

Preserving the Beasts of Waste and Desolation: Theodore Roosevelt and Predator Control in Yellowstone National Park

Theodore Roosevelt's role regarding predator control in Yellowstone is often times misinterpreted or confused. When examining the history of predator control in Yellowstone, Roosevelt is sometimes portrayed as the hero or villain, depending on the writer's environmental interest. Much of this confusion is due to Roosevelt's continually changing attitude and his actions towards Yellowstone predators. In his ranching days in the Dakota Badlands, Roosevelt often referred to predators, such as wolves, as the beasts of waste and desolation.¹ His early writings clearly paint predators as destroyers of cattle and big game, yet from this flamboyant portrayal there eventually developed a careful study of predators and their natural behavior. This close study of wildlife in his early years, combined with a vast amount of time spent in the West, led Roosevelt to change his perception of predators. In Yellowstone, Roosevelt attempted to end predator control in order to maintain a natural balance of big game populations. This switch in perspectives was influenced by many things, including Roosevelt's goal of establishing a wildlife reserve in Yellowstone, his personal desires, and an increased knowledge of natural history.

Roosevelt's real interest in Yellowstone began in 1885 when he met the famed naturalist George Bird Grinnell. Roosevelt sought out Grinnell to demand an explanation for his review of one of Roosevelt's books. Grinnell explained his reasoning behind the problems he found with Roosevelt's book, Roosevelt realized the validity of Grinnell's arguments, and shortly after the two became good friends. Their friendship and shared interest resulted in the founding of the Boone and Crockett Club, an organization that worked to defend Yellowstone and its wildlife.

During his active role in campaigning for Yellowstone's defense in the name of the Boone and Crockett

Club, Roosevelt began to envision the park as a breeding ground for wildlife. Roosevelt hoped that by protecting the park's wildlife, populations would dramatically increase and spread out to the surrounding regions. This would ensure the continuation of hunting, his favorite pastime, in the Yellowstone ecosystem. This would check Roosevelt's fears that the West was becoming a series of private game reserves, in which only the rich could hunt. As his political career progressed to the presidency of the United States, Roosevelt found himself in a position to achieve this goal.

The purchase of a pack of dogs to kill cougars became Roosevelt's first

step towards creating a wildlife refuge in Yellowstone. The purchase of the dogs resulted not just from Roosevelt's wishes to establish a predator control program in Yellowstone, but from his desire to arrange a personal cougar hunt in the park. A cougar hunt in Yellowstone would meet two objectives. First of all it would continue the ongoing process of eliminating predators in the park, allowing big game populations to recover from the results of intensive hide hunting within the park. A hunt in Yellowstone would also allow Roosevelt an opportunity to get acquainted with his friend and hunting guide, John B. Goff.

Roosevelt first met Goff in January 1901 shortly after his election to the vice presidency. Goff guided the vice president-elect on his first real mountain lion hunt. Cougars greatly interested Roosevelt, yet as of 1893 he had only seen two live mountain lions in the wild. All of his natural history studies of the animal came mostly from the tales of outdoorsmen he met in the Badlands.² Roosevelt learned a vast amount about cougars during his hunt with Goff. The hunters killed fourteen cougars during the trip, twelve of which were killed by Roosevelt. Today this may be seen as useless slaughter, but in a time before high-tech film and advanced scientific methods were used to study wild animals, hunting was the only option available to those wishing to closely examine wildlife. "My narrative in the volume 'Outdoor Pastimes of an

American Hunter'" wrote Roosevelt, "gave the first reasonably full and trustworthy life history of the cougar as regards its most essential details."³ Clinton Hart Merriam, director of the Division of Biological Survey, agreed with Roosevelt. After receiving the cougars' skulls from the hunt, he wrote Roosevelt "your series of skulls from Colorado is incomparably the largest, most complete, and most valuable series ever brought together from any single locality, and will be of inestimable value in determining the amount of individual variation."⁴ This information on cougars was later used by Roosevelt to make decisions on the use of predator control within the park.

Roosevelt began planning another hunt with Goff for the spring of 1903—a hunt which almost occurred in Yellowstone National Park. Philip B. Stewart, a political leader from Colorado Springs, initially took on the task of organizing the hunt, but one thing after another confounded his plans. First of all, Goff was wounded by an over-eager tourist during a cougar hunt. "I hope he beat the 'tourist' who inflicted the wound severely," Roosevelt wrote to Stewart.⁵ Goff did recover rapidly and promised plenty of game to keep Roosevelt satisfied, but on January 22, 1903, Roosevelt wrote Stewart canceling the hunt. "Many things are conspiring to make it unlikely that I can go," he complained.⁶ Instead Roosevelt was to make a grand tour of the Western states with one stop at

Yellowstone.

