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Tom Saler: End wildlife-killing contests in Wisconsin and around the country

By Tom Saler | guest columnist Jan 10, 2019

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The first thing you notice are the smiles. Toothy smiles, goofy smiles, ear-to-ear grins announcing the thrill of victory. Next, you notice the bodies, some hanging from the back of a pickup truck, some piled high in a trash bin, others displayed tidily before a camo-clad group preening for a social media post.

Trophy hunting, it turns out, is not confined to taking down big game on the great plain of the Serengeti. In 48 states — including Wisconsin — it is legal to organize and participate in wildlife killing contests for the sole purpose of, well, killing. Under-the-radar competitions — 16 are estimated to be held throughout the state in coming

months, according to the Humane Society of the United States — often are sponsored by local bars or businesses hawking products used in the killing, like telescopic rifle scopes or the electronic distress calls of the young and injured that lure animals into shooting range.

Winners receive cash and prizes and perhaps most importantly, bragging rights. Some killing-for-fun tournaments have children's divisions as well. Coyotes and foxes are the usual targets, but wolves, turkeys, mountain lions, crows, pigeons, groundhogs, opossums, prairie dogs, squirrels, and rabbits may also find themselves in the crosshairs.

Tournament organizers sell the competitions as recreational fun, but offer no scientific evidence that the indiscriminate killing spares livestock or succeeds at lasting population control.

According to Adrian Treves, a professor at UW-Madison's Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, assertions that wildlife killing contests reduce losses for livestock owners “is completely unsubstantiated, and the scientific evidence suggests otherwise.” In a recent interview, Treves told me that coyotes have “amazing biology, they bounce back and compensate for losses. If humans kill alphas or some adult helpers, the pack may split into two and you might get two breeding pairs where there was only one. In the long run, that could actually lead to having more coyotes.”

Wolves have similar social systems, although their populations rebound more slowly.

Robert L. Crabtree, founder and chief scientist at the Yellowstone Ecological Research Center, concurs with Treves' assessment. “It cannot be overemphasized how powerfully coyote populations compensate for population reductions,” Crabtree wrote in a recent scientific opinion letter to Project Coyote. “Although removal of offending individuals may temporarily alleviate predation rates on the protected species, the alleviation is usually short term and has long-term side-effects that can result in increased predation rates and increasingly ineffective control activities.”

Wildlife killing contests exist because organizers reveal them only on a need-to-know basis. And with good reason. “If the public were informed, there would be an outcry,” says Treves. “It's a violation of the public trust doctrine and probably leads to other

illegal activities, like poaching wolves.” Multiple studies also have linked violence toward animals with violence toward women and children.

Wildlife-killing contests can be banned by the state Legislature, and Wisconsin residents opposed to the gratuitous killing should pressure Gov. Evers and their representatives in the Assembly and Senate to take that action, post haste.

Notably, some hunting groups also oppose wildlife killing contests, fearful that the pointless bloodlust the competitions reveal will soil them as well. It’s easy to see why.

When the competitions conclude, when the carcasses have been counted and weighed, when the prizes have been awarded and celebratory inebriants consumed, you see the victims dragged across muddy fields and tossed to the ground, their twisted bodies oozing a deep red against a fresh-fallen snow. In time, the physical stain will wash away. But for a civilized society that values decency and compassion, the moral stain will remain for as long as recreational killing is allowed to continue.

“Wild animals never kill for sport,” wrote the English historian James Anthony Froude. “Man is the only one to whom the torture and death of his fellow creatures is amusing in itself.”

For those Wisconsinites who do not find the torture and death of the innocent so amusing, it is time to stand up and be heard.

Tom Saler is an author, journalist, and executive director of the Madison-based nonprofit Compassion for Farm Animals.

Editor's note: A sentence in this op/ed has been modified to increase accuracy.

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