Writer Rebuffs Elbert---

Wild Game Cannot be Treated Like Domesticated Animals

by Lawrence N. Ellison

A recent article written by Mr. Paul Elbert appeared in this newspaper, and the article suggested that more stringet control measures should be employed to control Alaska's wolf populations, the implications being that such control would lead to game abundance.

I do not entirely share his philosphy and I suspect that anyone making an assessment of predator-prey studies conducted to date will not reach Mr. Elbert's conclusions.

At one point, he mentions seeing few calves with a number of cow moose he observed near the Alaska Range, and attributed this to wolf predation.

However, in some years few of the cows on the Kenai Peninsula have calves, but this is not due to wolves because there are no wolves on the Kenai Peninsula. Lack of a calf crop in a moose herd is usually due to a poor range or an unusually hard winter, not to predation.

Although it is natural enough for a sportsman to attribute lack of game to predation or to view game taken by a predator as being stolen from the hunter's gun, when the sum of the individual cats is considered in terms of the final effects of the predators on a game population, it usually works out that the few healthy animals removed by predators has little or no influence on the availability of game to the hunter.

This conclusion may seem illogical, but the following discussion will attempt to show that it is not unreasonable.

Although Mr. Elbert says that wild animals can be managed on the same basis as domestic animals, nothing could be farther from the truth.

I will agree that a herd of domestic cattle turned loose in the midst of a wolf pack would not survive long, but wild animals such as moose, caribou, and sheep possess physical and behaviorial characteristics that have allowed them to coexist with their predators, including wolves, for a good number of years.

It is true that a high population densitites of game animals, predators may take quite a few individuals. But as the high number of game animals is reduced, the predators have to travel farther and expend more energy to take game, so that a point is reached where the predators either turn to an alternate prey or the predators themselves decline in numbers for lack of food.

This point of diminishing returns is always reached before all the individuals of a prey species is caught. Indeed, how could the myriad of predator-prey relationships have existed over the millenia of time if it were otherwise.

The lynx-hare relationship is a familiar example of a balanced predator-prey relationship. It differs from the predator-prey relationship of big game species in that the fluctuactions in hare and lynx abundance are great, ranging from near-absence to superabundance of both.

The longer-lived big game species usually remain at fairly stable population levels when influence by the predators they have lived with for ages.

Indeed, remove these normal predators and the result with such species as moose, deer, caribou, and sheep may be that the game population will increase rapidly to such high densities that they destroy the very vegetation providing them with food and shelter.

Then, due to starvation, the game population declines abruptly to a level far below that which existed when predators were present.

Furthermore, the game population may remain at the unusually low level for many years because vegetation is often slow to recover after over-browsing. In fact, the lichens of caribou winter range may require many decades to recover.

At this point the sportsman is likely to interject the comment "why not eliminate the predators and let me control the number of game animals within their food supply."

One reason is that man does not select his prey in the same manner a predator does. Predators, particularly wolves, usually weed out "heavily parasitized, diseased, old, or otherwise inferior individuals," thus maintaining healthy, alert animals in a game herd (see "THE WOLVES OF ISLE ROYALE by D. Mech. U. S. Govt. Printing Office, $1).

A second reason for not eliminating predators is that in some remote areas man cannot apply the hunting pressure necessary to keep game herds within their food supply.

A third reason for not eliminating predators is that some game populations, including moose, sheep, and caribou, should be controlled by their natural predators because trophy animals are more likely to be produced.

A predator does not select for trophy animals, which are usually superior animals in both intellect and horn or antler size.

On the other hand, game populations controlled entirely by man are unlikely to produce as many trophy animals because the heavy hunting pressure that is necessary to control such a population removes so many older superior individuals that there is little chance many will reach trophy age.

Now, what about those more accessible areas where man does want to harvest large numbers of game animals and is not so concemed about trophy animals. In this situation where the objective is to maintain a high density of game and concurrently allow hunters to crop the game heavily, some measures of predator control (but not elimination) may be justifiable.

I cannot condone a doctrine of elimination not only because of the beneficial influence of predators already mentioned but also because I feel it morally wrong to attempt destruction of a species that is not jeopardizing the welfare of man, which the wolf is not.

At this point it should be mentioned that it is often not necessary to practice predator control even if one does desire to maintain a high density of game for the hunter, because as the number of game animals removed increases, the number of young produced by the survivor increases.

This is particularly true of moose, deer, caribou, and sheep because there is often a limited amount of winter feed that must be shared by the herd.

Fewer animals in winter means that each individual gets a larger share of the available food, which results in a larger number of young females bearing young and a higher incidence of twins and triplets among the older females.

Thus the herd compensates for the high harvest by man and the predators. Conversely, removing some of the predators can stimulate reproduction in the surviving individuals and compensate for the removal.

Thus it is often possible for man to hunt both the predator and prey population without damaging either.

Assuming we do want to control or harvest wolves in some areas, the question arises as to the method. I believe that the Alaskan trappers and sportsmen should be entitled to the surplus wolves.

I think that both resent the present situation which allows a few individuals with airplanes to take unlimited numbers of wolves in an unsportsmanlike manner.

Some of these airplane gunners take up to 90 wolves in a single winter, receiving for each wolf $50 in bounty money (out of the General Fund of the State of Alaska) plus the value of the pelt ($20 to $80).

I propose instead that a bag limit be placed on the number of wolves an individual can take an annual bag limit of perhaps ten wolves.

I am in complete agreement with the current classification of the wolf as a big game animal, and as a sportsman would enjoy a wolf hunt in an area where there were either excess wolves or a wolf population capable of yielding a sustained harvest.

Under the current conditions of no bag limit, I feel that too many wolves are being taken by some individuals out of some areas and, because of the effectiveness of aircraft, I can foresee these individuals systematically eliminating wolves over some fairly extensive parts of Alaska.

I feel Alaska would not be Alaska without her wolves. It is rather dismaying to recall that a hundred years ago wolves roamed throughout North America, but have since been extirpated from 45 of the "48 lower states."