

Vol.16 No.1

January/February 2022

# THE WILDLIFE PROFESSIONAL

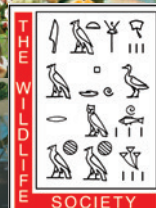
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# No Justification Needed

## ALLEVIATING CONFLICT SHOULD BE A BONUS OF PREDATOR HUNTING, NOT A REQUIREMENT

By Chris Comer



Credit: Steve Hillebrand/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

▲ Black bears are widespread and relatively abundant across much of North America, but they have been the subject of numerous ballot initiatives and state referenda to restrict hunting.

Numerous proposals have targeted carnivore hunting in the United States and Canada in recent months. The Great Lakes region has seen a constant stream of news and opinion about delisting gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) and allowing a regulated harvest there. In California, the since-withdrawn bill SB252 would have banned black bear (*Ursus americanus*) harvests. The spring bear hunt in Washington was recently suspended in response to public pressure, and a petition in Nevada to ban the use of dogs for bear hunting was defeated last spring. Recent years have seen a number of attempts to limit or end the hunting of cougars (*Puma concolor*), bobcats (*Lynx rufus*), grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos horribilis*) and wolves.

This is, perhaps, not surprising. Large predators elicit strong emotional responses for a variety of reasons. Some people may perceive them as rare, even when they aren't. Sometimes, the animals remind people of pets. Yet data from numerous studies have shown that regulated harvest is sustainable.

When trying to make a case for predator hunting, state agencies and hunting advocates almost always discuss the value of hunting as a tool to reduce human-wildlife conflicts. This argument holds a lot of merit, and it can be a convincing one. Years of surveys have shown that the public supports regulated hunting as a management practice. Reducing conflict is not the only reason for predator hunting, however, and it shouldn't be necessary for policy-makers to use it to justify the activity.

Even engaging in these discussions can detract from consideration of important issues related to predator hunting. Oftentimes, hunting critics use "value claims" (e.g., hunting black bears is bad for society) rather than evidence claims (e.g., hunting black bears reduces conflict with people). Separating these types of claims is important when considering issues such as the social licenses to hunt (Darimont et al. 2020). When justifying hunting or making the decision to have a harvest for a species, it's important to consider all values and evidence.

### Dynamic wildlife responses

In questioning agency management plans, anti-hunting groups often grasp onto the fact that hunting is not universally associated with reduced human-predator conflict. In fact, the literature does show different species react differently to hunters and human presence.

This issue came to my attention a few months ago when I came across an excellent scientific paper about black bear management in Minnesota (Garshelis et al. 2020). The authors described a relatively straightforward study of human-bear conflicts over four decades and their relationship to bear abundance. The researchers found that bear-related complaints declined following a dramatic reduction in population density due primarily to hunter harvest over several years. Other factors such as food availability and presence of



