

A History of the Animal Damage Control Act

Liz Finch

Southern Utah University

HIST 6820: History of the National Parks

Ryan Paul

February 25, 2023

A History of the Animal Damage Control Act

Whether driven by an inherent fear of predators or a practical need to protect livestock from bears, coyotes, wolves, and mountain lions, these animals and others have been in the crosshairs for hundreds of years. As far back as 1630, the Massachusetts Bay Company offered one penny for every wolf killed. (Bacon, 2012) Today, bounties are still offered on coyotes in Utah and Wyoming, and in Idaho, a nonprofit covers costs for hunters and trappers who successfully harvest wolves. (Peacher, 2020)

It is one thing for individuals to kill problematic predators, and quite another for the government to wage an official and well-funded war against them. Nevertheless, the Animal Damage Control (ADC) act has provided for such action since 1931. ADC has its roots in 1885, when an analysis of the damage birds cause to crops led to education efforts to help farmers combat such destruction. Congress funded more research over the following years; one project in 1905 examined ways to control wolves and coyotes. Eventually, the government was providing increasingly larger sums for experiments on ways to control virtually all predators. (Hawthorne, 2004)

Much of the pressure for such activities came from ranchers justifiably angry about their sheep and cattle being killed off. However, this special interest group had so much clout as to almost remove any dissenting opinions on the matter. It was likely to appease this group that Congress passed the ADC in 1931, one year after the American Society of Mammologists spoke out against predatory animal control activities. (Bacon, 2012)

Control is a euphemism for the most distasteful aspects of the work of the Division of Wildlife Services (Wildlife Services), however, the agency created to enforce the ADC. Wildlife

Services' stated purpose is to solve the problems that arise from human-wildlife conflicts, opting most frequently for strategies that are "biologically sound, environmentally safe, and socially acceptable." (Bacon, 2012) Because the ADC gives Wildlife Services "broad authority for investigation, demonstrations and control of mammalian predators, rodents and birds," however, the agency can choose to use any tool at its disposal to do so. Often, Wildlife Services choose cruel methods such as leg-hold trapping, den hunting, poisoning, and shooting, which can be done legally from low-flying aircraft. (Hawthorne, 2004)

Granted, there has long been some vocal opposition to such methods. The Defenders of Wildlife, the Sierra Club, and the Humane Society of the United States all filed lawsuits in 1971 against the Department of the Interior demanding an end to the use of toxicants in predator control. (Hawthorne, 2004) That launched the ADC's status as something of a political football after President Richard Nixon signed an executive order a year later to ban certain poisons. In 1975, President Gerald Ford partially rescinded the ban; President Ronald Reagan revoked it completely when he took office. (Bacon, 2012) And the football game continues to this day.

Figures on the number of predators killed annually by Wildlife Services are hard to come by, but in 2009 alone, the agency destroyed more than four million animals including 115,000 mammalian carnivores. Coyotes took a big hit, comprising 90,000 of that number. (Fox, 2011) Yet Wildlife Services' methods are legitimized by the sheer number of state and county governments that choose to take advantage of incentives and contract with the agency. A few, like Oregon state and several California counties, have chosen to develop alternative community-based programs that rely on non-lethal deterrent methods such as livestock guard dogs and llamas. (Fox, 2011) These are the minority, however.

Fighting the ADC is also challenging, as the legislation contains no oversight measures or documentation mandates. While Oregon Congressman Peter DeFazio repeatedly attempted to implement oversight measures while in office, he was not successful. (Fajeau, 2020)

Complicating matters is the fact that the main supporters of the ADC and Wildlife Services are members of the powerful, well-funded livestock and agriculture industry.

Scientific evidence has not made the struggle to overturn or overhaul the ADC any easier. Although Wildlife Services and the ranchers ultimately want to decrease livestock depredation, the results of several studies have shown that extermination “often conversely results in more predation. . . Wildlife Services contributes to a positive feedback loop by which predators kill livestock, Wildlife Services kills predators, and new predators kill more livestock, ensuring Wildlife Services’ job security.” (Fajeau, 2020)

As Camilla Fox, executive director of Project Coyote, wrote in 2011, “We need a new paradigm in the way we coexist with native carnivores and other wildlife – one that recognizes their important ecological role and their intrinsic worth as beings who share finite space and time on this planet Earth.”

References

- Bacon, T. (2012). *The implementation of the Animal Damage Control act: A comment on wildlife services methods of predatory animal control*. Journal of the National Association of Administrative Law Judiciary, 32(1).
<https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/naalj/vol32/iss1/6/>
- Fajeau, L. (2020, December 10). *The Animal Damage Control act: Implementation, enforcement, and reform*. Foundations of Law and Society.
<https://foundationsoflawandsociety.wordpress.com/2020/12/10/the-animal-damages-control-act-implementation-enforcement-and-reform/>
- Fox, C. (2011, May 25). *80th anniversary of the Animal Damage Control act – no celebration for wildlife*. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/80th-anniversary-of-the-a_b_830645
- Hawthorne, D. W. (2004, October). *The history of federal and cooperative animal damage control*. Sheep and Goat Research Journal.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/icwdmsheepgoat/6/>
- Peacher, A. (2020, August 12). *State of Idaho funds controversial wolf bounty program*. Colorado Public Radio. <https://www.cpr.org/2019/04/09/state-of-idaho-funds-controversial-wolf-bounty-program/>