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Science doesn't support claims about grizzly hunting

By Dr. Adrian Treves

and Dr. John Laundre Guest columnists

Aug 11, 2020

As the governor's Grizzly Bear Advisory Council (GBAC) works to finalize its recommendations regarding the future of grizzly bear management in Montana, it would be well-advised to follow its own guiding principle: "the best available science should inform decisions in all aspects of grizzly bear management and conservation."

A close look at what that science actually shows about coexistence with native carnivores reveals insufficient support for the notion that hunting seasons and lethal removal will reduce grizzly bear-livestock conflict or improve tolerance of grizzlies' presence on the landscape. To the contrary, the science suggests that killing carnivores can make these problems worse.

As a professor of environmental studies at University of Wisconsin-Madison and an assistant professor at Western Oregon University, we are well-acquainted with the scientific literature on predator management. We have been studying predator-prey ecology for a combined 80-plus years, and have published more than 80 peer-reviewed scientific journal articles on ecology, conservation, and predator management.

Our research and that of other scientists shows that lethal management and hunting seasons can hamper coexistence efforts by reducing residents' tolerance of native carnivores. Independent colleagues and both of us have examined public attitudes toward gray wolves in Wisconsin over a 13 year period that included the federal delisting of wolves in January 2012, which was immediately followed by government trapping and soon after by public hunting, trapping, and hounding seasons. We found that public tolerance of wolves declined each time policy changes made it easier for state managers or the general public to kill wolves.

Wisconsin's decision to open a hunt on the newly delisted population in 2011 was no exception. Even as hunters and trappers were allowed to kill hundreds of wolves in a single season, the men living in Wisconsin wolf range became more hostile toward them and, especially disturbingly, more inclined to poach them. More recent work coming out this year is showing that radio-collared wolves were more likely to be killed, and the evidence hidden from

authorities, during 6 independent periods in which wolf-killing was legalized. The reason why is elusive, but we suspect that lifting restrictions on killing essentially signals that it is socially acceptable to kill these animals; moreover, reduction or removal of disincentives, such as penalties associated with 'take' of endangered species, could be to blame.

The claim that killing carnivores is necessary to address livestock conflict is also dubious. A large and growing body of high-quality research from a dozen nations and two dozen independent scientists shows that nonlethal conflict prevention methods, such as livestock guardian dogs and electric fencing, are the most effective way to prevent predation on livestock by bears, wolves, coyotes, mountain lions, and other native carnivores.

By contrast, there is relatively little evidence supporting the effectiveness of lethal removal, and many of the studies that seemingly support such a claim are plagued by biases that render their findings weak and unreliable. In extreme cases, lethal control of carnivores might be necessary when coexistence proves impossible. However, this generally happens when and where we fail to use nonlethal interventions.

Some suggest that public hunts of carnivores are the solution. Yet public hunting has never been shown to reduce livestock conflicts, probably because the timing and location of hunts generally do not coincide with the timing and locations of domestic animal injuries. Indeed, recent research on cougars in Washington state has instead found that sport hunting led to more losses of livestock, probably by disrupting cougars' social and territorial hierarchy.

Similar results for wolves in Michigan suggest government trapping may have exacerbated cattle losses for the neighboring farms. That's how word of mouth between farmers can spread a counterproductive intervention. These results have been further supported in a large regional comparison of livestock loss to cougars between 10 western states with a sport hunt and California where sport hunting of cougars has been banned since the early 1970s.

Sport killing of carnivores just does not produce the management goal of lower livestock losses. All it does is to reward a killing opportunity to the small segment of society, hunters, who as a group are the least supportive of protection of carnivores, as we have shown in multiple surveys.

Simply put, the alleged benefits of carnivore-killing policies — both hunting seasons and lethal management by state officials — are overstated and unsupported by robust scientific evidence. Research shows that these policies are likely to undermine coexistence efforts by stoking social intolerance and failing to address conflicts. Continuing to promote these ineffective wildlife management policies wastes limited resources and harms nature, animals, and people.

The GBAC should heed the lessons learned through decades of rigorous research on carnivore populations in the U.S. and around the world by supporting nonlethal conflict prevention and recommending against hunting as a conservation strategy.

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