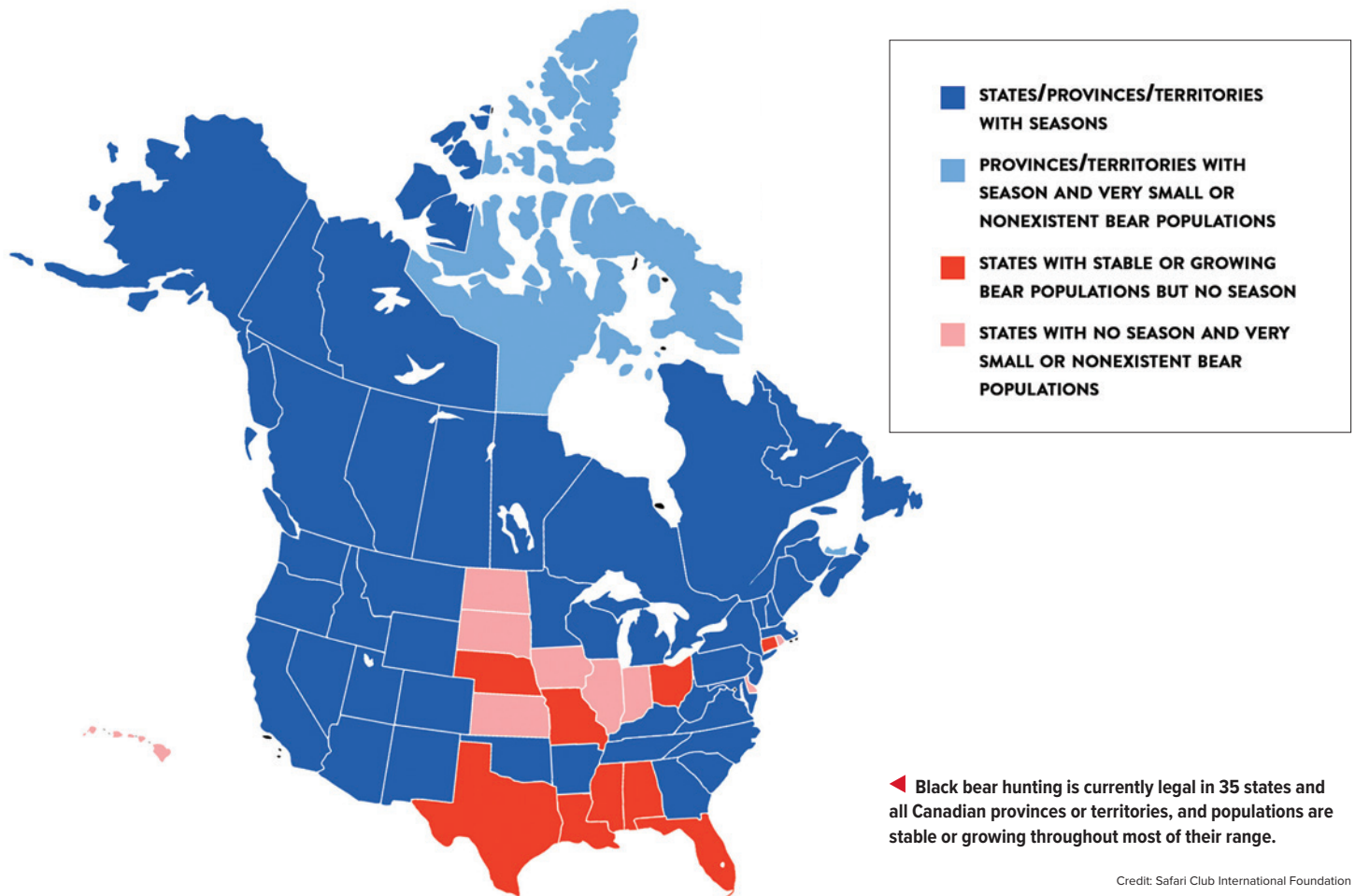
attractants also affected the incidence of complaints, but bear population density was the most important one.

Of course, the finding that fewer bears produce fewer negative interactions makes intuitive sense. Similar results have been found in other species and other locations (e.g., [Raithel et al. 2017](#)). The relationship between population density and human conflict should be relatively uncontroversial.

The relationship between hunting and animal behavior isn't as straightforward, though. Some authors have suggested that increased hunting mortality is associated with increased human-cougar conflict in western North America ([Teichman et al. 2016](#)), although further research will be needed to verify this effect. Others have found that hunting pressure can reduce human-wildlife conflict due to the animals' increased fear of humans (e.g., [Cromsigt et al. 2013](#)).

The idea that hunting increases social tolerance for predators also has some merit in the scientific literature ([Heberlein and Ericsson 2008](#)). Populations of larger predators—including bears, cougars and wolves—have been generally expanding across North America in recent decades, and social tolerance will be key to the future management of these species. The evidence of hunting's impacts on predators' behavior and social tolerance is mixed, though, and it varies depending on species, location and other factors. For such a complex issue, this should not be surprising. However, anti-use groups often seize upon the fact that hunting is not universally associated with reduced conflict to question agency management plans.

Defining the impacts of hunting and other management techniques on predator populations and wildlife conflict is an active area of research (e.g., [Treves et al. 2019](#)). However, resolving the scientific debate about the impacts of hunting on human-wildlife conflicts is largely unnecessary to make





decisions about hunting predators or other species. Wildlife management entities have narrowed their options and done themselves a disservice by engaging with these issues when considering the merits of sustainably using their wildlife resources.

### Keeping conflict out of the decision

Under the [North American Model of Wildlife Management](#), government entities manage wildlife in trust for the people and to maximize public benefit. High demand for hunting opportunities and, in some cases, high willingness to pay for those opportunities shows that there are irrefutable benefits to the public from sustainably using species such as bears and cougars. In many states, the demand for bear or cougar permits exceeds the number that can be sustainably harvested, and tags must be allocated by lottery or similar means.

