

DO PREDATORS HAVE RIGHTS?

by ROBERT W. PAGE*

Of all the species on earth, man, the predator, is the most successful. He can be found almost anywhere and he ultimately has dominion over the other creatures with which he shares this planet. Man has domesticated some birds and mammals and has then attempted to ruthlessly eliminate the remaining animals that compete with him in any way. His main competitors have, of course, been other predators; it is with them that early man came into conflict when seeking food amongst the earth's grazing and browsing animals. Today, with his great herds of cattle, sheep, pigs and horses man still maintains his ruthless competitive attitude towards fellow predators.

In Canada this competition has led to relentless pressure being applied to such animals as wolves, cougars, grizzly bears, coyotes and foxes. Birds too have been subjected to man's selfish refusal to co-exist. Hawks, eagles and owls have provided instant target practice whenever their paths crossed that of a man with a gun. In the past, farmers and hunters have either been ignorant of or downgraded the useful role that predators play and they have not considered the ethical question of whether such species have a right to exist or not. Such thinking has been applied to the new technology available to gunners and the result has been spectacles such as the Kenora wolf hunts of Ontario, the now infamous Quebec acrylic jaw-bone trophy wolf hunts and Saskatchewan's snowmobile fox and coyote hunts. The

latter are carried out legally with the sanction of the Saskatchewan Department of Natural Resources. The changing attitudes of an increasingly better educated, more civilized electorate across Canada has brought an end to the Ontario and Quebec wolf hunts but in Saskatchewan there is still debate as to whether or not foxes and coyotes should be hunted from power toboggans or other motorized vehicles. While the majority of people now feel that the Canadian experience is one of both civilization and wilderness and that respect must be shown for all members of the natural world, others mount their snowmobiles and roar off to destroy whatever foxes or coyotes they can exhaust, shoot or run down. Actually, running down the animal is illegal, but there is usually nobody around to see that an animal, tortured to the point of exhaustion, is shot instead of having its back broken by a snow machine.

In the past, few people really cared if something like this went on, but as the relative size of our planet shrinks and as humans become more plentiful and wildlife more scarce, people are beginning to feel that perhaps animals do have a right to exist. If specific animals become a real problem, and by real I mean a problem documented by government wildlife or agricultural personnel through field checks, then it may be necessary to kill those individuals but even then they have a right to a humane death.

If a particular area in Saskatchewan is suffering excessive predation on livestock or game, then some controls should be initiated. However, the loss of a sickly calf to a coyote should not

be considered a predator problem. Ranchers know that no coyote can take a healthy calf from a cow that is still interested in its welfare. Similarly, it is questionable whether or not one can reasonably call it a predator problem if lambs are left unattended in an enclosure without a dog or adequate fencing or some other kind of protection. Sloppy farming practices can sometimes attract predators into an area. If we are going to live with a balanced view of nature, some onus should be on the farmer to ward off possible problems. Killing predators should be the last, not the first, line of attack.

In the past, when a predator problem arose, overreaction was usually the rule, not the exception. The widespread dropping of poison baits was one solution. This caused the indiscriminate, cruel and long-suffering death of *any* predator that ate the poison bait. It did the same to all other birds and mammals that ate either the baits or their poisoned victims. The rights of animals to a humane death hardly entered the minds of the public

or their wildlife departments. Other control methods have included leg hold traps, hunting from aircraft and now from snowmobiles. These methods were effective, often too effective, but they gave no consideration to the animals being controlled. In effect, control appeared to be an attempt at widespread, indiscriminate elimination.

More positive solutions to predator problems exist but their acceptance requires a better appreciation of the role of predators in our environment. Their value as rodent controllers should be made more widely known and should their effectiveness in taking the weak, old and sick individuals of game species. Man and hunter seek prime animals, but predators that kill to live seek out the least healthy as a sure way to fill their stomachs. The value of the enjoyment that people can obtain from living in a province with a multiplicity of animals should also be publicized, as well as the fact that man's assumed enemy, the predator has many traits in common with him. For too long we have identified wi



Snowmobiles

Sask. Photo/Arts Service



Results of a coyote hunt with bombardiers in the Abernethy, Saskatchewan, district in the 1950's. Fred Bard

the poor lamb and the hunted deer. We humans are really more like the cougar, the coyote, the wolf. How many men like to be called sheep?

Positive solutions to predator problems should include the use of humane traps. Quick-kill *conibear* type traps do not torture animals as do leg-hold traps. More research could probably develop even better, faster kill traps. Secondly, it may be better game management to declare such predators as foxes, coyotes and wolves to be game animals. Then some could be taken each year by hunters using high-powered rifles, a method that usually kills an animal quickly. As a game animal, bag limits and set seasons could enable qualified wildlife biologists to maintain a healthy population. Of course, farmers should still have the right to shoot any predator that is harrassing their stock, although a few well-placed warning shots would discourage future visits from such an animal.

