

Coexistence With Predators

(transcription)

Bill MacDonald *Malpai Borderlands Group*

Mac Donaldson *Empire Ranch*

Caren Cowan *New México Cattle Growers Association*

Bill McDonald: We have asked Caren to join us, too, so we get at least three perspectives, because I don't think there is one particular philosophy with predators that anybody can say works in every case. If you were to ask me what my predator program is, I would say I don't really have one. That wasn't always the case. When I was young, I took great delight in sitting for hours with a game call and calling up coyotes and shooting them and I really felt like I was accomplishing something. We had somebody on the ranch who ran dogs and hunted lions with the idea that we were really helping out the calf crop. Quite frankly we were losing more calves at that time than we are now.

I lost a calf once to a golden eagle, but I'm going to address lions and coyotes, in particular, as predators. I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of calves that I know I have lost to coyotes. I know that coyotes have eaten on a number of dead calves, but in some cases you don't know if they were already dead. I suspect in many cases they were, and the coyotes were simply eating the carcass. Coyotes get to a dead animal very quickly and it's often difficult to tell whether the coyote was the cause or was just eating something that had already died. Where a coyote has actually killed the calf, I tend to hold it against the cow. I run my cows in one herd in the growing season, so they are all together. They are very aggressive. If any of you have cow dogs, you know that you don't take a pup out there by itself and start trying to move cows with it, because those cows will get after it. They are big and quick and they present a formidable obstacle to anything trying to get their calf. If they're not presenting that obstacle, I definitely hold it against the cow. I think it's much easier to get the right kind of cattle than it is to try to train a bunch of predators to do what you want them to do. I will concede, though, that that's just my experience on my ranch. I do know of areas, particularly ones close to towns, where whenever cows give birth, they are attacked by packs of coyotes and, in many cases, packs of dogs, not wild dogs, but domestic dogs that get together. So that's another issue. I'll get back to that when I talk about animal-damage control.

As far as mountain lions go, we aggressively hunted mountain lions for years and I still have a neighbor who

guides hunters to lions and sometimes does so on my place and sometimes at my request, if I have had a kill. But it's fairly rare, for two main reasons I think. One, we introduced some Angus blood into our livestock back in the late 60s and immediately saw a drop in the number of calves killed. Now, the Angus cows don't have horns, but they make up for it with attitude. They seem to be much more formidable to the lions and, I guess, more conscientious in protecting their calves than the straight-bred breed that we had before. We don't have straight Angus cows anymore but we still have a lot of Angus blood in the herd and I think that that helps protect them from mountain lion attack.

And the other thing is I tend to take cows off the Forest [National Forest allotment] soon after they calve. The calves start dropping in January. When I say "Forest," I'm talking about rugged mountain country that lions tend to like. I'm completely off the Forest by the end of March and it's a process where I am taking cows off as they calve, leaving cows that don't have calves on. I don't take all my cattle off the Forest at one time. It would be physically impossible to do, anyway, because this is rough country. So I think that has also contributed to the fact that I have very few losses to predators.

But I do know areas where lions have been and continue to be a problem. Ranchers have done some management and they have not been able to completely ameliorate their problem. I think there are places where you need professionals to come in. I'll give you one example. It has not to do with livestock. It has to do with pronghorn. Pronghorn were introduced 20 years ago into the San Bernadino valley. They are still there. They are doing fairly well. We just had a hunt. So they're doing well enough where they think they can be hunted, in spite of the droughts we have had the last few years. I'm convinced that they wouldn't have survived had there not been, for the first few years, some very aggressive coyote control from the state of Arizona, using U.S. Wildlife Services, because those pronghorns simply were not acclimated to that area and the coyotes were taking complete advantage of them. So I think there is a place for predator control.

These are observations made from my own experience as a rancher. I'm not a wildlife biologist or an animal behaviorist. I will say one brief thing having to do with the philosophy of Malpai Borderland Group, of which I am executive director. We don't have a group philosophy or group directive regarding predator control, but our actions have tended to be, especially in the case of the Mexican jaguar, of trying to discourage people from killing that animal. The Mexican jaguar rarely appears in the United States. When it does, we feel that's a pretty neat thing. The fact that we have a corridor that the jaguar can move in is important to a lot of people and should have some protection. On the other hand, if you have a situation where a rancher is losing a lot of livestock to this animal, I think there should be some compensation involved. As a result of Warner Glenn's experience in photographing the jaguar and the public interest it created ... it was on my ranch in my Forest allotment, we started a fund where we would reimburse ranchers in the United States and down into Mexico a little ways if they had losses from jaguars. So that's our attitude. We really believe you don't have to do intensive predator control in order to maintain a livestock operation, but you can't be naive either and pretend that you don't have the occasional problem.