Still Roosevelt did not give up hopes of going on a hunt with Goff. Shortly after canceling his hunt, Roosevelt wrote Stewart of the possibility of sending Goff to Yellowstone. By bringing Goff to Yellowstone, Roosevelt would meet his objectives: control of predators in the park and an enjoyable hunt. "The park authorities say they would like Johnny Goff to be up there with his dogs on trial for the business of killing out some of the mountain lions," he wrote, "then if things went right, I might get a week with him myself."⁷ Roosevelt's plan soon began to unravel. Secretary of War Elihu Root noted that Roosevelt's public image might be tarnished if he killed any animals in the park.

Roosevelt attempted to solve the issue by writing Major John Pitcher, the military superintendent of Yellowstone, asking if he had submitted any applications requesting hounds for killing predators. Roosevelt wanted to be sure if Goff could not reach Yellowstone for any reason, he would still be able to hunt mountain lions by using the park's pack of dogs. Pitcher's response is not known, but it appears that an application for three hounds was submitted. On March 2, Roosevelt ordered the secretary of the interior to send Pitcher an additional five dogs. Still worried about his public image, Roosevelt noted that "it would be better not to have Goff if you have

good dogs that can hunt."⁸ Roosevelt ordered Pitcher to put the dogs through a trial run, to be sure they would work. "We must be dead sure we get our mountain lion," noted Roosevelt.⁹

On the same day Roosevelt wrote this letter, Pitcher wrote a report for the president on the hunting possibilities. Pitcher must have made Roosevelt's day by describing the number of mountain lions in the area. He also noted that the park's buffalo keeper, Buffalo Jones, captured a live lion while feeding some bighorn sheep in the area. Pitcher reported the dogs from Texas would arrive in the park soon and kennels were awaiting them. "Now these lions have simply got to be thinned out, and if you will lend us a hand in the matter, you will be of great help to us," Pitcher wrote, "and no one can offer any reasonable objection to your doing so."¹⁰ When the hounds arrived in Yellowstone, Roosevelt canceled Goff's services to avoid any talk of bringing a hunting guide to the park.¹¹

Roosevelt continued eagerly planning for his trip to Yellowstone with Pitcher's assistance. Although being president regulated his planning for hunts, especially in regard to his public image, it did have its advantages. By being commander in chief one could commission the army to arrange hunts on public lands where no hunting by the public was allowed. However, Roosevelt's plans

