

Predator Management and Ungulates

By Dr. Vince Crichton

Predator (wolf and bear) management in these contemporary times is a hot button that has polarized the public. I must say, there is not one biologist I have known who enjoys removing predators for management purposes but in some cases it is one of the options for consideration and in some cases employed. The usual focus when it comes to predators is the timber wolf. Manitoba's wildlife management history involved surveys, setting hunting seasons, enforcement and predator removal. Poisoning wolves was an annual event done in most regions and there are photos from the early 1900s of wolf removal done through these programs. When I commenced work in Manitoba it was a ritual carried out extensively by conservation officers who saw it as one of their annual tasks which was justified as a mechanism to enhance big game populations for hunting. Where removal is done today it is generally in situations where wolves prey on livestock. The use of specialty guard dogs to protect livestock is being used and in most cases it is effective. I have seen cases where the accusatory finger has been pointed at wolves but when I have examined the dead livestock not a mark was on it suggesting predation. When livestock do not number the expected at the end of the grazing season wolves get fingered as the culprit. But losses can be from other factors. I have seen for example a breach birth in moose whereby the female died and I am certain if an inexperienced person was to look at the site wolves (or perhaps bears) would be blamed.

Now, where big game populations have been reduced due to anthropogenic activities what does an agency do when controls on harvesting all-round cannot be accomplished? Do agencies simply let big game populations slide to the point where they cannot meet expectations or do they act? Manitoba took a positive step in the moose conservation areas by paying registered trappers to remove wolves and when I discussed this proposal with the Minis-

ter of the day his response was "it's a no brainer, do it". I recently was taken to task by a person opposed to what was being done in Manitoba relative to wolf removal to facilitate recovery of moose populations to the point where they can meet societal expectations and to the level whereby the Government of Manitoba can adhere to its fiduciary obligation to Rights Based Users. My specific question was "what would you do"? The 'non answer' was most interesting - "I would first remove my manager's hat and replace it with the hat of a conservation scientist (as in Manitoba Conservation)". This clearly did not answer the question thus I repeated it and no answer has been received. This is a classic example of a critic when asked what they would do if wearing a government hat refuse to give an answer. In my opinion the critics when put in a manager's position do not have an answer or will not admit they would do the same thing, i.e. removal.

Further, it is widely recognized that when populations are significantly reduced, the impacts of mortality sources such as predation and diseases are more significant. When I see the responses on the anti-wolf pages which appear everywhere in social media these days it is depressing and the ignorance is staggering that these so called environmentalist are so opposed to anything that remotely supports conservation. Education is fundamental to ensure that all understand the rationale behind predator management. As a species wolves have been given the fairy tale judgment of the Big Bad Wolf and I believe that many still believe this in absolute innocence and ignorance. I have followed with interest the recovery of natural systems in Yellowstone due to wolf reintroduction. The issue has left me as a wildlife biologist with a great deal of personal conflict as I try to remain objective and understand the science while many (e.g. hunters and outfitters) have fixed opinions about killing wolves. From a manager's perspective I am convinced that many of the public do not appreciate the position a government manager is in when the pressure from above comes to take action.

Wild game is a high quality nutritious food source and preferred by many because of these qualities. There are conservation, economic, social and cultural decisions that managers are faced with when populations are driven to extremely low levels due to the inability to control some mortality sources. Citizens' views range from a position that wildlife populations should not be manipulated for human benefits to those who demand actively managing populations with the hope that a higher annual harvest can be achieved. The bottom line is no single management approach will satisfy everyone.

But let's not forget bears – they are a major predator on new born ungulates and I have records of adult moose being killed by black bears, although grizzlies are more adept at this task than black bears. The unknown of course is what health issues did the animal have which compromised its well-being. A Saskatchewan study showed that by removing 13 adult male black bears from a study area, calf survival the following spring doubled from 40 calves/100 cows to 80. And, following my first trip to a moose conference in Alaska at which the results of a major black bear/calf moose mortality study was reported, upon returning conservation officers in my region at the time said "you did not have to go to Alaska to learn that black bears kill moose". They then regaled me with numerous observations they had seen or had been reported to them over the years.

Control programs are destined to reduce number of predators not eliminate them – predators are an important component of the biodiversity found in Manitoba's ecosystems. Such programs must be stopped when prey populations meet established goals whereby they can support predators, controlled hunting and viewing. Predator populations will most likely begin to increase with increasing prey and if hunting and trapping efforts are not effective in controlling predator numbers whereby they compromise the sustainability of ungulate populations then control programs must be in the tool box.