

Livestock

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I'm not lion

by Lee Pitts

A Digest Exclusive

What would you do if you were a government agency and you spent a lot of time and money to find an answer to a problem, but the answer turned out to be not the one you wanted?

You'd ignore it, of course!

Too hot to handle

During the 1960s, hunters in California were upset about declining deer populations. In response, the Fish and Game Department, Park Service, Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management cooperated on a study to determine why deer populations were shrinking. They selected an area for their study in eastern Fresno County of California, which at one time during the 1950s was home to 17,000 deer. Known as the North Kings deer herd, its size 30 years later had been reduced by 90 percent.

Right away it was clear that fawn survival was the factor that had reduced the herd to 1,800 members. The experts knew that each doe should produce 1.6 to 1.8 fawns per



year, but of those 170 fawns per 100 does, only 30 were living to reproduction age. Habitat factors were assumed to be the major factor contributing to this loss, such things as inadequate food and cover, water and space. The governmental agencies got involved under one condition . . . they demanded that the issue of predators *not* be considered. That would have been a political hot potato!

Deer diary

Donald Neal was one of the research wildlife biologists who worked on this project. Before retiring, he spent 34 years studying wildlife and livestock interactions; 18 of those years were spent working on this study. He insists that he came to the study with no preconceived notions as to what was causing the rapid destruction of the deer population.

"First, we considered that recreation, logging, forest regeneration, hydroelectric development and livestock grazing were all having an impact on the North Kings deer herd. Deer are successional animals," says Neal, "that is, they do best in forests that are between new growth and old growth. So we burned, logged and seeded 32,000 acres of the 800-square-mile North Kings deer herd habitat to set back succession. We moved logging into the deer holding areas with good success. But the numbers of deer in that area continued to decline.

"Several members of our group," says Neal, "had the preconceived idea that it was livestock causing the problem. They thought that the livestock were competing with the deer for forage and that during the rapid fetal growth, the does were not getting adequate feed because of competition from cattle. So a major part of this study was to determine the influence of cattle on habitat."

Neal's team captured 200 does and equipped them with bells, rib-

bons and radio transmitters and mapped their migration routes with aerial photographs. They also radio-collared cattle. "We identified plant species that both deer and cattle preferred," recalls Neal. "What we found was that deer didn't really like cows and cows didn't like deer, but the cows were *not* altering the migration route of the deer. We found that cattle and deer both go every place but sort themselves out," said Neal. "Cows did not force the deer off the better feed. The deer tended to prefer the steeper, brushier north slopes and the cattle preferred the open, flat south slopes. We even went so far as to do stomach analysis of young fawns, and we recorded more than two and-a-half million bites of what the fawns were eating. In the end, we could *not* prove forage competition."

Even more perplexing to those who wanted to blame the cattle was that the death of the fawns was occurring throughout the year, not just in times of feed stress. "It was concluded," said Neal, "that cattle were not a major problem."

Framed?

But what was the cause? The team of investigators scrutinized fire, logging and livestock, but still could not find the culprit. "We looked at urban encroachment, powerline right of ways, water impoundments and road kills," says Neal. "There were no epidemic diseases wiping out the fawns, and what was even more mysterious was that no fawns were being found dead."

The mounting evidence pointed in one direction . . . but the government agencies and environmental organizations did not like the direction it was pointing.

Reluctantly, the Fish and Game Department finally allowed Neal's group to study the effect of predators in a 217-square-mile area. The next step was to capture newborn

fawns and equip them with radio transmitters. The fawns were located daily, and their radios transmitted their pulse rate. When a transmitter signaled that a fawn was dead, a search for the fawn started immediately.

"Dead fawns were usually found less than 12 hours after they died," says Neal. "When a dead fawn was found, a detailed examination of the carcass and the site was carried out to determine the cause of death. Tracks in the vicinity, method of kill, and size and distance between tooth punctures were used to determine the cause of death."

During eight years, from 1978 through 1985, 96 fawns were radio equipped and monitored. The fate of 89 of these fawns was determined through the first year of their lives. Of the 89 fawns for which the fate was known, only 34 survived their first year. Disease accounted for the deaths of eight fawns, and accidents killed two of them. Predators killed 45, more than half of the radio-equipped fawns.

The species of predator was identified in 37 of the 45 cases. It was determined that mountain lions killed 53 percent of the fawns, coyotes 16 percent, bears 10 percent and bobcats 5 percent. None of the fawns lost to predation were known to be sick or weak prior to being killed. Environmental groups cried "frame up," but the rates of death loss on the 98 fawns closely approximated the loss rate that had been occurring for 20 years.

