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BIOLOGICAL SURVEY IMPROVES PRACTICES IN PREDATOR CONTROL

Paul G. Redington, Chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey, U. S. Department of Agriculture, said to-day that the report of the special committee on problems of predatory mammal control, submitted to the American Society of Mammalogists, at its annual meeting in Philadelphia, Pa., May 12 to 15, which condemned field practices of the Biological Survey, came as a surprise, particularly, in view of the fact that in field methods of control the Biological Survey has made improvements that are definitely in line with many of the committee's proposals. Furthermore, he pointed out that investigation by the committee revealed little evidence of objectionable conditions in connection with the bureau's work in predatory animal control in recent years.

The committee's report charged that the Biological Survey in the control of the larger predators, such as the mountain lion, the wolf, the coyote, and the bobcat, particularly the coyote, has operated for the destruction on a large scale of other and valuable wild life, including fur animals.

The Biological Survey, by authorization of Congress, has been engaged for more than sixteen years in cooperative work for controlling damage by the larger predators and by such noxious rodents as ground squirrels, pocket

gophers, and prairie dogs, Mr. Redington pointed out. Its methods of control have seldom been questioned by farmers, stockmen, and game administrators who see in the coyote a menace to domestic sheep, cattle, goats, pigs, and poultry and to many of the beneficial forms of wild life, such as deer, antelope, mountain sheep, and ground-nesting birds.

"Throughout the sixteen years," said Mr. Redington, "in which the Biological Survey has been engaged in this control work--which is one of its seven main functions--most of the coyote control work has been in the West. The resources of the Survey have been sufficient only for work in areas where damage to domestic stock and to valuable wild life has been great, and we are unable to meet many requests for extending the work.

"Coyote control methods include trapping, shooting, den hunting, and poisoning. Those members of the American Society of Mammalogists who are criticising our work have objected principally to the use of poison. They apparently believe that poison for the coyote--even when carefully used in accordance with methods developed by the Biological Survey--is destroying many of the true fur bearers, such as skunks, badgers, martens, and minks.

"In order to satisfy objectors that its methods are not unduly destructive, the Biological Survey proposed last year a joint investigation by the Society and the bureau. This was carried on in the Western States in the last six months by five qualified biologists of the bureau and by four members of the Society not connected with the Biological Survey, representing its special committee on problems of predatory mammal control.

The Survey had been accused of employing irresponsible men, of indiscriminately scattering poison throughout the country, and of killing many animals other than the predators. The investigators found, however, that responsible men are being employed, that there is little evidence that true fur bearers are being killed in any considerable numbers, and that in general poison is so placed as not to endanger the smaller fur bearers.

"As a matter of fact, the use of poison has been decreased during the past two years. Furthermore, at a conference of our field men engaged in predatory animal and rodent control, over which I recently presided in Denver, the matter was discussed and it was agreed that the use of poison could be even further curtailed in the future. We are also undertaking laboratory analyses of the stomach contents of the coyote and other predators to supplement findings that have been made for years in examinations by our leaders and hunters in the field, and this summer we will establish a branch laboratory in the West. These changes are understood to be in accordance with the views of the Society's committee.

"It is fair to say that those members of the Mammal Society who have been criticizing the work of the Biological Survey recognize that some control must be effected, though they apparently believe that fewer men be employed and that trapping and shooting should immediately be substituted for poisoning. Bureau biologists who investigated the trap and poison line situation in the West last winter are of the opinion, however, that with careful use of poison,--as has been the rule-- the killing of coyotes by poison is not only more humane than using steel traps, but does not result, as has been charged, in the destruction of many other animals. Instructions to our hunters are specific that every possible safeguard must be thrown around the use of poison, and knowledge of the character of the men employed indicates that there has been little careless work.

"We are sincerely desirous of meeting criticisms fairly and squarely, and many members of the Mammal Society whom I met in Philadelphia indicated their belief that we are making the improvements they have been urging. We shall diligently pursue our investigations as to what is happening on the trapping and poison lines, and shall be glad to have the Society's committee on problems of predatory mammal control send out their own investigators. Their constructive suggestions to us as to improvement in the methods of taking these animals will receive hearty and sincere consideration.

"We are not working for the extermination of any species of predatory animals or rodents. We seek only such reasonable control as will keep to the minimum the damage they do to farmers and stockmen and to beneficial forms of wild life. Moreover, it is inconceivable to many who know the habits of the coyote that this wily animal can ever be exterminated. In many areas in the national forests and parks, on Indian reservations, and on other public lands the Biological Survey is doing absolutely no work for the control of either predators or rodents and is planning none.

"Many private trappers have been opposed to our control work because the pelt of the coyote in recent years has come to be a valuable fur. The Biological Survey annually employs approximately 300 men who use poison for a period of less than five months late in fall and in winter; but it was estimated after a careful canvass by our field men last year that more than 8,000 individuals were poisoning fur bearers, without any supervision whatsoever. At the Denver conference of control workers, I met representatives of the American Raw Fur Trade Institute. These men agreed to use their best efforts to influence those fur houses that have been advertising poison for sale to discontinue the practice. They also expressed confidence in the work of the Biological Survey and agreed to seek the enactment of State laws to prevent the use of poison in taking wild animals, except under the supervision of the Biological Survey or of some responsible agency of the State governments."