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Living or Dead? Choosing wildlife economies

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Facing a relentless saga of game farming disasters, governments across North America are being forced to 'rethink' the whole issue of privatizing and commercializing wildlife. To say that such evaluation is 'long overdue' is understatement in the extreme.

From the beginning, science, economics, and public interest have proclaimed overwhelming objection, based on several inescapable facts:

- Commercial trafficking in wildlife is its greatest known enemy.
- Game farming is flatly antithetical to wildlife, our system of conservation, and our living wildlife economies.
- Game farming brings disease, parasite, genetic pollution, habitat loss, poaching, escape, and a host of other problems that are inevitable—their costs enormous.
- Even the markets targeted by game farming (velvet antler sold as an aphrodisiac and 'trophy' animals for 'penned shoots'), are frivolous/illegitimate, detrimental, and unsustainable.

By any measure, game farming is nothing less than a biological quagmire and a pit of pyramid economics. It is a deficit mine — the deeper we get into it the more it costs.

While unable to refute or address any of these facts, the Alberta government literally (perhaps even illegally), forced game farming through in 1987. That entire process stands as one of the most corrupt in Canadian history. It was shallow, biased, disingenuous, and unscientific. It was not just undemocratic—it was deliberately manipulated by government to force a particular result—over the express wishes of Albertans.

Later, during the Tory leadership race Premier Klein committed, in writing, to put the entire "privatization/commercialization of wildlife issue through a thorough and public assessment." Once elected, however, he quickly attempted to backtrack—incredibly—suggesting that the whole issue had been carefully reviewed by experts and that public was generally supportive.

Since it was obvious that this ridiculously false information had been provided to him, I informed Premier Klein of the fact and extent of what had actually occurred. He responded with a promise to investigation and inquiry, and he renewed his commitment to legitimate assessment.

While I cannot speak to Premier Klein's motives, it is clear that reneging on that promised inquiry, as well as betraying his commitment to assessment, has served far more than just political purpose.

All evidence suggests that legitimate public assessment of game ranching would have led to a public outcry and an outright rejection of the industry. But by refusing public inquiry and assessment, the government of Alberta propped up the industry—serving the private financial interests of all of those involved. Among others this includes relatives of former Tory cabinet ministers (now Premier Klein's Campaign Manager and current Chief of Staff).





Meanwhile (but not surprisingly), the validity and the seriousness of the concerns expressed by scientists have been borne out entirely by our own dismal track record.

As predicted, the breeding pyramid schemes have saturated and collapsed for virtually every species. Valued at more than \$15,000 a few years ago, elk have recently been selling for just a few hundred dollars. Ostrich and emu are all but worthless. Llama breeders are so desperate they're trying to sell their animals for meat. Even bison fetch little more than carcass value.

The venison market... well, just isn't... despite the years of effort/resources spent trying to develop it. Not only does the public not 'want' or need it, any 'success' developing a venison market implies a direct and offsetting loss for existing meat producers (beef, poultry, etc). More importantly, any real success will mean a poaching nightmare for public wildlife.

As predicted, horrific diseases continue to plague the industry: The US Secretary of Agriculture recently (September 21, 2001) declared a "State of Emergency" because of CWD on game farms. Chronic Wasting Disease, is a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy of deer and elk, and a sister disease to 'Mad Cow.'

Canada may not have joined in that declaration, but we clearly lead the industry epidemic: some 7,440 elk, 260 cattle, 100 bison and 60 deer have had to be destroyed on thirty-nine different game farms in Saskatchewan. At least 190 elk have proven to be infected with the disease. There are currently no live tests for this disease and it is always fatal. (A test involving tonsil biopsy apparently does not work on elk.)

Potential for transmission to people is unknown; it is hoped the species barrier will prevent it. That same hope was claimed regarding Mad Cow Disease, but more than 100 people are now dead from TSE contracted from infected beef in Europe, and there may be tens of thousands more. Moreover, *in vitro* experiments show that healthy human prions are converted to malignant ones by CWD prions at the same rate as by BSE prions.

Despite repeated public warnings from scientists, Canadian game farms to continued to ship potentially contaminated velvet for human consumption even after CWD was confirmed in 1996. Dr. Valerius Geist, former Director of Environmental Science at the University of Calgary, warned that velvet antler is both very vascular and highly innervated, making it a potential source of (malignant) prions. Still, shipments continued after it appeared again in dead elk in 1998, and after repeated discoveries 2000. Finally, on October 18, 2000 the Canadian Food Inspection Agency instituted a policy to destroy velvet from diseased animals.

Dr. George Luterbach (CFIA) recently confirmed that product was sold from diseased animals, and that neither the industry nor government made any public effort to recall contaminated product, or warn customers—even after the animals from which the velvet was amputated were proven infected with the deadly disease. "It is not a requirement," he said.

