

VTFSC Testimony

S.281

Senate Natural Resources and Energy Committee

2/25/2022

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My name is Chris Bradley; I am the President & Executive Director of the Vermont Federation of Sportsman's Clubs, an organization that has existed in Vermont since 1875 and which represents 55 member clubs across Vermont with approximately 14,000 dues-paying members. I am a registered lobbyist for the Federation, and I am an unpaid volunteer.

We began research into this bill by calling Colonel Batchelder, the head of the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Wardens, about the question of hunting coyote with hounds. We asked for his thoughts on just how prevalent it was that hounds were used to run coyotes, with specific attention to those situations where the hunter intended to kill the coyote with their hounds. My understanding was that while it was not an impossible occurrence, it is at best a very rare event where hounds are actually used to kill.

The reason behind that is simple: Most hounds are expensive breeds. These hounds are often considered to be part of the hunter's family; and the owners of these hounds do not want their animals hurt or to pay unnecessary vet bills which are never cheap.

To touch upon a point made yesterday by the Commissioner, and then further explored by Senator McCormack: Nature is cruel. Very seldom does an animal go peacefully to sleep and then never wake up. Put very simply, animals have four "modes": Sleep, eat, reproduce, and avoid being killed. Coyotes however really have no predators but humans, and they are skilled killing machines preying on every other animal in Vermont with the exception of bear, and most assuredly prey on deer as well as livestock and house pets.

We could delve into the fact that coyotes are not native to Vermont; that the appropriate term for such a thing is "invasive species", and that "invasive species" gets that name because it displaces existing species. Red fox shares the same habitat and prey as the coyote, and it is fact that the larger and more resilient coyote will force red fox out of prime habitat.

Interestingly, and due to the resilience and adaptability of the coyote, we are told that no matter what we do: The population will grow. If we do nothing it grows, and if we stress the population by hunting it grows. Given those choices, there seems no logical outcome except to eventually reach a point where the population level becomes intolerable. It will really only take one bad human-coyote interaction for that to occur. In the face of that eventuality, the committee is currently contemplating the removal of a tool that is proven to be effective. We do not agree that a ban is the best answer, but we fully agree and support that this tool needs to be better managed.

As witnessed by Maryland, one of the last states to see an incursion of coyotes in the US, *“Public opinion concerning coyotes evolves in a very predictable fashion. As coyotes are first seen in an area, they are novel and receive a great deal of interest. As population densities and associated nuisance complaints increase through time, public opinion quickly changes from novel fascination to “I do not want this animal in my neighborhood.” Few, if any other, wildlife species evoke as widespread and passionate disdain by the general public as coyotes.”* (Maryland, Dept of Natural Resources)

The bill at hand addresses the use of hounds on coyote. In considering that, this would be a ban on the use of hounds against an animal that is approximately the same size with a wild ability to defend itself.

If the hounding of coyote is considered cruel or inhumane or whatever else, then we must respectfully ask the question: Beyond any thoughts on the topic at hand, in Vermont a number of animals can be hunted with hounds. With the prolific nature of coyotes versus those other animals, what makes coyotes so special, UNLESS coyotes are being used as a convenient starting point in a progressive march towards banning the use of hounds in all hunting?

If indeed that is the case, then why should we not be exceptionally concerned over rabbit hunting with hounds, or bird hunting with hounds?

We ask for help understanding this. The use of hounds on a coyote predator is apparently “bad”. The use of hounds on other game is okay? Why should people who hunt bird or rabbit with hounds not be worried because they only hunt smaller animals; that they will not be labeled in due time as “cruel” or “inhumane”; that their “recreational” activity is not next; that their “tradition” will somehow be preserved?

There appears to be two primary issues with hounding that are problematic:

- 1) The fact that hounds can chase animals onto and/or across posted property where their presence, nor that activity, is wanted, and
- 2) The possibility that hounds may cause damage or harm by not being under control

The posted property issue is perhaps the most difficult. When the question of how a property owner protects their livestock from coyotes is brought up, “hazing” is one of the solutions offered, but that would literally involve around-the-clock vigils. Another suggested alternative is fencing and/or electric fencing. If those are the preferred and recommended solutions to someone that does not want coyotes on their property, then why is that not the same solution for property owners that do not want game chased onto or across their property?

If land is posted, then while the hounder will likely know his animals are now on posted land, that hunter knows that they must first seek permission from the landowner to enter the land to retrieve their property. When (and if) they are allowed to do so: It would be illegal for them to take any animal. This would be as opposed to a coyote only being chased across posted property.

We do understand. It is an unwanted activity on private land, and the landowner may strenuously object to that activity. The hunter however did not intend for that trespass to happen; it must be considered as an act of God/force majeure; it is in essence little different from coyotes chasing a deer on the same property; and while a nuisance and possibly very upsetting: In all probability there is no harm done to the property.

If there is an issue of hounds causing damage or harm: We believe the answer to that is found with proposed bill [H.250](#), which addresses a strict liability for injury caused by domestic dogs. We support that bill, as it places the onus on the dog owner to properly train their canines, it would also apply to hounders, and if the hounds do not behave: The dog owner is held financially accountable.

Wild animals should and must generally live in fear of humans, and it cannot be denied that our canine companions assist with that. It is in fact what many of them were specifically bred to do.

It is clear the committee is highly motivated to do something, and there is nothing like calling for an outright ban to get that point across. After listening to the testimony of Commissioner Herrick, we suggest that the committee consider allowing the Commissioner to follow through with his plan. That would entail changing this bill to the effect that coyote hunting with hounds will become a permitted activity by legislative authority; that this will be implemented based on the recommendations of the Fish & Wildlife Department, with the new version additionally directing the Fish & Wildlife Board to implement the required rules. All to occur within a reasonable time-period to allow proper implementation.

An outright ban on a tool that is effective at management, when the logical outcome of coyote in Vermont is an overabundance, simply does not make sense to us until an effort has been made to more effectively manage the activity of hounding coyote, to include strict penalties for non-adherence.