

Animal activists: New Mexico rapidly becoming known for wildlife abuses

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Prairie dog explodes from high-powered rifle impact during hunting contest. LiveStream blog.

Conservationists are appalled at New Mexico's increasing anti-wildlife stance. It is a state that embraces the brand name "Land of Enchantment," which is inaccurate in the view of animal activists and it should be changed to something more reflective of the inhumane wildlife abuses allowed by the state.

According to an announcement from WildEarth Guardians, a gun shop in Los Lunas has been particularly free-wheeling with its sponsorship of wildlife "hunting" contests. The latest competition just concluded on Saturday and it will award a new rifle to the person who submits the most prairie dog, "tails."

Critics see this barbarism as similar to Alaska's wolf competitions in years past, when then Gov. Sarah Palin offered a bounty of \$150 for each severed foreleg of wolves; most slaughtered by "sporting" aerial killers.

"New Mexico deserves so much better than for our state to be known as the capitol of [wildlife] killing contests," said Laura Bonar program director for Animal Protection of New Mexico.

The statewide prairie dog shooting contest has been preceded by numerous coyote killing contests. The latest resulted in the death of 39 coyotes, with the winner being a father/daughter team. These contests are among the most egregious and widely publicized of recent wildlife abuses under Republican Gov. Susana Martinez.

Trapping is primarily unregulated on public land in New Mexico. The state's game commission recently lifted a ban on barbaric trapping in the recovery area of endangered Mexican wolves, which has a genetically unsustainable population of 75 animals.

Reportedly leg-hold traps have killed two of the rare wolves, while leaving two others in such bad shape they had to have legs amputated. In addition, a mother wolf was shot and killed leaving her cubs to starve.

Nonetheless, the game commission has continued to expand trapping rather than implement bans on the cruel practice. Lawmakers also rejected legislation to block trapping and poisoning on public lands.

Killing contests that incentivize the high-body count in a state that is home to Gunnison's prairie dogs, which are an Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing candidate, makes no sense, but the New Mexico legislature also rejected a law that would ban killing contests.

Prairie dogs have been scorned and brutally exterminated for over a century by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), ranchers and special interest groups like the Cattleman's Association.

However, scientists know prairie dogs are a valuable keystone species that has been decimated down to 2 percent of its original population across 11 states. They join bison, prong-horned antelope and black-footed ferrets as vital to the health and biodiversity of the Great Plains and short-grass habitats, but it hasn't stopped the wholesale slaughter of prairie dogs, with New Mexico rapidly becoming distinguished for its complacency on the issue.

Prairie-dog "hunts", are often a family affair, including kids and grandparents. It involves the "sport" of shooting them from great distances with high-powered rifles and earning extra points for blasting the animal into the air and causing "pink mist".

"I feel sorry for people who take part in these events because I don't think they are hunters," said Raymond Watt, a Los Lunas resident. "I know a lot of hunters and I know they respect wildlife, they give animals a fighting chance."

A coalition of wildlife advocacy groups has started a contest of their own to choose a more fitting brand name for New Mexico.

“If they truly want wildlife slaughter to be part of the character of New Mexico, then they shouldn’t be shy about it,” said Taylor Jones, Endangered Species Advocate for WildEarth Guardians. “We don’t find killing contests and leg-hold traps all over public lands ‘enchanting.’ Actually, I think ‘The Thrill-kill State’ has a certain ring to it.”

The conservationists are asking for public contributions of creative ideas on a new name. The top three will be chosen and submitted to the New Mexico Tourism Department and the winning brand name will be marketed through social media.