Korea (the biggest buyer of velvet) has banned all imports of product and animals from North American game farms. Incredibly, game farmers responded by lobbying for government assistance to reopen the markets—again without assurance that this so-called 'product' is free of disease.

Dr. Luterbach says the cost to Canadian taxpayers — for quarantine, access, 'depopulation,' handling, laboratory testing, disposal, and funding to compensate game farmers (up to \$4,000 per animal) already





exceeds \$30 million. The International Fund for Animal Welfare reported that the total cost will exceed \$70 million. But that's just the beginning.

Thousands of public deer on the Alberta Saskatchewan border are now being killed in an effort to stem the spread to the wild—already confirmed in at least two deer. The industry persists in a pathetic attempt to duck responsibility, and according to Ron Lind (Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management), government agencies have still not completed a report regarding the numbers of escapes from (infected) game farms. Equally troubling are instances of wildlife entering (and exiting) game farms—but, again, no official data are available. In any case, the costs are obscene.

Elk, deer, and other public wildlife are an enormously valuable resource. Beyond their ecological value, each animal represents a living capital asset belonging to the province (public), worth up to \$15,000. This value is a reflection of the substantial industries that have grown up around the enjoyment of public wildlife. Making, selling, and servicing a mountain of outdoor equipment and wildlife enthusiasts, North American 'wildlife economies' generate over \$150 billion every year.

Our public wildlife, and these enormous *living wildlife* economies, exist today only because a ban on commercial trafficking rescued wildlife from the brink of extinction! By 1900, marketing in *dead* wildlife had virtually wiped out North America's millions of elk, deer, moose, bison, antelope, song birds, shore birds, migratory birds, etc. The last native elk disappeared from Alberta in 1913.

And while our public policy prohibiting *dead* markets resulted in this phenomenal replenishment of vulnerable wildlife across North America, at the same time, the presence of 'dead wildlife' markets elsewhere in the world continued to wipe out species after species of public wildlife — elephants, rhino, tigers — despite every effort to protect it.

The lesson is that if markets demand dead wildlife, it dies.

Alternatively, the 'living' economies that develop around the enjoyment of public wildlife so dwarf the 'dead' markets, that comparisons are absurd. We could liquidate (kill and sell) every wild creature in North America, but it would not even generate 15 billion — let alone \$150 billion every year!

Some perspective is in order: Public wildlife and sustainable wildlife economies are suffering direct jeopardy, and the public is enduring these horrific costs, in order to generate profit for an unsustainable industry whose express purpose is to mutilate animals for aphrodisiacs/folklore medicines and to provide live targets for penned shoots.

That said, the true depth of this tragedy is realized only when it is understood that governments not only ignored all of the science/economics in order to force game farming through, they have repeatedly and deliberately ignored it ever since—in the face of overwhelming evidence.

Not only was the current CWD epidemic predicted by wildlife scientists, so too was the TB epidemic that ravaged game farms across the country in the 1990s. Direct costs for that epidemic also reached into the tens of millions, and it cost all of Canada our TB-free status—estimated by Agriculture Canada to be worth \$1 billion. Dozens of animals remain missing from infected/quarantined game farms.

But rather than finally doing the responsible thing — conducting serious and legitimate assessments — which may have averted the current CWD crisis entirely, the Klein government (among others) deliberately scuttled them!





The issues are, nevertheless, beginning to appear on the public's radar, and, given an opportunity, the vast majority flatly reject even the products and practices of this industry. Montana voters forced it out in the 2000 election (ballot initiative 143—to ban penned shooting operations, and phase out the industry). Other jurisdictions are looking for an exit as well. But not Alberta.

Here the industry only proved yet another prediction by finally abandoning their ridiculous claims of not wanting penned shoots here. Working with their partners in government, they devised a scheme to 'create enough cover' to allow the government to similarly abandon their promises to *never* allow them.

So-called 'public meetings' were held across Alberta to garner support for penned shooting operations that they dubbed "cervid harvesting preserves." This may be the most egregious abuse of the word "preserve" in history.

Industry representatives were allowed the only presentation, and their slick, 40 minute show simply ignored any and all of the serious issues. Members of the public were then given 5 minutes to put questions and comments... whereupon, the industry took an offsetting 5 minutes to respond.

All of this would have been perfectly within the rights of any organization—except for the fact that it was pre-arranged with government, who had representatives in attendance to "assess" public support.

Incredibly, even dealing from this deck wasn't good enough... so the industry stacked the meetings with game farmers (60—90% of attendees), who used up all the 'public' time patting themselves on the back, pretending to be 'hunters,' or making an asinine claim that only PetShoots would save the 'family farm.'

Much to the dismay of game farmers (and government), major editorial boards slammed the 'process.' Conservation organizations then commissioned a respected polling firm to show what Albertans really think. More than 76% oppose legalizing penned shooting operations... and even 78% of people who voted for the Conservatives oppose it. Significantly, this poll was taken after the infamous 'PetShoot Parade.'

One wonders what it would be if they knew the whole story.