M. Donaldson: We have a number of predators on the Empire cienega north of Sonoita, south of Tucson. Predominantly it is feral dogs. Of the natural predators we have—lion, bear, and coyote—we don't have much of a problem with them. Very rarely can a lion, even if it's hungry, or a bear, take a calf; the cows make taking a calf dangerous. During the 25 years we have been there, I think we've had probably three lion kills, and no bear kills that I know of. I think there have been about three to five coyote kills on calves in 25 years. It's usually a weak calf. There are two situations, two scenarios. One is that you'll have a brand newborn calf off of a first-calf heifer and she gets up and doesn't know what's happened. She doesn't know that she has calved, sort of a mysterious event, and she'll wander off, not being a very good mother, and leave that calf and then that calf will be gotten by a coyote. I'll sell that cow, just as much as Bill was saying, if she continues to behave in a nonmaternal manner. So I have eliminated that problem. I'm not going to try to find the coyote or the pack that did it.

Then there is another situation. During the first two weeks of nursing, when the calf is eating very little grass, from the point of view of a coyote the calf produces an extremely desirable excrement. A lot of times the excrement gets stuck on the calf. The mother goes off to water. We're in a fairly arid area and the cow might go as much as a mile, a mile and a half, to water. She'll leave her calf with a nursery sometimes, but maybe sometimes not, and the coyote will smell that fecal matter. They'll

be eating it on the ground and then they'll find the calf, which is defenseless, and they'll start to eat fecal matter off the calf and then, of course, they'll eat the calf if there is nothing to chase them away. But I don't think that's a targeted, an intentional kill. That's not a carnivorous kill. That's actually the habits of the coyote, that it eats everything from mesquite beans and feces to grass to whatever. So I don't really feel that coyotes present that much of a problem.

The real problem is feral dogs. We're close to the municipality of Tucson, which is getting close to a million people. A lot of people buy dogs, and then they decide they don't want dogs, so they say, "Let's take it out and turn it loose so that it can have a happy life out in nature." These animals pack. The most dramatic winter, we lost 14 head of yearlings. Some dogs castrated one young bull. And they were just doing it for sport. They weren't doing it for the meat. The pack was as big as 13 to 14. So that is the responsibility of humans. It's got nothing to do with the natural situation. But, to me, that is a predator situation and I can't get Wildlife Services to do anything about it, because dogs are not considered a trappable animal.

I know personally of a rancher near Santa Fe. Santa Fe has a tremendous problem with feral dogs. This fella, he carries a gun with him all the time. He kills in excess of 75 dogs a year on his place. People just turn them loose. That's the predator problem that I face. I don't face a natural predator problem. When the pronghorn were reintroduced on the ranch, there was some trapping done to remove coyote for that particular time period. They don't trap them anymore. The pronghorn have been there about 15 years now. You can see the dramatic change in the population of the fawns according to the coyote population. But, more than predators, the forces affecting winter growth key into whether the fawns make it or not. I think that Wildlife Services could help me if they could eradicate some of these feral dogs. So, I agree with Bill. I think there is a place for predator control.

Because I have a federal permit, I'm sure I'm going to get some black-tail prairie dogs and I'd like to see how they do. I'm curious what Wildlife Services will do with the coyote population before the prairie dogs arrive because they are going to reintroduce them on the plains and the prairies, where the coyote does his work, rather than in a wooded or a riparian habitat.

