

Don't condemn role of hunters

Now that the hunting season is upon us once again, it won't be long before somebody coughs up a rant on why hunting and hunters should be made obsolete by law. I'd like to offer a counter-argument that hunting and hunters should be actively encouraged. It would take a page of this newspaper to outline the economic benefits of hunting, but those emotionally opposed will dismiss economic arguments as irrelevant. What really matters to them is going to bed at night knowing that Bambi, the ducks and the coyotes are all safe in their beds, too.

I have lived in Calgary since 1946 and have hunted since I shot my first duck at age 12. During those early years of hunting gophers, hiking and riding horses all over land that is now Calgary suburbs, I don't recall ever seeing a coyote inside or even near city limits.

Even at calving time on Lindsay's dairy farm, which is where the Brentwood Shopping Centre now stands, we never saw a coyote. Those we did see while hunting were generally observed from the rear as they high-tailed it in fear. Today, coyotes follow people walking their dogs in neighbourhoods like Beddington. Coyotes den under people's porches in southwest Calgary. They no longer fear humans.

According to the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (IAFWA), and data provided by some provinces and the insurance industry, nuisance wildlife damage and wildlife-vehicle collision insurance claims in the five years ending in 2004 ran into the hundreds of millions.

In the greater Ottawa area, the deer population is growing so fast that crop depredation claims and animal-vehicle collisions are at an all time high.

In Calgary, hardly a week goes by without media reports of coyotes wandering the streets and attacking dogs. The argument that coyotes and deer were here first doesn't wash, based on my 50 years of first-hand observation.

We never saw coyotes close to the city and you would never have heard them howling, as I did one night three weeks ago, in the North Haven elementary school playground.

Provincial statistics confirm there are fewer hunters today than in 1980 when our numbers peaked across Canada, partly attributable to silly firearms registration legislation.

The increase in wildlife-vehicle collisions is growing. In 2001 in rural Alberta there were 10,468 wildlife-vehicle collisions, with five fatalities and 313 injuries.

In British Columbia in 1995 there were 284 such collisions with 280 injuries and four fatalities. In 2004, there were 406 collisions with 396 injuries and 10 fatalities. The province of Ontario recorded just more than 7,000 collisions in 1995 and in 2003, well over 13,000 collisions.

The deer population has exploded in Canada. As a boy, I roamed all over Nose Hill and never saw a deer. These days, they browse the neighbourhoods surrounding the hill.

What anti-hunters don't understand is that as hunter numbers decline, wildlife populations increase. That increases the risk of disease and starvation for deer,

more coyotes in the city, more wildlife-vehicle collisions and governments being forced to take other measures of population control.

When farmers, ranchers and insurers suffer increasing losses from deer eating crops or coyotes eating new-born calves, governments will have to act.

That could mean professional hunters retained by the provinces to cull wildlife populations. Instead of collecting money from hunters purchasing the various licences required to hunt, the provinces would be spending it to achieve the same results.

Statistics Canada, in a 1996 survey, reported that Canada-wide, 1.2 million Canadians spent more than \$823.8 million while hunting and kept more than 14,000 people employed.

The anti-hunters should think outside the Bambi box and encourage more hunting. At the same time, they should condemn politicians who perpetrated a cruel hoax on naive and frightened voters when they said firearms registration would keep us safe.

The only creatures safe from firearms in Canada today are the urban coyotes and the burgeoning deer, moose and other wildlife populations both inside and outside our various city limits.

Ron Wood is a former press secretary to Reform Party Leader Preston Manning and communications adviser to John Reynolds when Reynolds was leader of the Official Opposition and election campaign co-chair of the Conservative Party of Canada.