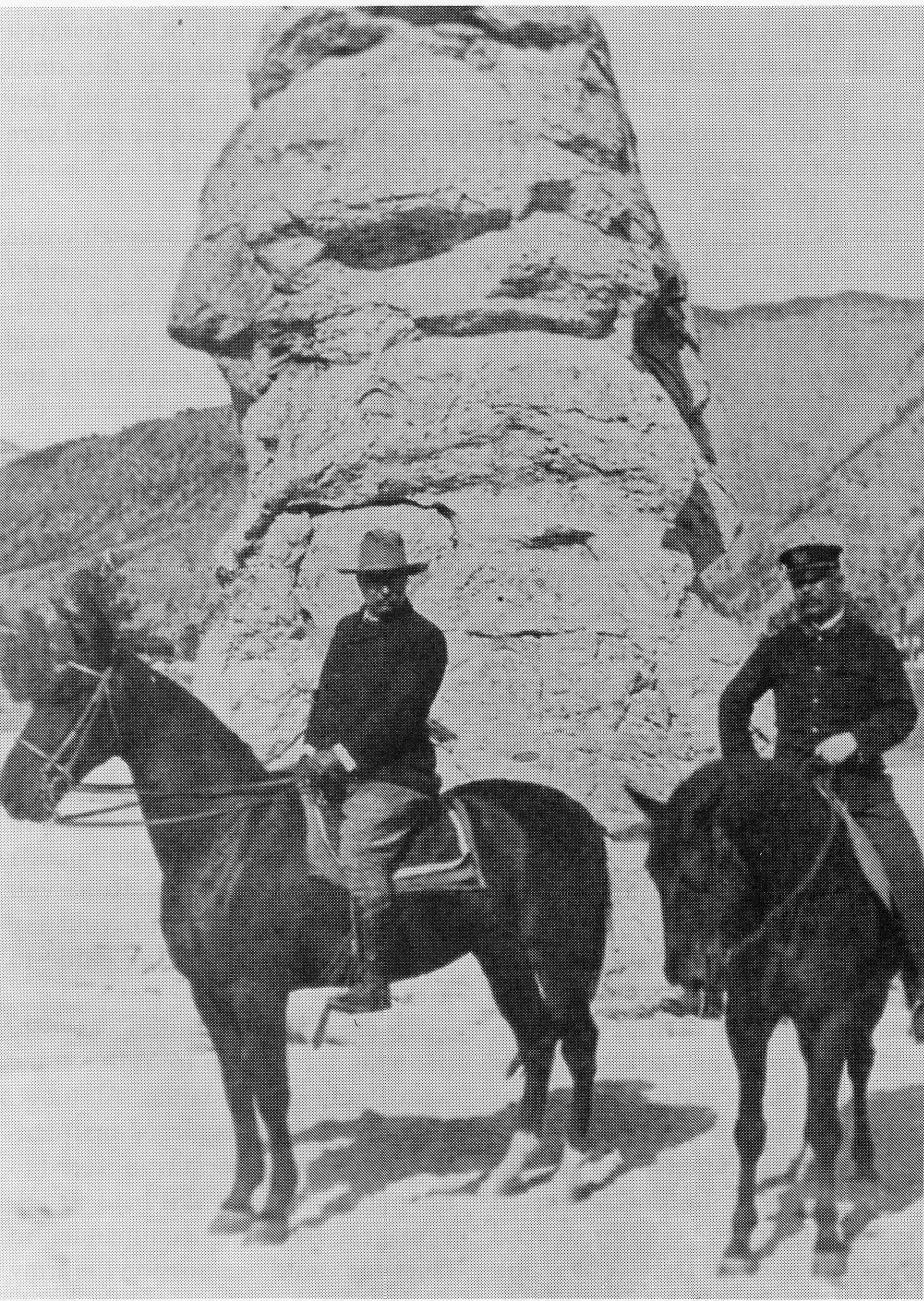


Figure 1. Theodore Roosevelt and Major John Pitcher, acting superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, at Mammoth Hot Springs during the president's 1903 visit to the park. Liberty Cap, an extinct hot spring cone, is directly behind them, with Fort Yellowstone in the middle distance. National Park Service photo.

began to take another turn on March 21, when Pitcher informed the president that only four of the eight dogs were received, and those were untrained. Buffalo Jones was attempting to train them by using his captured mountain lion. Pitcher also noted that he telegraphed Mr. Poole, who was supplying the dogs, and informed him that he needed the other four, two of which must be trained or the contract was void. Poole telegraphed back saying four more dogs were being shipped to the park. Pitcher requested Goff's address in order to contact him should the four new dogs be unsuitable.¹²

Upon receiving the news, Roosevelt wrote back to Pitcher to cancel the hunt. "Having had experience in the past with individuals who sold hounds," Roosevelt wrote, "I am not in the least surprised at your news."¹³ Roosevelt also commented "an untrained hound is worse than useless. Such a pack will run deer or elk in the place of lion, and will be a perfect curse to the Park."¹⁴ Roosevelt also noted that bringing Goff up to the park would be unacceptable. "The more I have thought it over ... [Goff's] coming up would cause a great deal of talk," reflected Roosevelt.¹⁵ He concluded the letter by noting that seeing the game of the park would be exciting enough, and if on the off chance the hounds were trained in time, he would attempt to hunt mountain lion. Roosevelt then made plans to visit the park with John Burroughs on a sight-seeing

tour only.¹⁶

Roosevelt's visit allowed him a substantial amount of time to study Yellowstone's wildlife. During the trip, Roosevelt's perspective of predators began to change, especially after viewing the conditions of Yellowstone's elk herds. The president viewed many elk along his way to the first camp site on Cottonwood Creek. Roosevelt noted that elk "were certainly more numerous than when I was last through the Park twelve years before."¹⁷ The President, with the aid of Pitcher and Elwood Hoffer, their guide, counted three thousand head of elk in one sitting. Roosevelt also noticed many elk carcasses lying on the ground. He paid close attention to what had caused their deaths. Two were killed by scab, some were killed by cougars, but the majority were killed by starvation, resulting, Roosevelt believed, from overgrazing by wild animals in the region.

Roosevelt now began to defend the cougars' presence. "As the elk were evidently rather too numerous for the feed," he later wrote, "I do not think the cougars were doing any damage."¹⁸ He began to worry the elk herds would meet the same fate as his cattle herds had in the disastrous winter of 1886-87. Roosevelt feared the elk would overgraze the range, leaving little if any winter feed. He felt this would lead to starvation for the elk herds and other wildlife. Big-game populations, especially the elk herds, needed to be thinned down,

and Roosevelt realized predators would be needed to fulfill this function. This was an unusual view of predators for the time, especially from a former western rancher.

