

Don't kill the coyote, just confuse him a little

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Friday, 09 January 2004 05:50 - Last Updated Friday, 09 January 2004 05:50

Christian Science Monitor: Traps. Fences. Poison. Ranchers have tried everything to keep predators from their livestock. But guard llamas? At Thirteen Mile Ranch near Belgrade, Mont., llamas have kept watch over the sheep for a decade. The result: No losses from coyotes - the bane of sheep ranchers.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0102/p15s01-sten.html>

Sci/Tech > Environment from the January 02, 2004 edition

Don't kill the coyote, just confuse him a little

By Tim King | Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor

Traps. Fences. Poison. Ranchers have tried everything to keep predators from their livestock. But guard llamas? At Thirteen Mile Ranch near Belgrade, Mont., llamas have kept watch over the sheep for a decade. The result: No losses from coyotes - the bane of sheep ranchers.

"Our llamas have developed some kind of an understanding with a local and fairly stable coyote pack," says Becky Weed, who runs the ranch with her partner, David Tyler. "They know the ropes, and we know the ropes, and I think they understand that we don't bother them. We like to have them around because they hunt gophers."

Increasingly, ranchers in the US and abroad are turning to such natural methods - from aggressive donkeys to strategic herd movement - to safeguard livestock. Those methods mean ranchers seldom have to kill predators. True, the predators they save aren't particularly endangered. And the products they market as "predator friendly" sometimes fetch a premium. But the impetus behind the wild-farming movement seems to run deeper than that. Its message: Ranchers, livestock, and large predators can coexist.

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"People farm with the wild because they deeply care about the land as their home," says Dan Imhoff, author of a new book, "Farming With the Wild." "It has economic value, but it also taps into life's biggest questions. Why are we here? What is our place in the community of all species?"

Consider Will Holder, an Arizona rancher whose friends call him the "Cattle Whisperer." "I'm with my cattle every day," he says. "If you spend enough time with them, you can tell by the way they are acting that a lion has moved into the area."

When cattle signal that a lion or a wolf is near, Mr. Holder moves cattle. It sounds simple, he says, but compared with the conventional approach to ranching, day herding represents a radical departure. "The traditional way of managing cattle in the West is you kind of kick them out into a pasture and don't look at them for about four months," says Holder. His family sells predator-friendly beef at premium prices under the Ervin's Natural Beef Company label in Tucson and Phoenix.

But cattle left to their own devices develop deadly habits. "Predators need to get comfortable with a situation and feel like they are going to be successful," he says. "By always moving the cattle, predators [stay] off balance and they leave us alone."

Other ranchers who raise beef for the Ervin's label use a variety of techniques to keep mountain lions, wolves, coyotes, and bears off balance. One rancher used strips of bright orange marking tape tied to a fence. Another uses aggressive guard donkeys to chase them away.

"The reason eco-labels work is that they give producers a way to tell their story," says Janelle Holden of the Predator Conservation Alliance of Bozeman, Mont. "People won't necessarily buy a product just because it's predator friendly, but it does make someone unique enough to highlight their product in the market."

Besides relying on guard llamas, Ms. Weed and Mr. Tyler also keep an eye on their sheep. To assure that coyotes aren't tempted to prey on new lambs, the Thirteen Mile Ranch lambing paddock was placed within sight of the ranch house. The result of their strategy is that no predators, or livestock, have been killed at their ranch or Holder's for years.

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Farming with the wild isn't limited to the US. In Canada, the Central Rockies Wolf Project works with ranchers to keep wolves and livestock apart. In Namibia, the Cheetah Conservation Fund has given hundreds of farmers guard dogs. The dogs keep cheetahs and leopards away from the farmers' goats. And in India and Nepal the Snow Leopard Conservancy has developed a predator-friendly livestock project in concert with Himalayan goatherds.

Much like at the Holder ranch, the solutions are simple. The conservancy worked with farmers in six areas to develop leopard-proof corrals. The results have been dramatic. "With each corral we can save up to five snowleopards from being killed in retribution for livestock losses," says the Conservancy's Rodney Jackson. No livestock has been lost.

The Conservancy is now working with villagers in Ladakh, India, to turn their new leopard stewardship into an economic plus. A village homestay program, www.Himalayan-homestays.com, was launched in the 2003 trekking season. So far, it's drawn mainly European tourists, eager to glimpse the rare leopards.

Learning to coexist with predators also helps create an environment more congenial to other wild creatures. For example, by moving his cattle regularly, Holder says he's seen a revitalization of native grasses, which helps small animals. Holder and his wife, Jan, have also helped with the introduction of (endangered) Mexican wolves in the area close to their ranch, located in New Mexico near the border of Arizona's Gila Wilderness.

"When I was growing up I hated ranching because it was just this brutal way of man against nature," Holder says. But "I enjoy this kind of ranching because it's more of an intellectual challenge."