

Coyote bounty impact harmful

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Just more than a year after Saskatchewan caught the nation's attention as the bastion of backwardness by organizing a gopher derby, it's back in the news -- this time for placing a bounty on coyotes.

It may have escaped the notice of Agriculture Minister Bob Bjornerud that coyotes are much more adept than are .22s at dealing with a problem of excessive gophers, but this misplaced priority didn't escape the notice of those who actually study wildlife in this province.

Lorne Scott, head of Nature Saskatchewan, was taken by surprise when he heard of the new bounty. Darrell Crabbe, executive director of the Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation, suggests coyotes are probably much less of a problem than what the minister suspects.

"Coyotes play a very important role in the health of the ecosystem out there in many places," he said.

Mr. Scott and Mr. Crabbe both suggest the government would have been better off to allow some RMs the luxury of opting out of the coyote bounty. Certainly, those RMs that suffer from an overpopulation of gophers -- these make up the majority in southern Saskatchewan -- would quite likely appreciate the opportunity to opt out.

But even those RMs with an overabundance of coyotes would be wise to consider how it came to be that there are so many of the predators in their districts. Populations of coyotes, foxes, badgers, hawks and owls all are closely tied to the abundance of their food supply. In Saskatchewan, that abundance is typically reflected in the rodent population and the province has struggled since its early settlement days to control these rodents.

One can be sure that, if there is an abundance of coyotes, it isn't an oversupply of calves and lambs that's led to the population explosion. Any effort at a large-scale coyote eradication program, such as the \$20-a-head bounty now offered by the provincial government, is bound to do much more harm than good over the long haul.

The province stepped into this delicate balance between predator and prey when it opted a few months ago to allow the use of higher doses of strychnine to control gophers. While this was an understandable decision, given the severity of the gopher problem and the enormous economic impact they have on agriculture, it came with risks.

When predators eat the sick or recently dead remains of the gophers, they, too, can be poisoned. This threat against the critters at the top of the food chain is great enough that, for generations,

Saskatchewan people have recognized the danger of increasing the concentration of poison.

Adding to this the threat an ill-considered bounty -- so ill-considered that it wasn't apparently discussed with those organizations most closely attuned to the natural balance -- would seem to be reckless over the long term.

What Saskatchewan needs is a much more comprehensive program to compensate producers for losses they absorb from wildlife. Far better to pay producers compensation for the carcass of an animal they've lost to a predator (or even for a reasonable facsimile of a carcass if the remains can't be found) than to pay a bounty on animals that, in all likelihood, are doing more good than harm.

If a program is in place that more closely compensates for the real losses that producers must absorb because of nature, perhaps the connection between predator and prey would become more obvious to those officials who are quick to come up with cash for a bounty.

And it wouldn't hurt to have those officials and producers, who are so quick to pick up their guns, consider what it does to the reputation of Saskatchewan on the national stage when one year they hold a derby to shoot gophers and the next there's bounty placed on one of that pest's main predators.

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