

Viewpoint

Does Nature Want Us To Kill Wild Animals?

Because we have interjected too many uncertainties into the natural systems, management of wildlife populations by man is essential.

By Walter Howard

As a youngster I was always distressed when my turtles, snakes and shrews killed and ate fish, birds and small rodents in my backyard menagerie. I still have a genuine love and deep protective feeling toward the welfare of birds and mammals, as many people do. My early childhood experiences put me on a path to try to understand what I call Nature's "life-death ethic."

As tragic as it may seem at times, Nature's death ethic requires that most animals die before they become sexually mature to prevent populations from continuing to grow in size. Most of the animals that are born must die before they mature sexually to preserve the balance of Nature. Nature would not be able to cope with the huge population densities that would result.

The most valuable asset I have obtained during my 85 years has been learning to analyze Nature's death ethic objectively, not just emotionally. This is not easy. Those of us who love Nature and animals can't help but feel emotional about the welfare of animals, and we inherently want all animals to live to an old age despite Nature's death ethic. One of the main traps we fall into is that we become sentimental about "individual" animals. Yet Nature does not recognize individuals, only populations of animals.

Balance Of Nature

Since some undesirable exotic plants and animals in America are now permanently established and cannot be eliminated, we must learn how to live with them. The huge populations of people that exist today along with these exotic animals are here and can't be ignored. The high population of people and the well-established unwanted plants and exotic animals must be included in any management scheme we develop. We cannot leave the solution of managing the make-up of human-modified ecosystems to Nature. We have interjected too many uncertainties into the natural systems. Management by us is essential.

I am sure many people join me in my concern about the welfare of wild birds, mammals and other animals. Most of us want to preserve as much "natural" biological diversity as possible and to do what we can to conserve natural resources and to protect the environment. But at what cost? In 1982 I spent one month in Khana National Park, India, at a conference with 60 wardens from India's Tiger Preserves. The wardens told me that each year surplus tigers from their preserves annually killed about 150 villagers.

Now I think the number of fatalities each year is only around 50.

Could it be that despite our "good" intentions to protect "individual" animals and to conserve natural resources and the environment, we have inadvertently caused some populations of animals, such as deer, raccoons, foxes and others, to be exposed to needless suffering – because we have eliminated too many of their natural mortality factors?

After spending much of my life studying animals and how they interact with humans, I must say the answer to this question is unequivocally "yes." Just look at the degree of suffering deer sometimes have in suburban areas, and the plight of surplus bears, when populations exceed the food supply and they are reduced to rummaging through garbage for a meal.

Perhaps without realizing it, we have gone against Nature's ways because of our emotions and ignored a basic fact of life, i.e., Nature's life-death ethic. Our innate desire to want to preserve life interferes with the need for us to assist Nature in managing the population density, e.g., of skunks, foxes and other animals in human-modified environments, which then often develop rabies or other diseases because of their excessive density. Unfortunately, many of today's habitat modifications are well established and it is impossible to change them back to a pristine state.

Surplus Animal Populations

Our help is especially needed because the natural predator-prey balance, which is so important to an ecosystem, no longer exists in many altered habitats. Original natural balances have disappeared because either the original predators are no longer present or the altered habitat now enables such species as blackbirds, squirrels, rats, coyotes, deer, opossums, and skunks to overpopulate, sometimes with terrible consequences to the welfare of entire populations of these animals.

When plague occurs in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and local populations of golden mantled ground squirrels, chipmunks and woodrats die, public health has to temporarily close the campgrounds until the now hungry infected fleas in the unoccupied rodent burrows have been controlled. It is important to note that these plague epidemics in California have only occurred where human-induced environmental changes have enabled these rodent species to overpopulate.

Most people feel we should manage wild animals without killing them. Of course, when possible, but in practice this isn't just difficult; it is impossible. How should wild animals die? At what age? By what means? Are all wild animals entitled to a long and happy life? Or do you agree with Nature that to prevent overpopulation most animals of all species must die while young?

All animals produce surplus offspring to serve as food to others. It is difficult, isn't it, to separate one's emotions from the facts of Nature.

Many people think a good solution for dealing with unwanted animals, particularly larger mammals like bears, but also even mice, is to capture and release them somewhere else where we think they might survive. One can then rationalize that at

least this approach gives the animal another chance to live. However, to do so, shows a lack of understanding of Nature's scheme. With radio telemetry we know that the odds are stacked against the survival of any translocated mammal – from rodents to bears – released into a strange environment. In fact, once released a

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mammal rarely settles down but tries to find its original home. How sad. In addition to the trauma of being put in a strange environment, they seldom survive. Therefore, capturing misplaced mammals and releasing them elsewhere is clearly a compassionate resolution for disposing of unwanted or surplus mammals.

In today's human-modified environments, which frequently are still changing, Nature's scheme usually cannot maintain a balanced ecosystem without our help. Natural or surrogate predators are essential in preventing species like rodents and deer from overpopulating and in maintaining a healthy balance of Nature.

To help Nature, people need to become surrogate predators, stalking the out-of-balance predator-prey relations like a hungry lion. Let's not make things worse by allowing animals to greatly overpopulate. In environments where the natural plant and animal communities have been permanently altered, and obviously can't be reestablished, we need carefully developed management schemes that will regulate the density of animal populations. And they must be grounded in sound science.

Survival of the fittest? A shortsighted strategy at best. We should be willing to help Nature engineer healthy ecosystems that improve the

lives of wildlife and the balance of Nature. Self-limiting mortality factors – starvation, disease, territoriality, cannibalism, poor breeding success, and sexual battles – usually become more horrible and truculent in modified environments where the natural predator-prey balance no longer exists.

On Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, in the absence of predators or hunting, deer became so abundant and sickly that the public finally agreed that the only solution was for wardens to cull their numbers. First, some deer were captured and moved to the mainland, but they did not survive.

Morality of Nature

Nature is naturally harsh, of course, but where human-induced environmental changes have occurred, she is often forced to be much crueler, causing a higher percentage of animals to suffer from these self-limiting factors than occurs with natural mortality. Few wild animal deaths are as humane as those at the hands of humans.

When people cull animal populations, they are governed by many regulations designed to ensure that hunting, trapping or other lethal measures are as humane and selective as is feasible. Only we humans express compassion toward prey – certainly Nature does not. We must rise above our emotions and recognize the environmental importance of Nature's death ethic. We can't leave the needed management to the whims of Nature.

Death is an inevitable fact of life. The public and many biologists do not seem to realize that most wild animals of all species do die before they have a chance to reproduce. This early mortality is absolutely essential for a number of reasons. Without it every species would over-