Wolf pelts on display at Wainwright, Alberta, near Buffalo National Park, circa 1910–1917.

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# Open Season

In the early days of Canada's national parks, managing wildlife meant killing most predators, a policy that devastated ecosystems. by Alan MacEachern

On a July day in 1915, two cars bounced along the Bow Valley Road in Banff National Park, bearing the men responsible for the park and indeed for the entire Canadian parks system. There was J.B. Harkin, commissioner of the National Parks Branch, the precursor to Parks Canada. There was his boss, Minister of Interior W.W. Cory, and Cory's son. And there was Jack Clarke, superintendent of Banff Park, and Howard Sibbald, chief game warden. The illustrious little motorcade happened upon a bear and her two cubs. "In about two minutes Mrs. Bruin was dead," shot by Cory Jr., the local *Crag and Canyon* newspaper would report with approval, since the bear was suspected of break-ins at camps along the valley. The cubs were captured and placed in the Banff zoo. "And the officials sure had some day," the newspaper reported.

We take for granted today that all wildlife is protected within national parks. But from the time Banff was created as the first national park in 1885 through much of the twentieth century, there were many exceptions. Predators were killed so that more desirable species such as elk and deer could flourish, wildlife populations thought to have grown beyond the park's carrying capacity were culled, and animals symbolic of Canadian nature were donated internationally. Over time such practices became unacceptable — in part because the parks service itself eventually developed and communicated the principle of the sanctity of wildlife within parks.

When the first national parks were created, wildlife was treated much the same inside their borders as out. The first visitors to British Columbia's

## Newspapers carried stories of predators skulking out of parks at night, wreaking havoc on livestock, and then slipping home.

**Hunters pose with a bear shot at Waterton Lakes in Alberta in the early 1920s.**

Glacier National Park, which was established in 1886, took potshots at bears from the windows of the Glacier House Hotel. CPR guidebooks to the parks contained accounts of the fine hunting to be found. In an initial attempt to develop policy, the Canadian government sent fisheries officer W.F. Whitcher to Banff in 1886 to assess the wildlife there. Whitcher recommended protection for animals, but only in terms of licensing the hunting already taking place. He also compiled a blacklist of animals to be killed on sight: wolves, coyotes, foxes, lynx, skunks, weasels, wildcats, porcupines, and badgers. If eagles, falcons, owls, hawks, loons, mergansers, kingfishers, or cormorants became too numerous, they were to be killed, too.

There was no need for Whitcher to defend his reasoning, which would have been perfectly apparent to anyone of his time. Predators terrorized prey in parks, livestock outside of parks, and sometimes humans themselves, so they deserved no less than death.

But as much as Whitcher's blacklist represented conventional thinking, the period also witnessed the rise of a competing point of view, one that saw the devastation of wildlife populations as inhumane or just inefficient. Two 1890s Royal Commissions, for example, decried the destruction of wildlife and called for sanctuaries and stricter hunting and fishing laws. The government's decision in 1890 to ban hunting outright in the national parks and to outlaw "only" wolves, coyotes, lynx, cougars, wolverines, and hawks was a small but measurable move in the direction of wildlife protection.

By the time the Parks Branch was established with J.B. Harkin as its commissioner in 1911, the parks system was already growing more appreciative — and more possessive — of its wildlife. Game populations were thriving in parks, and that was becoming one of the principle justifications for parks' existence. Free from the danger of predators, the game animals supposedly lost their fear of man, which was good for tourists who wanted to see them up close. And as they increased their numbers, they wandered outside the park, which was good for hunters who wanted to shoot them. Harkin became Canada's foremost public advocate for parks as wildlife sanctuaries.

The new branch tightened game regulations, maintaining especially vigilant enforcement against members of ethnic groups believed to be the worst poachers. For example, regulations at Banff were posted in Italian, German, and Polish; guidebooks, by comparison, appeared only in English.

But it was still open season on predators. Park wardens — usually former outfitters, guides, and trappers with a long-standing hatred of predators — were permitted to sell the skins of the blacklisted animals they trapped. This arrangement boosted wardens' salaries by ten to fifty percent, giving them every incentive to devote great energy to this part of their job. It also meant that unscrupulous wardens could run traplines for more valuable fur-bearers

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that were not blacklisted — such as mink. They knew that if they were caught with such a fur they could blame the death on the trap's undiscriminating nature.

