

Leopold's Views on Predator Control

On no other issue did Leopold do as complete an about-face during his lifetime as on the subject of predator control. In his early life, perhaps partly because of his affection for hunting, but probably mainly because it was the predominant attitude of the time, Leopold considered the larger predators as "vermin" and thought they should be "exterminated". He was initially concerned that if predator populations were not controlled, they would exterminate their prey.

He eventually came to believe, as do most all professionals in the field today, that predators perform an important service in controlling the overpopulation of various species; that predators are an important component of any diverse habitat, and in most situations, do not adversely reduce the population of prey animals below the natural carrying capacity. We also know that stable populations of predators and prey have coexisted for eons without any species being eliminated.

Here is a chronology of Leopold's writings on the subject, showing the evolution in his thoughts on this subject:

In 1919 "The advisability of controlling vermin is plain common sense, which nobody will seriously question."

In 1920 "To try to raise game in a refuge infested with mountain lions, wolves, coyotes and bobcats, would, of course, be even more futile than to try to run a profitable stock ranch under the same conditions".

In 1935 "By killing off all species having predatory tendencies we may have been doing a greater damage to our game species than ever did the predators."

In 1937. "...Would not our rougher mountains be better off and might we not have more normalcy in our deer herds, if we let the wolves and lions come back in reasonable numbers? Let those who habitually ascribe all game scarcity to predators or who ascribe predator control as the first inevitable step in all game management take that to heart."

In 1938 "It was admitted by all, a decade ago, that any bird taken by a predator was a bird subtracted from the game bag, or from the residual breeding population. The new concept of carrying capacity has changed all this (although the average sportsman doesn't know it yet). It has explained—however imperfectly—the age-old paradox of the lion and the lamb not only laying down together, but being (as a race) dependent on each other for mutual thrift and welfare. It has explained, in at least a preliminary fashion, what every pioneer sees but persistently refuses to believe, namely the simultaneous abundance, on a good range, of both hunting and hunted things."

In 1939 "The clearest [idea] is the idea that browsing animals, unlike birds, are in constant danger of destroying their own range, and that hunting alone is seldom a sufficiently delicate control to keep the herds in balance. We need predators as well...

...The fight over predator control is no mere conflict of interest between field-glass hunters and gun-hunters. It is a fight between those who see utility and beauty in the biota as a whole and those who see utility and beauty only in pheasants and trout. It

grows clearer year by year that violent reductions in raptorial and carnivorous species as a means of raising game and fish are necessary only where highly artificial (i.e. violent) methods of management are used. Wild-raised game does not require hawkless coverts, and the biotically educated sportsman gets no pleasure from them.”

In 1945 “I myself have cooperated in the extermination of the wolf from the greater part of two states, because I then believed it was a benefit. I do not propose to repeat my error.”

In 1947 “It cannot be right, in the ecological sense, for the deer hunter to maintain his sport by browsing out the forest, or for the bird-hunter to maintain his by decimating the hawks and owls, or for the fisherman to maintain his by decimating the herons, kingfishers, terns and otters. Such tactics seek to achieve one kind of conservation by destroying another, and thus they subvert the integrity and stability of the community.”

Obviously, the extermination or near-extermination of all the big predators has long since been accomplished in Texas, and even if the bear and mountain lion populations increase somewhat, their total effect on prey populations will remain minimal. Sheep and goat ranchers will probably want to continue managing coyote populations.

But the effect of a lack of predators on the deer population has been severe overbrowsing and the accompanying destruction of understory habitat and replacement of hardwoods in much of the state. It is obvious that deer hunting has not filled the void of lack of native predators. It is also obvious that the big predators are not coming back to Texas.

Until next time...

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