



KILLING WILDLIFE TO SAVE WILDLIFE

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

A proposed University of Alberta research project that is investigating killing and sterilizing wolves near Rocky Mountain House has received unprecedented public opposition. Once again, people are asking exactly who we are managing wildlife for in Alberta.

According to the research proposal, “Concern over ungulate herds that are *below objective* in portions of this area has led to discussions of reducing wolf predation” [emphasis added]. To accomplish this reduction, the proposal suggests sterilizing the alpha male and female wolves, and killing the rest of the pack in order to maintain wolves on the landscape at a low density.

AWA is asking just who has determined that ungulate numbers are “below objective.” Wildlife in Alberta is a “public resource,” so presumably the public has a major role to play in determining how they want this “resource” to be managed. Do Albertans believe that sterilizing and killing carnivores to increase ungulate numbers is acceptable?

The proposed research program is not intended to assist endangered species recovery, as with the culling of wolves in disturbed caribou habitat (which AWA also opposes, but some see as justifiable). Rather, its objective is increasing numbers of common ungulates, including elk and mule deer. The Minister of Sustainable Resource Development (SRD), Ted Morton, has strongly supported the proposals, citing “very disproportionate, almost historic lows of elk, mule deer and mountain sheep.”

But are they really at a “historic low,” or are they simply not distributed according to human convenience? Parks Canada recently investigated the possibility of sterilizing elk near the Banff townsite because of their high numbers. And SRD has recently been lobbying local authorities to support the introduction of Sunday hunting, part of



Alberta Sustainable Resource Department spokesperson Darcy Whiteside responded to public concern about the wolf sterilization proposal with a surprising and revealing comment: “No one has a problem swatting a mosquito.” PHOTO: R. BERDAN

the justification being that the apparent need to improve highway safety by controlling the excessive number of deer adjacent to highways.

Opposition to the proposals has been extensive, coming from a range of sources. “This is 1950s wolf management that has been updated to include sterilization,” said wildlife biologist Paul Paquet. He described the proposals as “destructive and morally reprehensible.”

The research proposals also received considerable opposition in the media. The *Calgary Herald* and *Edmonton Journal* both carried numerous letters objecting to the wolf cull, and both published editorials against it. “Left alone, the elk and wolf populations regulate themselves quite nicely,” pointed out the *Herald*, and according to the *Journal*, “Manipulating one species for benefit of human sport directly contradicts the conservation principles of sustaining natural biodiversity and the naturally determined balance of species’ populations.”

The *Journal* also put its finger on the real issue, which is still not being addressed: “Preservation of habitat, a much more difficult but important task, is the key to maintaining healthy populations.”

Last fall, Minister Morton instituted Provincial Hunting Day to “promote hunting and hunter awareness and educate Albertans about the important role hunting plays in wildlife management and conservation.” But the proposed wolf cull has received heated public opposition from hunters and non-hunters alike. It seems that killing carnivores to artificially inflate the numbers of huntable ungulates is not an effective way to promote hunting amongst 94 percent of Albertans who do not hunt (2004 Alberta Recreation Survey).

AWA concurs with the Waterton Lakes National Park website: “We can eradicate wolves. The real challenge will be to see if we are wise enough to listen to the howl of the wolf objectively and find creative ways of sharing the landscapes we both depend upon.”

Send your comments to Honourable Ted Morton Minister, Sustainable Resource Development 420 Legislature Building 10800 – 97 Avenue Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6 (780) 415-4815 foothills.rockyview@assembly.ab.ca