons. They relate to the scarcity of anything to hunt. To discuss these, I would like to don the hat of the biologist because we get into things of a biological order.

There is no question that the destruction of habitat - of the kinds of conditions that wild things need - is important for all wild creatures. These adverse developments include the spread of urban conditions, and it includes the adopting of modern agricultural methods, which leave little or nothing for the harboring of wildlife.

However, the scarcities of wildlife in most places is far greater than these destructive influences would produce. Even in the best of conditions in places still undisturbed, wildlife scarcities with the exception of only a few species are rampant. These scarcities include upland game, big game, and waterfowl, and they take in some of our most appreciated smaller birds and mammals.

Why do we have these wildlife scarcities even under conditions where there should be abundance? Formal studies as well as the observations of many an experienced on-the-scenes observer show that an overabundance of the predatory species has to be the number-one cause, or close to it, in almost every instance. A generally unheralded, but widespread, development occurring subsequent to WW II at different times in different localities has been a change from a prey dominated environment to one that is now predator dominated.

A careful four-year study of pheasant mortality in Wisconsin shows that hunting accounts for no more than eight percent of pheasant mortality. Destruction by predators accounts for something like 85 percent. The same kind of results were obtained in studies in both North and South Dakota.

The northern portion of Minnesota until fairly recently had the reputation of being one of the finest whitetail deer ranges in the United States. Today, deer have been eliminated or nearly so from large portions of this area through overpredation by wolves. Even wolf lovers are admitting this now. Minnesota used to regularly exceed neighboring Wisconsin in its yearly take of deer. Now, after the extending of special status to the wolf in Minnesota, the yearly kill in Wisconsin is upwards of four times the deer harvest in Minnesota. Wisconsin does not have a wolf problem.

The very best kinds of waterfowl studies carried on in the Dakotas and the prairie provinces of Canada show that predation by fox, skunk, and raccoon is holding our wild duck population down to consistent low numbers. In this region that has the reputation of being the "duck factory" of North America, the problem is a lack of nesting birds rather than lack of habitat. The fact that over 90 percent of the nests, as shown in carefully conducted studies, are destroyed by predators before a hatch can be brought off has to be high on the list of causes.

With overwhelming evidence that overabundant predators are responsible for a general decline in wildlife numbers, why doesn't this translate into effective programs of predator control? This is even a greater mystery when you consider that increased predator numbers have been injurious to agricultural interests also, sapping the sheep industry alone to the tune of millions of dollars annually.

There is no question that low fur prices for a long time subsequent to WW II was an important factor. With fox and raccoon pelts selling for less than 50 cents a pelt, and with no price at all on skunk hides year after year, it is easy to see why trapping provided very little control of predators.

But there is more to it than this. A share of the blame has to be laid at the feet of the dominant leadership in our wildlife management establishment, for their consistent unwillingness to recognize the predator problem. More than this, they appear to have been active in propagating an attitude of favoritism toward the predatory species, with a constant pulling of punches in favor of the predators wherever possible. Moreover, they have been responsible for exerting a heavy hand in making it personally unwise for anyone in the wildlife field to speak out against an obvious unfavorable predator balance.

Standing in the way of adequate predator control, also, has been the attitude of much of the media in their consistent refusal to give publicity to situations that might put predatory animals in a bad light. Here as in the case of many of our wildlife experts, we see an elitist attitude of people deciding the kind of information the rest of us ought to hear.

And then, also helping to frustrate adequate predator control has been the actions of the protectionist public who are prompted by idealistic, narrow feelings towards the inevitable cruelty that attends the control and killing of any wild animals. I refer to these as narrow feelings because these people are conspicuously silent when you bring to their attention obvious cruelties to which they themselves might be accessory.

How does one know what is right when it comes to the treatment one affords animals and the other forms of wildlife?

The framers of the Constitution and Bill of Rights had nothing to say on this subject. One might guess they assumed this was taken care of within a broader framework within which they lived and worked. It was the framework which was the underpinning of their entire society, namely, the framework of Judeo-Christian precedents.

Because of the backgrounds of our early leaders, it seems fair to assume they took for granted the things Judeo-Christian teachings specify, namely, that people are more important than the other living things, and that mankind has a certain jurisdiction over the other living forms around him. While the Mosaic law contains certain instructions for showing due respect for a killed animal, and there is a reference or two that can be interpreted as counselling conservation measures, in no instance is the killing of animals, even for sporting purposes, given biblical disapprobation.

Unless we continue within this framework, what parameters do we have? Where do we stop? Do we have to accept whatever in-group with enough clout at the moment happens to plan out for us?

If they make it wrong to shoot a duck or trap a muskrat on their usual grounds that "they like to live too," isn't it equally wrong to poison a rat, swat a fly, pluck a rose or pull a weed?

Those of us who believe in the appropriate control of predatory animals are often accused of cruelty, and the same goes for the killing of animals by the hunter and trapper. It seems to me that we cannot deny that a certain cruelty is involved whenever an animal is killed. It is unavoidable.

There is no question that hunting down and killing a deer is cruel, but so is the process of shipping an animal off to market and subjecting it to the frightening stock yards and slaughtering experience. There is no question that holding an animal in a trap is cruel, but so is the process of pulling a fish out of the water or opening the shell of an oyster and extracting the living contents. Even the confining of an otherwise wild animal to the conditions of a zoo is cruel, and when you come down to it, it is cruel to break a horse to saddle.

While freely admitting an unavoidable element of cruelty in our activities and trying to reduce it to a minimum, hunters, trappers, and animal control specialists ought not be criticized by anyone who directly or indirectly causes equal cruelties via the things they eat, wear, or otherwise enjoy.

The requirements for dealing with wildlife seem to have very little precedent in established law. It is an area in which the lobbyist, the propagandist and the professional opinion maker can have great influence. Employing experts in these kinds of things, the anti-hunters, antitrappers,

protectionists and wildlife ideologists of various kinds are having disproportionate influence. They do very little for the real cause of wildlife - hunters do immeasurably more - nevertheless these people are able to have an influence far greater than their real contributions justify.

It behooves those of us who believe in the appropriate control of the predatory animals to learn how to make our influence felt, with greater effectiveness. The truth is on our side, and that is a very strong tool. We should use it.

Let's not be afraid to tell any sportsman, for example, that he cannot expect prosperity for his game animals in a condition where the out-of-doors is dominated by the predatory animals.

Let's not be afraid to tell the public that they are paying dearly for the policy of favoring the predators. A recent Wall Street Journal article states that coyotes alone are costing U.S. sheep ranchers \$50 million annually; that the price of lamb is three to five cents per pound higher as a result; and that the price of wool is abnormally inflated.

Let's not be afraid to point out that our carrion feeding predators are the most serious spreaders of disease, probably exceeding even the house fly; that because of today's favoring of the predatory animals, for the first time in history rabies has become endemic to every state in the union; and that epidemics of rabies and scabies are breaking out with increasing frequency.

Let's point out that predators do not confine their depredations only to game animals or domestic stock; that many of the animals classified as threatened are particularly vulnerable to our increased predator numbers.

However, important as getting the truth across is, it will take more than this. One cannot get very far working alone. We have to learn to seek out and cooperate with others of a similar conviction. An alliance between sportsmen, agriculturists, trappers, animal control people and individuals who sincerely want to see an abundance of wildlife would be a powerful influence. The time may be ripe.