Basic economic theory tells us that society clearly benefits from having regulated and sustainable harvest of wildlife, including predators. Hunting provides both monetary and nonmonetary benefits. Hunters receive recreational benefits. Rural and Indigenous communities often reap monetary gains from permit sales and hunters' expenditures.

Further, sustainable hunting does not preclude other public benefits from that resource by those that choose not to hunt and engage instead in wildlife viewing or photographic tourism. Given these societal benefits, sustainable harvest of wildlife should be allowed unless that harvest inflicts quantifiable costs that outweigh those benefits. The real issue is not whether hunting reduces wildlife conflict. It is how society weighs the costs and benefits of these activities among various stakeholders and users.

### A push for sustainable hunting

The first and most obvious reason to halt or change harvest of a species is if that harvest is unsustainable. In North America, the unregulated and unrestrained market hunting of wildlife in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century provides a cautionary example. However, our understanding of wildlife ecology and wildlife management has grown immeasurably since market hunting threatened many species in North America. Indeed, the past hundred years or so have seen numerous examples of species being brought back to healthy populations through effective regulation and management led and funded largely by hunters. Well-publicized examples include wild turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*), wood ducks (*Aix sponsa*), elk

(*Cervus canadensis*) and white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*). Outside North America, examples include white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*) in Africa and markhor (*Capra falconeri*) in central Asia.

Today, black bear populations continue to grow and expand across North America, despite hunting seasons in over 35 states and 12 Canadian provinces. They now occupy their greatest range since a low point in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Regulated hunting clearly can occur in a manner that provides for stable or growing black bear populations throughout their range. According to some researchers, hunting has even contributed to the growth of bear populations.

Evidence from all over the world shows that regulated hunting can take place in a way that does not negatively affect wildlife populations and in many cases provides tangible benefits in the form of habitat or population management. The value of sustainable use of wildlife for humans and for wildlife conservation is recognized by a variety of entities, including [The Wildlife Society](#) and the [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#).

Arguments against sustainable use of wildlife rely on value claims rather than evidence claims. In general, these take the form of arguments asserting that hunting wildlife is cruel or questioning the moral impact of harvesting animals for pleasure. The full argument in this case must be that the moral impacts on society of allowing hunting offset the clear and quantifiable benefits of that use.

These arguments seem dubious at best. Although harvest with a modern rifle or bow clearly is not painless, it is difficult to argue that a hunted animal suffers any excess pain or distress compared to others in the population that die by "natural" means such as starvation, disease, predation or conflict with other wildlife. In the absence of regulated hunting, mortality may increase from non-hunting human factors, including vehicle strikes or euthanization after being involved in conflicts with humans, or from symptoms of overpopulation, such as malnutrition or disease. The public may come to view wildlife as a pest rather than a resource, and issues such as illegal or retaliatory killing may increase ([DeStefano and Deblinger 2005](#)).

In these cases, the animal is seldom used by people, and it is difficult to manage impacts on the





population. If there is no excess pain or distress for a hunted animal compared to other mortality and the animal is less likely to be wasted, then it is difficult to argue that hunting represents a moral blemish on society.

### The cost of hunting bans

Elimination of hunting imposes real and quantifiable costs in the form of lost opportunity to participate (including for the 30,000 black bear hunters in California that would have been affected by SB 252) and lost income for state agencies, rural communities and outfitters (Southwick Associates 2018). In 2018, hunting guides and outfitters in British Columbia filed a lawsuit to recover damages to their business due to a ban on grizzly bear hunting in that province. Would black bear hunters in California or houndsmen in Nevada have cause for a similar action?

The case for sustainably hunting predators such as bears can—and should—stand purely on the benefits to those members of society that engage in the activities. Hunting may provide further benefits in the form of reduced human-wildlife conflict or direct income to operators. However, proving those benefits

should not be necessary to implement or maintain sustainable wildlife use. As a society rooted in individual liberty, citizens should be allowed to engage in activities according to their individual will and ethics unless such activities impose negative impacts on society. The burden of proof should be on opponents to show quantifiable costs to society if we are to deny the benefits of a regulated harvest to those who engage in it. Management agencies have a **responsibility to ensure harvest is sustainable**, and hunters themselves are responsible for maintaining ethical standards.

The North American Model clearly states this principle, but it applies anywhere in the world where sustainable use of wildlife resources can benefit society. ■



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