

Deadly force creates unintended consequences in nature

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

Like the prow of a ship, the Granite Mountains rise sharply from the creamy-white playa of the Black Rock Desert in Nevada.

Here, in rugged terrain owned by the American public, a little-known federal agency called Wildlife Services has waged an eight-year war against predators to try to help an iconic Western big-game species: mule deer.

With rifles, snares and aerial gunning, employees have killed 967 coyotes and 45 mountain lions at a cost of about \$550,000. But like a mirage, the dream of protecting deer by killing predators has not materialized.

“It didn’t make a difference,” said Kelley Stewart, a large-mammal ecologist at the University of Nevada, Reno.

For decades, Wildlife Services, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, has specialized in trapping, poisoning and shooting predators in large numbers, largely to protect livestock and, more recently, big game.

Now such killing is coming under fire from scientists, former employees and others who say it often doesn’t work and can set off a chain reaction of unintended, often negative consequences.

In biological shorthand: Kill too many coyotes and you open a Pandora’s box of disease-carrying rodents, meadow-munching rabbits, bird-eating feral cats, and, over time, smarter, more abundant coyotes. You also can sentence the deer you are

trying to help to slow death by starvation.

“There is a widespread perception that predators are the root of all evil and I’m tired of it,” said Stewart. “More often than not, if you have predation on a mule deer population, you’re going to have a healthier population.”

Agency officials say controlling predators is a must, especially in the West where livestock graze large tracts of unfenced land. “The intent is not to prevent predation,” said William Clay, deputy administrator of Wildlife Services. “All we’re trying to do is remove the problem animals.”

Killing predators is part of Wildlife Services’ DNA, a mission it pursues – along with a wide range of other animal control work – largely outside public view.

Some details, though, can be gleaned from the agency’s Web page, where it posts a sea of data showing – species by species – the millions of birds and mammals its employees kill each year. Sift through the numbers and you find that about 560,000 predators were killed across America from 2006 to 2011, an average of 256 a day.

The body count includes more than 25,000 red and gray foxes, 10,700 bobcats, 2,800 black bears, 2,300 timber wolves and 2,100 mountain lions. But the vast majority – about 512,500 – were coyotes.

“When they see a coyote, all they got is one thing in mind: killing it,” said Gary Strader, a former Wildlife Services hunter in Nevada. “They don’t know if it was a coyote that killed a sheep. It’s just a coyote, and it’s got to be killed.”

While fewer bobcats are killed today, the numbers of three other major predators shot, trapped and snared by the agency have risen. In 1970, agency employees killed 73,100 coyotes, 400 black bears, 120 mountain lions. By 2011, the tally had

climbed to 83,200 coyotes (up 14 percent), 565 black bears (up 41 percent) and 400 mountain lions (up 230 percent).

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