Snowmobile hunting, however, is the last method of predator control that ever should be allowed. Letting people use power toboggans in this way tends to encourage a lack of respect for life

and leads to the inhumane deaths of too many animals. It also has unhealthy implications for all society.

First of all, snowmobile hunting, through the tirelessness and speed of the machines involved, is a one-sided type of hunting, catering to the worst in man. It enables people who have tired of simply driving their machines in circles to suddenly have a legally justified excuse to pick some victim, then run it to oblivion. The fact that such a "sport" exists in Saskatchewan is, no doubt, the envy of all redneck snowmobilers in neighboring provinces. Saskatchewan's precedent is a danger to the wildlife in other parts of Canada where power toboggans are now under more control.

Secondly, snowmobile hunts perpetuate the now outdated idea that there are good and bad animals and that it is alright to do anything you want to be "bad" animals. Snowmobile hunts detract from what is now being taught in schools across Canada, that all life is interconnected and must be respected. Such hunts reject the ethic of man trying to live more in harmony with nature, with an enlightened dominion over the beasts

and birds of our earth, rather than a brash, ruthless dictatorial approach whereby everything — animal and plant — that appears in his way must be destroyed.

Finally, there is the actual problem of controlling snowmobile abuses. With more snowmobilers getting their recreation from running down foxes and coyotes, how does one get them to stop there? As long as our society accepts the use of snowmobiles to hunt one or two species, it will be more ready to overlook the hunting of other animals, anything from jack rabbits to deer and moose. As long as one kind of snowmobile hunting is legal, it is less likely that the courts will be sufficiently severe on other illegal forms of motorized hunting.

It would be appropriate if members



Fred Ba
Coyote being chased by snowmobile.

of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society and other readers of the *Blue Jay* would write to Saskatchewan's natural resource minister, the Honourable John Kowalchuk, care of the A



Snowmobiles in woods.

Sask. Photo/Arts Service

Administration Building, Regina, and express their views on legislation that allows municipalities to issue permits for people to use snowmobiles to hunt predators.

Hopefully, 1974 will be the last year in which this practice is allowed. Saskatchewan, with its strong Natural History Society, its beautiful Natural History Museum in Regina and its rich diversity of wildlife and scenery is presently diminished by its winter snowmobile hunts. This is not something about which a thoughtful citizen can be proud.

**ABSTRACT FROM
SASK. D.N.R. POLICY
CONCERNING PREDATOR
PERMITS
(Oct. 2, 1972)**

From INTENT: "The practice of pursuing and killing wild animals with power snowmobiles has resulted in . . . the 1970 session of the legislature (amending) Section 29 of the Game Act (to read as follows:)

Unless expressly authorized by the minister, no person shall use a power snowmobile or vehicle for the purpose of:

(a) chasing or pursuing any wild animal or wild bird; (b) disturbing any wild animal or wild bird; (c) driving any wild animal or wild bird towards hunters; or (d) injuring or killing any wild animal or wild bird with such power boat or vehicle.

"Unfortunately, in certain agricultural areas in Saskatchewan, rural residents are confronted with local problems of predation by coyote and/or fox which are difficult to handle by conventional methods of control . . . Therefore, it is deemed necessary to issue permits to rural residents so affected to deal with these local problems. There is no intention whatsoever to permit the use of motor toboggans for sport hunting or pelt hunting."

From POLICY: "1. Special permits to use snow toboggans for hunting fox and coyote will be issued when these animals are causing depredation problems. The permits are to be issued by the Conservation Officer . . .

"2. Local Conservation Officers must be prepared to discuss the conditions of issuing such permits with the local R.M. council. The importance of restricting authorization for permits to bonafide cases of animals causing predation should be stressed.

"3. The R.M. or L.I.D. will only be required to pass one resolution authorizing the Department to issue permits to residents within the R.M. or L.I.D. . . ."

From APPLICATION: "List total losses of livestock or poultry during the past three months caused by coyotes or fox and dates (applicant's land only) . . ."

COUGARS IN MANITOBA

by ROBERT W. NERO*

In the early years, cougars were perhaps uncommon in Manitoba but

with the increase in White-tailed Deer populations, cougars seem to have increased in number. Since the 1960's, especially, there have been several well documented sightings of cougars. For the 71-year period from 1879 to 1950 there are only 16 reports of cougars in the province, but 21 reports

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