C. Cowan: While my family has a ranching operation in Southern Arizona, kind of between where Bill's and Mac's places are, I work for the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association, so I will speak in much more general terms. I don't have the day-to-day experience these fellows do. Livestock producers are in the business of raising animals, and that's what they want to do. When predator management becomes necessary, it is

a necessary evil, as you have heard from both of these gentlemen, something that you do to maintain some balance so that you can protect your private property and coexist with nature. We believe that the Wildlife Services program is necessary. As you have heard from both Bill and Mac, predators hurt not only domestic animals, but wild animals as well. In New Mexico, in many areas of the state, we're losing deer populations because we have more predators than those areas can stand. So our game and fish department is addressing that. The New Mexico Game Department is attempting to reestablish bighorn sheep populations and they are having a terrible problem with mountain lions. So I think probably the whole message of this is that we need to achieve some balance. Everybody has to find a way to coexist. Unfortunately once and a while that means using a lethal method, but most producers are going to try a nonlethal method first, as Bill and Mac have talked about. In New Mexico we have had huge sheep numbers in the past. A lot of those sheep producers are switching to cattle, because cattle can protect themselves from predators better than sheep can. So balance is what we're looking for, and the ability for all of us to coexist.

Coexistencia Con Depredadores

(resumen)

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Bill MacDonald: Una forma de proteger a los becerros de depredadores es dejar que el ganado forme una sola manada durante la época de crianza. De esta forma las vacas siempre están juntas y son muy agresivas y es muy difícil que cualquier animal pueda acercarse a las crías.

Debido a que los coyotes pueden encontrar un animal muerto rápidamente, es difícil saber si el coyote fue la causa de esa muerte o si sólo se comía algo ya muerto. Pero sospechamos que en muchas ocasiones la muerte del animal no fue causada por el coyote. En los casos en que un coyote mata un becerro, con frecuencia es por negligencia de la vaca, porque en general, las vacas son obstáculos formidables para un depredador como el coyote. Por eso, en estos casos prefiero deshacerme de la vaca. Es mucho más fácil y barato seleccionar vacas que sepan proteger a sus crías que tratar de controlar la población de depredadores en la región.

La pérdida de crías por ataques de puma ha sido mínima en nuestros ranchos debido a que se introdujo sangre Angus en el ganado, lo que los hace más conscientes de la protección a sus becerros. Además, las vacas bajan del bosque poco tiempo después de dar a luz, por lo que la manada que permanece en territorio de pumas consiste sólo de adultos.

A diferencia de los ejemplos arriba mencionados existen algunos casos donde es necesario el apoyo del Estado para el manejo y control de depredadores. Por ejemplo, hace 20 años se introdujo berrendo en el valle de San Bernardino, y las poblaciones han sobrevivido bien. Esto no hubiera sucedido si el Estado de Arizona no hubiera implementado un agresivo programa de control de coyotes, porque el berrendo no estaba aclimatado al área y los coyotes tomaban ventaja de esto. Recuerde, el control de depredadores debe usarse para tratar la causa del problema en lugar de los síntomas.

Mac Donaldson: En nuestra área de trabajo, en el sur de Tucson, Arizona, nuestros principales problemas de depredación son causados por perros salvajes. Una gran cantidad de gentes compran perros y luego deciden que ya no los quieren y los liberan en los alrededores para liberarse de ellos. Estos animales, después, tienen que matar animales indefensos para sobrevivir, convirtiéndose en una plaga para los ganaderos. Un rancho de Santa Fe, NM, menciona que en un año ha logrado cazar hasta 75 perros salvajes en su rancho.

Caren Cowan: En Nuevo México se están perdiendo poblaciones de venado a causa de la alta densidad de depredadores en esas zonas. El Departamento de Caza de Nuevo México está tratando de reestablecer las poblaciones de borrego cimarrón y enfrenta grandes problemas con el puma. Frente a estas circunstancias, la intervención del gobierno en el manejo de depredadores es necesaria para mantener un equilibrio, proteger la propiedad privada y coexistir con la naturaleza.

El caso del jaguar mexicano es especial, porque este animal se mueve por un corredor a través de la frontera y debido a su importancia ecológica es importante protegerlo. En este caso no es necesario llevar a cabo un control intensivo de este depredador para mantener una operación ganadera productiva.

El problema real al que algunos rancheros se enfrentan son los perros salvajes. En el municipio de Tucson hay cerca de un millón de personas, y muchas de ellas abandonan a sus perros en el campo cuando deciden que ya no los quieren. Estos animales se mueven en manadas y son peligrosos porque atacan al ganado por diversión. Esto es responsabilidad de los humanos porque no tiene nada que ver con la situación natural. La solución a este problema requiere que el público, el gobierno y los rancheros actúen y colaboren de forma conjunta.