A CRITIQUE OF GAME RANCHING IN ALBERTA


The intent by the Alberta ministries of Public Lands and Wildlife, and Agriculture, to establish game ranching has reached the stage that enabling legislation was passed on November 13, 1984, in the form of Bill 84. The debate about game ranching, however, is not subsiding. Some changes in position by the advocates of game ranching have taken place. They have now adopted the position that game ranching cannot be economically carried out on large tracts or relatively unproductive lands. Rather, game ranching will now be confined to small, intensely managed parcels of land. No longer will game ranching economically utilize "marginal lands" (although this part of their change of mind has failed to reach the Alberta ministries of Public Lands and Wildlife, and Agriculture, as seen from page 5, point IV, of the "Big Game Ranching Discussion Paper", October 30, 1984). No longer is game ranching a means of providing land for the landless, or for salving the uncontrolled access of native people to Crown land. However, should native communities indeed accept game ranching, and the advantages it offers them as described on page 4, then their land claims may indeed be weakened. Without any doubt, the argument for game ranching as now advanced by its proponents is more reasonable, more attuned to economics, than were the earlier promotions. Nevertheless, the chief argument against game ranching in the North American context is not weakened by the recent stance.

The problem with game ranching is that it creates a market for wildlife meat and products, as well as an infrastructure for the export of such products. Markets for wildlife, however, have led in North America to uncontrollable slaughter of wildlife, and were consequently stamped out -- though never entirely! In Europe, an intense policing effort is required to protect wildlife, a policing effort that far exceeds anything we normally envision. To understand this point it is necessary to look at how wildlife protection operates in North America.

The two pillars of wildlife conservation in North America are public ownership of wildlife, and equalitarian access to wildlife. Market forces have been pointedly excluded in the allocation of wildlife, just as they have been excluded in the allocation of water. These are two very important policies as they lead to concerned self-interest in those that desire a share of the wildlife harvest, to a willingness to sacrifice a little on behalf of wildlife, to refrain from killing outside the law, and to taking a dim view of those that flout the allocations. It is not at all surprising therefore that wildlife has not only a lobby in the large hunter associations, the naturalists, the societies dedicated to the conservation of waterfowl, bighorns, wolves, etc., but that wildlife is worthy of district ministries -- depending on jurisdictions. Granted this deep concern for wildlife, it is logical that wildlife laws are largely self policing, and that only a dwindlingly small number of wildlife guardians -- which go about their business unarmed -- is sufficient to provide fairly good protection. This self policing, cheap, very civil
system of wildlife protection is a great achievement of North Americans, an achievement envied abroad, and for good reason.

Germany has a rich tradition in wildlife management. It is this country that normally is referred to when reference is made to the "European" systems, and its way of managing and protecting wildlife is indeed very different from that of North America. It is a system that also "works", although by comparison with North America it is a system with a much poorer record in conservation and wildlife protection, and one based on an extraordinary effort in policing. There is a market for wildlife meat, and poaching -- of a much more sinister type than in North America -- has always been a problem. The problem has its roots in the fact that a legal market for wildlife meat attracts poachers that usually are hardened criminals. To cope with the policing problem the German system deputizes each of the hunters into police officers. To become an officially sanctioned hunter is a great honour reached only after preparation, exams and police clearance; part of one's preparation is to earn when, and when not, to use firearms in the task of wildlife protection. Poachers and hunters have been killed in shoot-outs. In Germany there is a great legal barrier to the acquisition of firearms.

Let us now look at some statistics that drive home the point of how terribly difficult it is to protect free-living wildlife. In West Germany, there were (in 1982) some 75,000 square miles of huntable land. To protect wildlife there are about 65,000 hunters that lease land for hunting, each one deputized as a policeman. In addition, about 1,000 hunters are professionally occupied managing and protecting private hunting preserves, while an unknown number are foresters protecting public, as well as private hunting areas. Furthermore, there are about 200,000 licenced, registered hunters, which, if they gain hunting privileges, may become deputized policemen. At a minimum there is thus one deputized wildlife protector per square mile of huntable land, as well as the regular police force that also plays a role in wildlife protection. Compared to Germany, Alberta, with a land area about 2.63 times greater than that of West Germany, employs a mere 100-odd game wardens. Granted that Germany's 260 'regiments' of actual or potential wildlife protectors are only on the job part-time, and may spend only two days per week or so on their hunting area, their policing effort is still several thousand-fold greater than ours! And, their wildlife protectors are armed; ours are not! How can we even hope to protect our wildlife against commercial poaching if we allow a market in wildlife meat to develop?

It is important that our arguments pro or contra game ranching not lose sight of established experience and facts. The New Zealand initiative in game ranching is based on circumstances quite different from ours in North America. They have no conflict between game ranching and the need to protect a stock of native wildlife. In fact, the contrary is the case. In New Zealand, deer are introduced, and justly treated as a pest on the land due to the great damage they have caused to the flora, fauna and soils. Anybody who can eliminate them strikes a blow for conservation, including those that gun deer from helicopters and sell their carcasses, skins, etc. The helicopter and automatic rifles, coupled to European and Oriental markets, have given New Zealand's native biota at least a small chance of recovery. Deer on public land there are a plague;
here they are an asset and a deeply cherished one. In New Zealand, a market for deer meat is a boon to conservation, here it has been an uncontrollable destructive agent on wildlife, and illegal markets continue to be so to the present.

Could not game ranching swamp the market with wild meat, making poaching uneconomical? In an ideal world, in fairy land, everything is possible. Not so in the real world. Long before the "swamping" could occur, our stocks of wildlife will be depleted or vanished. The market hunters of old did not have today's network of roads, fast vehicles, systems of electronic communication, night-sighting equipment, long-reaching rifles, or silencers. Given the God-given opportunity of a legal market to be infiltrated -- how is our unarmed, little handful of game guardians to protect wildlife, how will they carry out their mandate? How long before one of them, trying to do his duties against a gang of armed poachers, will loose his life? Even a modicum of understanding of the problems surrounding today's criminals that kill wildlife for the small, smouldering illegal markets, should make it evident that the above questions have a basis in stark reality.

The discussion paper on game ranching does envision park-like amenities on game ranches for the public. Unfortunately, the public and game ranching are not compatible. Should any game rancher let the public move through his stock of animals via ski trails or hiking trails he faces the legal consequences of one of his tame animals attacking a hiker, or -- if his stock remains shy -- he faces a loss in production due to the cost of excitement to the animals, and inefficient use of forage. There is no escape from this dilemma. We can safely assume that game ranchers will be even less pleased with trespassers than are cattle ranchers! Clearly, more thought and care in researching facts must be given before embarking on a promotion of game ranching.

Inadvertently, the discussion on game ranching raises a point not addressed: If game ranching can produce bountiful wildlife on "marginal" land, what has prevented the Fish and Wildlife Division from generating that bounty?

Is not the Minister aware of the market demand for wildlife-based recreation? This demand is staggering in North America, as so pointedly exemplified by the Texas system of leasing the shooting farms for game birds, the private hunting preserves stocked with exotics, etc.? Is not the Minister aware of the deep economic net tied to recreational wildlife that he is now endangering in Alberta? Any wildlife surplus that can be generated on "marginal lands" in Alberta would find, only too ready, a paying taker, increasing both the cash flow to government and affected municipalities. Those of us in wildlife management are aware that some increase in wildlife can be generated, provided the demand is recognized and channeled, and not abandoned and ignored as it is today. What of wildlife enhancement? Why is it not explored instead of game ranching?