Even after they were armed with this information, the Fish and Game Department was reluctant to do anything. During the 1950s there had been an end to bounties on certain types of predators, and in 1970 mountain lions became a protected population in California.

"The lions had their own political constituency," says Neal. "The media jumped all over me," he recalls. "There were letters to the

editor in conservation magazines about me and I was painted as some terrible person. And yet not once during our study did a conservation group that had attacked our results come along with us on a field trip to check our results. They didn't want to come out of the valley fog," the wildlife biologist contends.

Gully!

Meanwhile, the case against mountain lions was building. The wildlife groups contended that there were only three mountain lions in the entire 800-square-mile area, and three lions could not possibly wreak so much havoc in just one 217 square-mile region.

To determine the lion density, three mountain lions were radio equipped at first, and then 13 more. Keep in mind this was in only one-quarter of the total area where there were supposed to be only three lions total! "The 16 mountain lions were captured by tracking and treeing with dogs, tranquilized with darts, equipped with a radio transmitter and released at the capture site," says Neal. "The mountain lions were located each day and maps of their home ranges were recorded for four months." Before the study was concluded, there were more than 6,500 observations recorded on the 16 lions. From the study, it was conservatively estimated that 41 mountain lions, not three, were using the 800 square miles of the North Kings deer herd range.

"The conclusion of the study," says Neal, "was that predation was the largest source of fawn loss in the North Kings deer herd. The validity of this conclusion is supported by the close match between the disappearance of fawns from the radio equipped population and the herd as a whole. The elimination of mountain lion predation alone would reverse the downward trend in the herd if all other factors remained the same. No other single factor

would reverse the trend," says Neal.

"Our study indicated that mountain lion predation alone accounts for enough fawn mortality to prevent recovery of the deer herd from its present depressed level. Our monitoring work clearly shows that much of the conventional wisdom concerning mountain lion behavior is incorrect. It is clear that the present high number of mountain lions cannot be maintained without coming in conflict with humans."

How prophetic those words would turn out to be!

Is your pet missing?

"Livestock, pets and people are increasingly at risk as the deer population declines," said Neal. This is because of something called "prey switching." When there are no more deer for the protected mountain lions to eat, they will eat other things such as cattle. The menu of choice for lions is first fawns, then calves, adult deer and adult cattle. "One cattleman in this area lost \$22,000 in calves to mountain lions and was forced out of business," says Neal.

Further study indicated that the diet of the typical mountain lion in this area consisted of 61 percent deer, 18 percent small animals, 6 percent cattle, 4 percent pine marten, 3 percent porcupine, 3 percent mountain lion, 1 percent bobcat, 1 percent dog, 1 percent vegetation and 2 percent unidentified small animals. . . probably your pet cat!

Neal warns that mountain lions across the country are re-invading their old habitat. "All states are reporting that lions are increasing nationwide. In Wisconsin, mountain lions during the past two years have been reported in 40 of 52 counties," says Neal. "There have been 631 human/lion interactions between Fort Collins and Pueblo, Colo. In the city of Fresno, there have been five lion sightings within the city limits. In one incident, a lion went into a private home through a doggie door

and killed both the pet dog and cat inside the house. In one town, there have been 14 reported incidents of lions rummaging through garbage cans. In Chico, Calif., a trapper was called in to trap a lion on a golf course. He trapped one lion, but later was told it was the wrong one."

Postscript

So what has the state of California done about their lion problem? In their infinite wisdom, the voters of California last year approved \$30 million per year for 30 years for the purchase of habitat for mountain lions. We are talking here about habitat for one of the most adaptable animals in the world, found from the Yukon to Tierra del Fuego. An animal that can lose a litter and have another pair on the ground within 90 days. In a state with a \$14 billion deficit, nearly a billion dollars is to be spent acquiring homeland for a predator that is clearly not endangered and whose numbers are woefully underestimated.

At the meeting where all this information was divulged, a rancher, Louis Bergman, got up and warned the crowd, consisting mostly of college biology students, that the lions were a danger to small children and that something bad would happen soon if something was not done about them soon. The crowd of students scoffed at his warning.

