

OPINION

## Killing bears and cougars isn't ideal, but the data is important

By THE DENVER POST EDITORIAL BOARD

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Matthew Jonas, Daily Camera file

A black bear sits in a tree in Boulder on Sept. 22, 2015. Colorado Parks and Wildlife is considering raising the number of bears and cougars it kills to boost the state's deer population.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife commissioners will consider at their December meeting hiring specialized contractors to kill bears and cougars in the Roan Plateau and Arkansas Basin areas to help the dwindling mule deer population in the area.

We would urge the commissioners to move forward cautiously with this plan to kill between five and 15 cougars and 10 to 25 black bears a year for three years in a small area of mostly private land north of Rifle, and an additional 20 to 30 cougars per year in a portion of habitat spanning from Leadville to Walsenburg and Salida to Pueblo.

This is an emotional issue. No one wants to see predators unnecessarily culled.

The beauty of Colorado's hunting programs is that it helps maintain the population of deer, moose, sheep, elk and many predators at levels allowing the rest of the ecosystem to be healthier. Hunters get to enjoy the sport and the spoils of their hunt knowing that they are helping the ecosystem and that their fees go to support a healthy habitat.

Wildlife biologist and zoologist Chuck Anderson of Colorado Parks and Wildlife said research has indicated that it isn't habitat encroachment from the oil and gas industry causing the decline, and at this point they aren't sure what the issue is. Given that hunting is already used to control populations, the culling proposal doesn't seem unreasonable.

The culling plan and the study it allows could provide useful data to help determine what is causing the decline, which could help with deer populations across the state. That makes sense to us.

According to the Piceance Basin Predator Management Plan Overview, mule deer in the area once known for an abundant and healthy population are struggling. Otherwise healthy fawns are failing to reach adulthood at significant levels. Scientists have collared fawns for eight years to study the impact and determined that loss of habitat is not a significant driver in these deaths. Around 44 percent of the fawns tracked have been killed by predators.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife is proposing the two separate geographic studies to see if reducing the cougar and bear population helps the fawns reach adulthood. Researchers like Anderson responsible for these areas take that mission seriously and wouldn't suggest culling the predator population in the area unless they felt it was necessary.

It would be a real shame if wildlife officials unintentionally harmed the cougar and bear population in the process. Denver Post reporter Bruce Finley reported that there aren't concrete estimates of those populations in the state or a sense of how population levels have declined or increased over the years. Predators are much more difficult to track and count than herds of deer and elk.

We would caution that in the absence of data indicating predator levels are out of control in the area, it seems plausible that loss of habitat to housing development and oil and gas development might be the real culprit here. That unfortunately is a much more difficult issue to address, and if the predator study fails, that could be used in an argument that more needs to be done to protect habitat.

The board will get the facts next month on this issue. Should members decide to move forward on this well-thought-out experiment, we hope that environmental advocates don't unnecessarily shut it down, as it would likely prove instructive for the rest of the state.