

# The High Cost of Predation

by

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In earlier MDF articles, I discussed the biological costs of predation, but there are economic and social costs, as well. Before we consider what a mule deer is worth, though, we need to understand how Fish and Game agencies are funded, especially here in the West. Most state wildlife departments do not receive general fund appropriations from their respective legislatures. Instead, Fish and Game agencies are funded almost exclusively by hunter licenses fees and federal excise taxes on hunting equipment under the Pitman-Robertson Act. The federal government then allocates P-R funds back to the states based on their area, population, and the number of hunting licenses they sell. There is also a requirement in the Pitman-Robertson Act that all hunting license fees must be earmarked for exclusive use by state wildlife departments, if the state agencies are to receive P-R funds. Hunting license fees cannot be deposited in state general funds, but only into special accounts and those dollars spent only on wildlife.

These funding mechanisms, along with independent wildlife or game commissions, were established at the birth of modern game management to take politics out of wildlife management. If you think things are bad today, just imagine how it would be if wildlife had to compete with starving orphans or highway projects for state general funds each and every year. This is also why state legislatures have delegated most wildlife regulatory powers to independent commission or boards appointed for fixed terms by state governors. So what this means is that if you do not buy a hunting license, or guns, or ammo, you do not support wildlife management in your state - - only state agencies manage wildlife,

federal agencies manage habitat - - except for ESA and treaty species, such as migratory waterfowl.

Moreover, without non-resident hunter license fees, many state wildlife agencies would be forced to close their doors. Take Montana for example. Non-resident big game hunters pay over 90% of the hunting licenses fees collected by the state, while accounting for less than 10% of the deer and elk harvested each year. Montana then uses those non-resident fees to subsidize its sport fishing and non-game programs, all of which do not pay their own way. This is true in most other states - - big game hunters, not fishermen, are the only people who pay their own way. So if predators lower game numbers and force state agencies to reduce hunting quotas, then hunter license revenues fall. This, in turn, forces wildlife departments to either cut back on staff and programs, or to raise the cost of hunting licenses.

Which brings us to how much a mule deer is worth. Surprisingly, there is little hard data on this subject and the available numbers are all over the place. Some economists I have talked to have told me that a mule deer is not worth anything!! - - this may be one reason why people consider economics a “dismal science”. According to those economists, a mule deer is worth nothing because what we spend on the hunt is called discretionary spending. That is to say, if we did not spend our dollars chasing mule deer, we would spend them on going to the movies, or out to dinner, or on some other activity.

On the other hand, individual hunters have paid more than \$150,000 for a single governor’s permit to hunt mule deer!! A non-resident wishing to hunt mule deer in Montana must pay anywhere from \$343 to \$795 just for a general season

license, while a non-resident, general season mule deer tag in Idaho will cost you nearly \$400. It must also be remembered that hunting success for mule deer generally runs from 30% to 50%. So every mule deer harvested by non-resident hunters in Montana is worth from \$1000 to \$2400 to the state wildlife agency just in license fees. And this does not include the cost of guides, guns, ammo, food, lodging, travel, ATV's, horses, or taxidermy fees. Now, resident expenditures are generally lower, since they travel less and pay lower license fees, but we are all paying over \$3.00 a gallon for gas or diesel!!

So again, what is a mule deer worth? My best guess based on all the studies I have seen is that each harvested mule deer represents at least \$1,000 in economic activity. Recall in an earlier MDF article, I estimated that mountain lions alone are killing approximately 1.2 million mule deer each year. If those deer had instead been taken by hunters, that would have generated \$1,200,000,000.00 in economic activity, which translates into 60,000 additional jobs. In my home state of Utah, mountain lions are killing around 100,000 mule deer each and every year, while hunter success hovers near 33%. Now if hunters had the opportunity to take those 100,000 deer, instead of predators, the state could sell an additional 300,000 general season mule deer tags. At \$45 per resident licenses, the state is losing a minimum of \$1,350,000.00 per year, not counting non-resident sales. For those who think this may sound too optimistic, during the 1960's when widespread and effective predation control, actually held predators at low numbers, Utah hunters took home nearly 130,000 deer a year. For comparison, the 2005 mule deer harvest was under 25,000.

The social costs of predation are even higher, for hunters are the only people who actually pay to buy and maintain habitat, as well as actively opposing projects that damage the resource. And as every politician knows, hunters vote!! There are all sorts of opinion surveys telling us how the general public supports wildlife, but those studies are virtually worthless because they tally only accepted social norms, not what people actually pay to support wildlife.

Look at the Mule Deer Foundation, or the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, for instance. They have thousands of members, who have donated millions of dollars and countless hours, to support mule deer and elk and to preserve and enhance habitat. Now compare that with the Great Bear Foundation, which has been around for just as long, but which barely gets by - - and which you have probably never heard about until now. So while opinion poll after opinion poll shows that the public loves grizzlies, mostly those who do not actually live with the bears, virtually none of those people dig into their pockets and fund wildlife. And only hunters fund habitat protection. As you may have guessed, the Great Bear Foundation does not promote hunting as a management tool.

Utah recently developed a state management plan for wolves if those animals ever became established in the state, they will, and for when wolves will be removed from the Endangered Species List, they won't. At one of those meetings, a pro-wolf advocate got up and said, "so what if wolves decimate mule deer populations, hunting is on the decline, so who cares?" True, deer permit sales have fallen, as the state has had to institute a draw for general season tags - - but is this because mountain lions and other predators are severely impacting Utah's deer herds? or because no one wants to hunt mule deer anymore?

I just checked the statistics, and I would have to live to be 300 years old before I would have a reasonable chance of drawing the best, limited-entry mule deer permit in Utah! One hundred to one odds are common in other western states, as well. The idea that big game hunting is on the decline is equally false. Total license sales in the U.S. have declined, but that is entirely due to falling interest in bird and small game hunting. Big game license sales continue to increase year after year!! True, most of that upward trend is fueled by eastern whitetail hunters, who do not have to contend with either mountain lions or wolves, but mule deer license sales have fallen only because there are fewer deer to hunt, not because of a general lack of interest.

Which brings us to another problem, how do we recruit the next generation of mule deer hunters? I have a friend, who lived in Arizona for a number of years, and he was able to draw only one mule deer permit in 10 years. He has since moved to Nevada and there he has been luckier for he has drawn two mule deer tags in 10 years!! And I have not drawn a non-resident mule deer permit in Wyoming in the last 16 years. Even in southern Utah, a resident needs two preference points or more before he, or she, can draw a general season mule deer tag. Personally, as a young adult I would never have gotten interested in mule deer hunting if I had to wait years between permits. Some states have instituted special youth hunts but with ever increasing mountain lion populations, and with wolf recovery looming in virtually every western state, is that really a long-term solution to hunter recruitment?

The opposition's long-range plan is clear. First they run mountain lions down our throat, which they have done. Then they finish off our hunting

opportunities by promoting wolf recovery - - this time with the full support of the federal government under the Endangered Species Act. After that, it is a simple matter to ban hunting, since no one is “interested” in hunting anymore. Under the guise of “saving” elephants, Kenya banned hunting in 1977 and their wildlife populations have been in serious decline ever since. As hunting opportunities fall, there is less and less support for wildlife because hunters, and the economic activity they generate, are the only ones who support wildlife to any significant degree. Mountain lions, wolves, and other predators, and their supporters, simply do not, and will not, foot the bill.