

Coyotes and Sacrificial Lambs

By Glenda Eden

(Ontario Sheep News, March 2010)

AMHERST ISLAND — There's little doubt that coyote numbers and kills are up. How to address the issue is far from clear or simple.

Coyotes are Chris Kennedy's biggest management issue. "I lose more sleep over coyotes than anything else," says the Eastern Ontario sheep farmer.

While predatory behaviour is on the rise compensation for lost livestock has remained the same and does not cover the full monetary loss to the farmer. Predator compensation paid out by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) is based on market meat value and the \$200 that Kennedy receives for ewes doesn't cover the loss of a purebred animal or breeding stock. A bred ewe, he says, is worth much more than \$200. Kennedy has 900 breeding ewes on his Amherst Island farm west of Kingston.

A carcass must be provided to receive compensation and that is often impossible with lost lambs. Coyotes will take a lamb right out of the pasture and with a large flock, the farmer may not realize lambs are missing until he does a count at the end of the week.



"But, not all coyotes are a problem," he says.

Some pay little heed to livestock, living on whitetail deer, ground hogs and rabbits.

Hunting is a learned behaviour and pups learn to eat what their parents eat.

Some years are worse than others and Kennedy would dearly like to know why that is. There have been years when he has lost up to 10 per cent of his lamb crop. In 2009 he almost got through the entire summer with out any kills. His neighbour on the other side of the island, however, wasn't as lucky and lost lambs all summer long.

Many farmers use guard animals like llamas, dogs and donkeys to protect their flocks but even that seems not to work anymore, he says. Coyotes are becoming bolder and hunting in packs, which are overwhelming the guard animals.

He currently has 11 adult Akbash dogs and a litter of pups guarding his sheep. The large, lanky, white-coated dogs originated in Turkey and weigh between 90 and 120 pounds. The dogs worked great the first couple of years, he says, but coyotes are very cunning and have figured out how to deal with them. They'll lure the dogs to one side of the flock and take lambs from the other, he says.

He's personally not a big supporter of putting a bounty back on wolves and coyotes. "It's bad public relations," he says. He'd would rather see skilled hunters and trappers deal with the issue.

As vice president of the Ontario Sheep Marketing Agency, Kennedy was a member of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture's predator task force. Their report submitted to the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) and OMAFRA almost a year ago called for a number of legislative changes to deal with the problem but there has been no response so far, he says.

The two main things the OFA task force is asking for is compensation for farmers to hire hunters and trappers to deal with problem animals and the lifting of the ban on neck snares in Southern Ontario. Coyotes can be very difficult to trap and neck snares are the most effective. Hunters and dogs are also effective.

There is a third option he'd like to see but doubts it would be embraced in Ontario. Some jurisdictions in the U.S. use a baited lamb to target and poison problem coyotes. Administered by conservation officials, a poison collar is fitted to a lamb while the rest of the lambs are safely shut away. A marauding coyote then gets a mouthful of poison when it attempts to take the bait. It is a far better method he believes as it targets only coyotes which pose a risk to livestock.

Public opinion he expects will nix this new spin on the sacrificial lamb.

The Ministry of Natural Resources claims to have no money and OMAFRA pays only for kills. "We argue that it's more cost effective to pay for the removal of problem animals."

According to OMAFRA, in the 2008-2009 fiscal year, the province paid out \$1,292,921.48 in coyote/wolf compensation under the Livestock, Poultry and Honey Bee Protection Act for 5,964 farm animals killed or injured. That's up from \$950,775.10 and 4,563 animals in 2006-2007. Livestock included sheep, cattle, goats, horses and poultry.

Osgoode County farmer, hunter and trapper Paul Mussell says both of the two main task force recommendations would go a long way in addressing the problem.

He's not yet made up his own mind on the effectiveness of a bounty. Saskatchewan and Bruce County have put bounties into place, he says, and he'll wait to see how it affects numbers.

Coyotes are becoming increasingly bold in his county. Fifty years ago you'd see the odd coyote says Mussell. At a dairy farm near him, they took two dairy calves right out of the hutches and that kind of thing was unheard of until just recently. He believes several factors come into play including the natural cycle of the coyote population, their ability to live in close proximity to farms and urban areas, low fur prices and the availability of white tail deer. "There is no pressure or push back," he says of increased coyote numbers.

And just how low are fur prices? Mussell's father sent two coyote pelts to the North Bay fur auction and they didn't even sell.

In Osgoode it started out as a rural problem but the coyotes have now moved farther into the city of Ottawa and are making off with domestic cats and dogs. Mussell believes that just might be what it will take for government to pay attention to what farmers have been telling them for some time now.

Far from a local problem, coyote predation is, in fact, a North American phenomenon according to Brent Patterson, a research scientist with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources in Peterborough.

The coyote is not native to eastern Canada. Cultivation and development forced the much smaller western coyote to migrate east from the central plains and crossbreeding with the large eastern wolf in the early 20th century. Although people will argue other wise, these animals, though quite variable in size are hybrids and for the most part coyotes, Patterson says. Conditions just aren't suitable for the true eastern wolf in southern and eastern Ontario and they are rarely seen south of Highway 7. Migrating western coyotes managed much better. According to Patterson, the return of a bounty will do little to address the problem that farmers face with coyotes and livestock. Ontario lifted the ban in 1972 and in the 53 years it was in place there is no evidence that it made a difference in the coyote population. A bounty does not target the problem animals and the population density is too high, he says, they would quickly re-populate. The coyote was first reported in Lampton County in 1919.

Where management practices aren't effective in discouraging or preventing coyote kills Patterson believes money would be much better spent, at least in the short term, in targeted hunting of specific coyotes — the bad apples as it were. He'd rather see resources focused on areas where livestock losses actually occur and covering the costs of creating a network of skilled hunters who can deal with a problem coyote within hours.

In southern Ontario, trapping can be problematic and caution is necessary. Though the neck snare is effective it can't be used south of Highway 7, said Patterson. The coyote is difficult to trap using a foot snare or leg-hold trap and an inexperienced trapper may actually be educating the coyotes.

Coyote predation in urban areas is neither chronic nor inevitable, says Patterson. Prevention is effective and protecting pets, not leaving dog food outside and keeping garbage out of the way will discourage coyotes from sticking around.

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