

Letters

British Columbia and its wolves

In his letter about British Columbia's wolf policy (*Oryx*, **22**, 48) Mr Walker suggests that opinions should be based on facts and should avoid 'error and misinterpretation', but he does not practise what he preaches. Instead he resorts to obfuscation and tactical evasion.

Firstly, no proper census of the wolf population in the province has been carried out, and estimates vary between 2500 wolves and 11,000 wolves, which averages out at 6300—hardly a basis for sound management.

Secondly, wolves have extended their range in the province, not because they have increased in numbers but because they are dispersing in the face of persecution. The wolf population is very unevenly distributed, some 98 per cent of the animals being found in the Skeena and Omineca-Peace regions (out of seven Resource Management Regions). Of these wolves, some 48 per cent are reportedly located in the latter region, where government control is most intensive: an 80 per cent reduction is the official aim—an euphemism for 100 per cent, which, if successful, would cut the province's wolf population by almost 50 per cent. So much for the statement that 'the total area in which wolves are being controlled . . . is less than five per cent of the province'.

Thirdly, leaving aside the question of the humaneness of shooting animals from helicopters, such indiscriminate killing breaks up the wolf's complex social system and its ecological relationships, with incalculable and possibly disastrous results.

Fourthly, funding other than from government sources, including a lottery, has been available, but such funds are technically used for back-up operations to government control programmes. For example, for the Kechika and Muskwa management programmes the Foundation of North American Wild Sheep pledged \$200,000 and the Guides and Outfitters pledged \$100,000. To say that such funding was not intended for 'wolf control' is a mere verbal evasion. In any case 'government sources of funding' means the taxpayer, who has not been consulted. On the contrary, whenever possible a veil of secrecy has

been drawn over these operations.

Lastly, all published plans and most public statements, although they pay lip-service to conservation, have made it clear that the real intention is to conserve prey species for the benefit of hunters, guides and outfitters, to which end wolf numbers will be reduced to whatever extent may be necessary to satisfy the demands of these influential minority groups; this is the real meaning of 'policies and strategies for the conservation and management of wolves or other wildlife'.

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At the risk of wearying *Oryx* readers I must reply to the letter by J.H.C. Walker of the Department of the Environment, British Columbia, relative to wildlife policies in this province (*Oryx*, **22**, 48). Mr Walker has attempted to justify excessive wolf control programmes in British Columbia by attacking the credibility of my article, while introducing a number of red herrings, which must be examined.*

Federal regulations indeed prohibit the shooting of wildlife from aircraft, as does the British Columbia Wildlife Act. However, British Columbia wildlife staff are given special permits to use aircraft.

It is patently ludicrous to suggest that 'Ms Harrison uses her own data'. Every statistic used in my article was obtained from a government source, either through official reports or in correspondence, and should be thoroughly familiar to a knowledgeable director of wildlife.

There is an ironic sequel. In April 1987, the BC Wildlife Branch announced that an area in south-eastern BC, just north of Montana's Glacier National Park, would be opened to wolf hunters and trappers for six months, from September. The public was assured that the programme would be implemented with the full approval of the State of Montana. However, scientists from Montana State University, who have for some years been studying 20–25 wolves that move

*This letter made many additional points similar to those in the letter above and has been edited to avoid repetition. Editor.

Letters

back and forth across the Canada–US border, expressed outrage, with a hint of lawsuits to come, when four wolves—three radio-collared and one ear-tagged, were killed by Canadian hunters. The Wildlife Branch forthwith closed the hunting season on 23 October and decided not to open the trapping season due to begin on 1 November.

Mr Walker reacts only in general terms to my criticism of black bear control, but does not volunteer specifics. Indeed, he finds himself unable to refute a single word of my observations. He also fails to clarify the point that ‘of the two people killed and others seriously injured in confrontations with bears’, all incidents occurred in remote areas of the province, and involved hunters and transients encroaching on bear habitats, including the surprising of females with cubs.

Meanwhile, wolves continue to be indiscriminately shot, trapped and poisoned in British Columbia—sacrificed to the lucrative trophy hunting trade. The BC Government has much to answer for in its rampant abuse of wildlife—but never more so when it fails to articulate its own policies with a sense of responsibility, honesty and accuracy.

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Round Island boa eats Serpent Island gecko

The article by Cooper and West (*Oryx*, **22**, 18–24) on radiological studies of Mascarene Island fauna, includes a radiograph of a Round Island boa *Casarea dussumieri* supposedly containing a Round Island gecko *Phelsuma guentheri* that it had eaten (Figure 4). The lizard is incorrectly identified; it is a Serpent Island gecko *Nactus (Cyrtodactylus) serpensinsula*.

The specimen of the boa and its prey are of interest since it provides us with a previously unreported food item, and suggests an unusual cause of death for this very rare snake. The boa was found freshly dead on Round Island, Mauritius on 13 March 1981 by John Hartley of the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust. I subsequently sent this specimen to John Cooper for post-mortem examination.

180

The snake, an immature with the characteristic overall orange-brown colour, was 310 mm in total length, of which 80 mm was tail. There was an obvious swelling where the snake had recently consumed a relatively large lizard. The lizard was removed and submitted to the British Museum (Natural History) where it was identified as a Serpent Island gecko (E.N. Arnold *in litt.* to J.E. Cooper, 30 June 1981). No pathological lesions were detected in the boa's tissues, but it was suggested that the large prey item may have induced cardiac failure or cerebral hypoxia because of prolonged pressure on major blood vessels (J.E. Cooper *in litt.*, 23 June and 7 July 1981).

This is the first known example of a Round Island boa preying upon a Serpent Island gecko, although it has previously been suggested as a likely food item (Bullock, 1986). Both of these reptiles are very rare Mauritian endemics. The boa is, as its name suggests, only found on Round Island although it was found on pristine Mauritius as well as some of the satellite islands (Cheke, 1987). Likewise, the Serpent Island gecko, or a closely related species, was found on the mainland (Arnold, 1980), but today is limited to Round and Serpent Islands.

The boa and the gecko are both nocturnal and difficult to census accurately, but their populations probably number in the hundreds, if not more. The populations are apparently healthy and reproducing well with many young animals. Nevertheless, these and the other reptiles on Round Island are very vulnerable and the introduction of exotic mammals or reptiles to the island could spell their doom.

References

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