Little did anyone in the room know that just a few hours earlier, within 100 miles of the spot where Bergman issued his warning, a 9-year-old boy was mauled by a mountain lion in the Gaviota State Park. The startled parents threw rocks to keep the lion from dragging their son away into the brush. The boy lived, and the park was closed while rangers searched for the deadly lion.

As I write this story the lion has not been found, and three animal rights groups are planning to protest the capture of the mountain lion.

Pond weed

by Lee Pitts

A Digest Exclusive

Last year, ranchers in the Fort Davis area of west Texas thought they had successfully fought back an attempt by the National Park Service to bring much of Jeff Davis County into the National Park Service.

The failed legislation would have changed park boundaries nationwide and in the Trans-Pecos region the original bill recommended adding 60,000 acres to the Big Bend Park in addition to 60,000 acres the Park had just received. In addition, the neighboring Guadalupe Mountains National Park and the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River were also to be expanded by an unspecified number of acres.

By now this attempted land grab is a familiar story to ranchers along scenic rivers or next to national parks. When the original bill failed in Congress, ranchers breathed a sigh of relief.

But that was before the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service discovered endangered species such as "Potamogeton clystocarpus" . . . pond weed for short. It is a little known weed that grows in Little Aguia Creek, a small tributary in the Davis Mountains. It is also the latest plant proposed to be listed as an endangered species by the Fish and Wildlife Service. The USFWS says that the weed is being "threatened by cattle trampling and possible changes in water quality due to cattle." This is despite the fact that cattle have grazed the area for over 100 years.

When the federal bureaucrats couldn't get their hands on the land of private property owners by expanding the boundaries of the neighboring national parks, they resorted to something known as the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The "Cattle Free by '93" crowd have found it to be a very useful tool. Montana biologist and wolf advocate Pat Tucker recently said at a symposium

in Phoenix, "You can control a lot of human activity through the Endangered Species Act."

When the Fish and Wildlife Service held hearings to consider information about the "endangered" weed, more than 100 ranchers stormed the meeting room. Ranchers, townspeople worried about their local economies, and educators concerned about lost income from property taxes were jammed inside the meeting room and the overflow was pressed against the windows outside the meeting hall.

West Texans presented nearly four hours of scientific facts and testimony as to why the pond weed should not be designated as "endangered." Only one speaker spoke in favor of the designation.

Why was such a diverse group of people so concerned about pond weed? Because the Endangered Species Act of 1973 provides for possible land acquisition to protect the specie in question, and when the endangered specie exists on private property, the recommended action is acquisition of that property. But it was clear from the outset of the meeting that it was not the intention of the USFWS to merely protect the pond weed. "It is their policy," says Ben Wallis Jr., "to remove as much of the nation's land as possible from the ownership and control of private individuals to that of the federal government, while at the same time placing much of the nation's land into non-productive status."

"Although the Endangered Species Act of 1973 was intended to be used as a shield, actions by the USFWS have seen the act used as a sword. The USFWS is more interested in listing the land than in listing the species," says a group known as the Davis Mountains Trans-Pecos Heritage Association.

This group was formed in March 1989 when area residents first joined together to prevent the National Park Service from drawing their land into the park system. Members of the

organization represent over 5 million acres of privately owned land. They strongly support practical preservation of the environment without government intervention and the needless expenditure of tax dollars.

During the meeting to discuss pond weed several ranchers addressed the issue. Rick Davis, who owns property in the area, asked the Fish and Wildlife representatives in attendance if any of them knew where the Little Aguia Creek was. No hands were raised. But Phil Clayton, the state botanist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the pond weed "appeared to be in imminent danger of extinction," although he admitted "we don't know everything about this species and are the first ones to admit it."

Rancher Frank Pollard told the local newspaper, "I think other questions are bigger than the pond weed, such as government intrusion into private property. The primary issue," he said, "should be the government's infringement on freedom and how the bureaucracy does its job."

Jim White, who has extensive ranch holdings in the area, stated the ranchers' case clearly. "Ranchers have proven to be responsible caretakers of the land and its natural resources and we do not need the government telling us how to manage our lands. Our livelihoods have come from this land and our well being has depended on how prudently we manage the resources of nature.

The members of the Trans-Pecos Heritage Association are naturally leery of any newcomers to the area who want to come in and lock up their land. They are particularly concerned about the Nature Conservancy. "They are nothing more than a smokescreen for eventual acquisition by the state or federal government," says the group. "Of the 200,000 acres the Nature Conservancy has acquired in Texas, over 90 percent has been conveyed to the government.