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February 2007

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## Nevada News & Commentary Predators - Mule Deer & Desert Sheep Populations

By James "Mike" Laughlin

Nevada - In 1867, D.C. Wheeler trailed a band of domestic sheep from Oregon to western Nevada. Since that time, there has been some type of predator control conducted in and around sheep herds in Nevada. In 1927, there were reported to be 1,200,000 sheep and 400,000 beef cattle in the state. Each stockman or groups of stockmen fought their own predator problems. After World War One, the federal government took over the predator program. Under the Biological Survey, professional hunters were hired to pursue coyotes, bobcats, and mountain lions state wide. In 1939, 93,000 coyotes were reported killed throughout the state of Nevada. Counties also paid bounties on coyotes and lions. The longhair fur industry became profitable and private fur trappers harvested many coyotes and bobcats.

In 1946, the federal government began to use sodium monofluoroacetate, a toxicant-called 1080. This poison was tasteless, odorless, and colorless and highly selective to canines. It proved to be the single most effective tool ever used to suppress coyote numbers. 1080 was injected into sheep or horse meat. These baits were placed in coyote runways. Also, about this time, the cyanide getter was used to a real advantage taking large numbers of coyotes. Steel traps and head snares were also used. Deer numbers were very high statewide and deer tags could be purchased over the counter. There were also lots of upland game birds.

In 1962, Rachel Carson published the book "Silent Spring" which brought worldwide attention to the use of pesticides. Starting from the publication of this book, the environmental movement was launched throughout the world.

In 1972, President Nixon banned the use of all toxicants (poisons) by executive order. He was soliciting the support of environmentally concerned voters. With the loss of toxicants in the Animal Damage Control program, coyote numbers began to increase dramatically. Coyote predation upon newborn range calves became a

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real problem in many areas of Nevada. Cattlemen, along with sheep men, backed the predator control efforts in the state.

The federal government launched into a non-toxic predator program. A large amount of federal money was appropriated and spent in an attempt to prove that the use of non-toxic control tools could replace 1080, cyanide getters, etc. The use of helicopters to shoot coyotes from the air was initiated in Elko, Nevada. About this same time, use of fixed-wing aircraft, which had been used before to hunt coyotes, was also increased. Longhaired fur prices went sky high and fur trappers were out in force after coyotes & bobcats. The Animal Damage Program also employed 3 to 4 mountain lion hunters with dogs, who pursued mountain lions statewide, year around. Most of the mountain lion depredation calls occurred on or near domestic sheep ranges. With the removal of many coyotes and mountain lions by the Animal Damage Control program and private fur trappers, mule deer numbers began to rise dramatically.

In the late 1970s, the predator control program shifted from Department of Interior to the Department of Agriculture. Federal funding began to dry up. The BLM and U.S Forest Service began to clamp down on predator control activities on lands they administered. Law suites by environmental groups filed against grazing allotments and Federal and State agencies were initiated throughout Nevada. The Nevada Department of Fish & Game became concerned about the environmental community and about lion numbers and implemented a quota system by hunting units.

Domestic range sheep numbers, in the late 70s, began a decline statewide and therefore predator control activities declined. Consequently, mule deer population numbers began to go down.

I feel that, through all of this, the Nevada Department of Wildlife, for about \$30,000 a year, got virtually a free ride in the predator program administrated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and their cooperators. Since this time when domestic sheep numbers fell and predator control activities diminished, mule deer numbers have steadily decreased.

The Nevada Department of Wildlife has attributed the decline of deer herds with such factors as over-grazing by livestock, drought, over-winter mortality, fire, longhair fur prices, gas prices going up, etc. Never once did I ever hear a statement by a Nevada Department of Wildlife biologist to the fact that predators may have made a big impact upon Mule deer and Desert Sheep populations.

It is my prediction that mule deer and desert bighorn sheep numbers may never come back to the levels of the

“good old days” because predators have a free roll in Nevada today. The Nevada Department of Wildlife continues to be “in denial” concerning the impact of predation on Nevada Mule Deer and Desert Sheep populations throughout the state.

*James “Mike” Laughlin is a (Retired) Supervisory Wildlife Biologist for the U.S Department of Agriculture & U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. He has a Bachelor of Science Degree in Wildlife Biology from Arizona State University. He worked for 31 years in 9 Western states, Mexico, and Provinces of Canada. You can reach him at: [mikelaughlin@hotmail.com](mailto:mikelaughlin@hotmail.com)*

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