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NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

SESSIONAL PAPER NO. 5

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VALUE OF THE BOUNTY SYSTEM IN PREDATOR CONTROL

At the second session 1964 Council discussed briefly the desirability of re-introducing the bounty system, more particularly a bounty on wolves. Council asked for a paper on the effectiveness of the bounty system in predator control. This paper confines itself to the question of the usefulness of a bounty on wolves as this predator forms the principal threat to game and fur-bearing animals in the Northwest Territories.

The suggestion has considerable attraction for many people; it seems simple, on the surface it seems to solve the problem and it injects more (Government) funds into the trappers' economy. However, not all the arguments are favourable. This paper reviews them.

Prior History in the Northwest Territories

From 1924 to 1932, a wolf bounty of \$30 was paid in the Northwest Territories and from 1932 to 1933, \$20 was paid. Bounties were discontinued on wolves killed after August 1, 1933. They were resumed from 1936 to 194C during which period a bounty of \$5 was paid.

The indicated average take of wolves in the Northwest Territories during a fourteen-year period when bounties were paid was 1,004 per year. The indicated average take during a fourteen-year period when bounties were not paid was 580 wolves per year. The figures for the years when bounties were not paid relate only to pelts exported as the take and consumption within the Territories is unknown.

It is obvious that under the bounty system payments made on all wolves which would have been taken anyway are wasted. The above figures show that bounty was paid on 580 wolves annually which in the normal course of events would have been taken without the additional incentive of a bounty. At an average bounty payment of \$22, this represented an unnecessary annual outlay of \$12,760.

Difficulties

One of the difficulties with bounties is fraud. While it could never be proven during the period when bounties were in force in the Northwest Territories, there was reason to believe that some trappers were raising wolves in pits and maintaining them by feeding caribou meat. There is also the procedure of visiting wolf dens, taking the pups for bounty purposes and leaving the female to rear a new batch of pups for the following year's harvest. The other avenue of fraud is to smuggle pelts from an area that pays a lower, or no bounty.

Effectiveness of Bounties

Studies made in Canada and the United States have shown that the payment of wolf bounties is not an effective method of diminishing a wolf population.

In several North American areas where good statistics are available, wolf populations have not appreciably diminished in spite of a substantial bounty paid over periods such as fifty years. The explanation of this phenomenon lies in the facts of natural mortality among wolves. A female wolf gives birth to

one litter of seven pups annually, on the average, or 50 pups in her lifetime. In a level population of wolves only two of those 50 pups survive. From this statistic it is clear that death comes to wolves from natural causes at an appalling rate (appalling to wolves). By natural causes one refers to all causes other than those created by man, i.e., injury, disease, parasites and starvation. To be effective, a bounty system must get through this tremendous margin of wolves that nature has condemned and will kill. This is the reason that ordinary bounty systems have not reduced wolf populations, - because the killing is overwhelmingly upon the 1/8 that meet early death anyway and does not touch the tiny segment necessary for continuation of a level population.

In fact, there is reason to believe that the killing resulting from bounties may be beneficial to the wolf population because more food may be available for survivors and it reduces the likelihood of disease transmission.

Conclusions

The evidence indicates that bounties are ineffective as a control measure and are a waste of public funds. Where bounties are being paid in the United States and Canada, it is chiefly because they have considerable appeal to the public.

If bounties must be considered for sociological reasons, for example, as a disguised relief measure, it should be understood that this is the only purpose, as bounties are not sound as an instrument in wildlife management. There are more effective ways of controlling wolves.

In spite of the vast amount of time, effort and money which have been expended both in Canada and the United States on predator control, methods which are efficient and at the same time economical, require further development. Control through a well-organized wolf poisoning program undertaken by trained personnel would seem to be the best method developed to date.