With hunting banned and predators reduced, game sanctuaries soon became victims of their own success. Banff imported elk from Yellowstone National Park in the United States in 1920 and by mid-decade was so overrun that a ten-kilometre-long, three-metre-high fence was needed to keep them off the golf course. In the most spectacular Canadian conservationist initiative of the era, Buffalo National Park, near Wainwright, Alberta, was created in 1909 to restore the near-extinct plains bison. The park grew overcrowded so quickly that thousands of bison had to be slaughtered.

Biologists across North America were learning that trying to save one species without giving consideration to its broader ecology could yield unpredictable results. They took special notice of cases where predators had been hunted down only to have the prey population soar, pick clean the habitat, and then starve.

For Hoyes Lloyd, the civil servant with the exalted title "supervisor of wild life protection in Canada," the lesson was clear: "It is a law of nature," he wrote in a 1925 policy statement, "that the destroyer is also the protector." A key advisor to Harkin on wildlife matters, Lloyd grew convinced that the parks' predator policy must change. At his urging, the parks system in 1924 reviewed which animals were still being killed and found that the wardens' blacklist was not much different than Whitcher's had been forty years earlier: wolves, coyotes, mountain lions, weasels, wolverines, crows, magpies, and a variety of hawks. Some superintendents were even targeting new species: eagles at Waterton Lakes, Alberta, owls at Revelstoke, British Columbia, blue herons at Buffalo. Beginning in the mid-1920s, Lloyd bombarded Harkin with the latest ecological evidence in support of letting predators live.

Harkin was receptive to this new thinking but could not ignore the interests of human stakeholders. Livestock owners and hunting groups still carried a great deal of weight. They thought in terms of good and bad animals, and it was clear in which camp predators belonged. What's more, Harkin had to deal with the antipathy of Westerners who believed the parks were run by Ottawa desk jockeys who didn't consider or understand local conditions. A 1926 *Crag and Canyon* article summed up this attitude: "J.B. Harkin, Commissioner of Parks, is registered at the Banff Springs Hotel. Who the hell cares?"

Harkin's solution was to tighten the predator policy incrementally. He informed staff in 1924 that only wolves, coyotes, wolverines, and, later, mountain lions were to be killed — and not for controversial ecological reasons, supposedly, but because "so many people are interested in seeing the various kinds of wildlife within the Canadian National Parks...." In 1928, he decreed that wardens could no longer keep the proceeds from predator pelts they brought in. He also forbade them from trapping, demanding that they rely strictly on their skill with a gun. Harkin defended the parks system's new policies by declaring lamely, "Wildlife is given absolute protection with the further exception that war is waged on predatory animals to a reasonable extent...."

Yet even Harkin's compromise measures drew fierce opposition. Fish and game associations and provincial authorities warned that predator populations were skyrocketing. Newspapers across Canada carried stories of predators supposedly skulking out of the parks at night, wreaking havoc on livestock, and then slipping home. The *Crag and Canyon* grumbled, "The fatheads in Ottawa pose as knowing more than the men who tramp the mountain trails during the winter time." Many parks staff opposed the new direction, too; some wardens likely carried on as before. Among the protesting voices was Maynard Rogers, superintendent of Jasper, who wrote Harkin that "ecologists and other 'gists' to the contrary, the policy of preventing wardens from trapping coyote is causing a most serious, and in my opinion, shameful waste of our wildlife."

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**Hunter John Wilson poses with a lynx killed in Banff National Park in 1906. The cats were on a long list of animals considered pests and shot on sight.**

The Parks Branch answered its critics both inside and outside the parks by offering a new, fundamentally contradictory policy: Parks staff would continue to kill predators at a respectable rate even as the branch would communicate the most up-to-date scientific evidence that predators were an intrinsic component of a healthy natural system.

It was Harkin's successor who put predator policy on more solid scientific footing. After Frank Williamson took over as commissioner in 1936, he made it clear that he considered the old position outdated. "We must present arguments of scientific men and give illustrations of detrimental effects of predator destruction on beneficial animals themselves," wrote Williamson to Lloyd, the wildlife supervisor, in 1937.

Under Williamson's watch, the Parks Branch increasingly spoke in the language of animal ecology, defending its policies in terms of carrying capacity, population cycles,