

Hunting coyotes: One weekend, two viewpoints

Events spotlight contrasting attitudes about hunting predators

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KINGMAN - This weekend, two very different views of that extremely adaptable rural and urban predator, the coyote, will be on display.

The 27th Annual Antelope Eaters coyote hunt, put on by the Mohave Sportsman Club, takes place Saturday and Sunday across northern Arizona, although the event's headquarters is in Seligman.

As a bit of counterprogramming, a monthly educational seminar held at the Keepers of the Wild Nature Park in Valentine will focus on coyotes Saturday. The sanctuary houses several coyotes, and its founder takes a dim view of these hunts - hunts that proponents say are necessary to keep the predator population in check and ensure the health of game animal populations, such as antelope.

The debate is ongoing and passionate across the West. Predator hunts in New Mexico and in southern Arizona have drawn public outrage, and there was unsuccessful legislation to ban the contests in New Mexico. California has banned organized coyote hunts, which also have been targeted in Nevada and Oregon.

In Arizona, the Game and Fish Commission at one point approved a rule outlawing predator hunts for prizes, but it was subsequently vacated after further review, said Jim Paxon, special assistant to the director of Arizona Game and Fish.

Between the two sides, the only thing they have in common is they're talking about coyotes.

'Thrill kill'?

There are several coyotes living at Keepers of the Wild, but just because they're in a sanctuary doesn't make them tame.

"I've got coyotes here that I wouldn't go in with because they'd attack," said Jonathan Kraft, founder and executive director of the sanctuary and a critic of predator hunts.

"The coyote hunt that is coming up is something we oppose, of course, vehemently, for the simple reason that I just believe it's a thrill kill," Kraft said. "People don't understand that coyotes have a very important role in the environment. There's a lot of complaints here in Mohave County about the overpopulation of the burros, and the rodent population, and the rabbit population ... well, coyotes are the ones that limit those numbers."

And Camilla Fox, founder and executive director of Project Coyote, an advocacy group that works against predator hunts in the U.S., said such hunts are part of "a management system that doesn't value predators" - indeed, it's usually "open season" on those animals, she said.

Her organization, and others with similar aims, question the efficacy of coyote hunts. If the goal is to eradicate or even permanently reduce coyote populations, the hunts largely fail, because coyotes bounce back and thrive just about everywhere they go.

Some research has found that coyotes biologically compensate when under lethal attack. Litter sizes grow and females start reproducing earlier. Linda Bolon, Project Coyote's Arizona representative, cited that research in an op/ed sent to the Miner.

"Science shows that coyote populations that are not exploited by hunting and trapping form stable 'extended family' social structures that naturally limit populations," she said. "Indiscriminate killing of coyotes disrupts this social stability, resulting in increased, not decreased, reproduction and pup survival."

Adaptable

Paxon, of Arizona Game and Fish, has heard those claims, and "we don't exactly agree with that."

"Once the pups are grown, they disperse. They are not a pack animal like a wolf," he said, although family units will sometimes hunt together.

"The thing that dictates population is the availability of prey. When there are lots of deer, pronghorn and rabbit, coyote populations go up," Paxon said. The opposite is true as well, although there can be a lag time between when, say, a rabbit population crashes and when the coyotes that prey on them show the effects.

But coyotes are better prepared to weather those cycles than most, he added.

"The coyote is arguably the most adaptable animal on the planet," he said. "They're very entrepreneurial. They'll eat anything - berries, twigs, bugs, seeds, carrion, small mammals, birds, and larger animals in smaller stages, like fawns.

"They will fill any void in empty habitat where prey is available."

His agency doesn't have an official position on coyote hunts like this weekend's, but Game and Fish does sometimes organize hunts targeting coyotes, if game animals are thought to be at risk.

When surveys determine that fawns are not surviving to adulthood at a high enough rate, officials look for reasons why. It could be drought or loss of habitat, fences or other reasons; or it could be from predation, and "usually that's by coyotes."

If that's happening, the department will target fawning grounds in a game unit with a sustained coyote hunt that will go from April to June for two or three years. When the game population recovers, the hunting stops, and the coyote population usually rebounds within two years after that.

Critics contend that money is at the heart of the continuation of these hunts, and Paxon acknowledged that it plays a role. Antelope Eaters could be a real economic shot in the arm for Seligman's hotels and restaurants, and hunting license fees and taxes on items such as ammunition are key parts of Arizona Game and Fish's budget, just as they are in agencies in other states.

Project Coyote is producing a film aimed at turning public attitudes against predator hunting contests (promoted, appropriately, by actor Peter Coyote); in the promotional materials, the group contends that "these contests send a chilling message that killing is fun, wild animals are disposable, and life is cheap."

Among participants, such sentiment is unlikely to move many minds. Paxon said this weekend's hunt probably won't change much for most of northern Arizona's coyotes.

"Most of these where they call these coyotes in for a short time period, there are fairly minimal impacts," he said. "This hunt in Seligman? The effect is miniscule."