The main predators that concerned Roosevelt were cougars, for he felt coyotes and wolves were not as dangerous to the big-game herds. Roosevelt now realized predators could keep down the elk numbers, but he still feared predation would destroy other big-game populations such as deer and bighorn sheep. Roosevelt began advocating a limited predator control program for Yellowstone. The hounds imported for Roosevelt's planned hunt were placed under the control of Buffalo Jones; however, Jones soon ran into a conflict with park military officials and resigned his position as gamekeeper and predator-control agent. The job of regulating predators was now open and Roosevelt stepped in to fill it. Roosevelt knew the man for the job: his old hunting guide John B. Goff. Roosevelt had kept in touch with Goff after canceling his services for the proposed Yellowstone hunt, and in the spring of 1905 Roosevelt finally hunted with him near Glenwood Springs, Colorado. During this hunt, the President wrote to Major Pitcher; A. A. Anderson, forest inspector; and Ethan A. Hitchcock, secretary of the interior; requesting that Goff be "given all the privileges that can be given for killing lion within or without the park."¹⁹ Goff left for Yellowstone in June

1905, expecting the job of thinning out the Yellowstone lion population would take four years.²⁰

The president's instructions to Goff clearly indicate Roosevelt's new approach to predator control. "Of course you can not afford to let the cougar exist in the neighborhood of where the deer and sheep are," Roosevelt wrote Goff, "but any cougar that are found off where there are practically nothing but elk, I should think it a good plan to leave them alone."²¹ Roosevelt failed to realize that Yellowstone's predator population was already too low after years of steady hunting by various individuals. "Roosevelt was misinformed about the lion situation," Byron Goff, John's son, later recalled.²² John Goff soon discovered that the mountain lion population was not as great as expected and after less than a year of service he resigned.

Shortly after Goff left the park, Roosevelt began to see how dangerously low the predator population had become. Roosevelt then took actions to repeal his predator control policies. In a 1908 letter to Superintendent S. B. M. Young, Major Pitcher's replacement, Roosevelt ended the predator control program:

I do not think any more cougars should be killed in the park. Game is abundant. We want to profit by what has happened in the English preserves, where it proved to be bad for the grouse itself to kill off all the peregrine falcons and all the other birds of prey. It may be advisable, in case the ranks of the deer and antelope right around the Springs should be too heavily

killed out, to kill some cougars there, but in the rest of the park I certainly would not kill any of them. On the contrary, they ought to be let alone.²³

After this directive, cougars were not harmed (though hundreds of coyotes were killed) in Yellowstone until the winter of 1913-14 when another predator control agent was hired to kill the predators. Predator control would continue through the conclusion of the army's role in the park in 1918, and into the National Park Service's administration, until the 1920s, when the mountain lion and wolf populations were almost entirely eliminated from the park.²⁴

Roosevelt's attention again focused on Yellowstone in 1912. Roosevelt became concerned over the increasing populations of elk within the park. He had previously expressed his worries regarding the overgrazing of elk within the park, now he feared the problem would result in a disaster.²⁵ The only solution, Roosevelt decided, was that "it would be infinitely better for the elk, infinitely less cruel, if some method could be devised by which hunting them should be permitted right up to the point of killing each year on an average what would amount to the whole animal increase.... Of course the regulation should be so strict and intelligent as to enable all killing to be stopped the moment it was found to be in any way excessive or detrimental."²⁶

A number of problems prevented Roosevelt's new elk policy from be-

ing established. It was hard to convince the public, including park administrators, that the Yellowstone elk herds should be culled in some manner. The park administrators did attempt to solve the problem by decreasing domestic grazing in the National Forest Reserves and by shipping elk outside of the Park, but this was not effective, in Roosevelt's opinion.²⁷

As Roosevelt predicted, the winter of 1916-17 took a heavy toll on the elk populations. Heavy snowfall kept the elk herds from traveling to their winter range. Many elk died from starvation and many people became overly alarmed that the species was again headed for extinction. Most of this fear was based on exaggerated counts from previous years, but the new park administration responded to this fear by implementing a policy of continually feeding hay to the elk. Roosevelt felt this would only compound the problem by once again raising the elk population to uncontrollable standards, now that predators were no longer effectively culling the herds.²⁸

Death prevented Roosevelt from pursuing a solution to the issue of elk overpopulation in the park. In 1919, Roosevelt passed away at his home Sagamore Hill, New York. With his death, Yellowstone lost one of its most important defenders. Roosevelt's handling of predators in Yellowstone will always be debated as being good or bad. Yet one thing is clear: Roosevelt attempted to estab-

lish policies that he believed were in Yellowstone's best interest. Unfortunately, he failed to grasp many environmental changes that were occurring in Yellowstone during his lifetime. He failed to recognize how drastically the environment had been changed by those before him, especially how much damage had been done to the predator populations. He also failed to recognize that the large

increase in elk populations and the effects of winter kills were a natural part of the Yellowstone ecosystem. Despite these failures, Roosevelt's attempts were fairly advanced for his day and age. He made an effort to look beyond the image of predators as beasts of waste and desolation to critically examine their valuable role in the Yellowstone ecosystem.

Endnotes

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