

THE FINAL ONSLAUGHT AGAINST PREDATION



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Picture: Julia Kennaway <http://conservationaction.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Alpaca-and-sheep-Julia-Kennaway.jpg>

Of all animals wild and domesticated the sheep must have the best meat by far. Its unique flavour sometimes enhanced by the natural herbs of the Karoo is certainly something that sensitises the taste buds of any connoisseur of fine foods. Even the black-backed jackal and caracal will attest to that as they eat up to 26% of the annual lamb crop on sheep farms while they also test their palates against beef on occasion.

Back in the old days before we be-

came environmentally conscious, predators were targeted with poisoning, gin traps, cage traps and shooting. Poisoning was state policy and a government gazette of 1913 set the scene for mass poisoning of wildlife: it declared virtually all predators as well as vultures and eagles vermin and issued strychnine to farmers to poison everything from lion to African wildcat.

In the modern day and age we talk a lot about sustainability but often forget that it includes the notions

of social, environmental and financial sustainability. In this sense poisoning is socially and environmentally unsustainable due to the massive impact on wildlife. Continuous hunting is financially unsustainable as it is a never ending war against jackal and caracal while it appears to even catalyse intensified breeding in these two predator species.

We have to move into a different frame of mind if we ever hope to achieve the objective of bringing predation under control as the methods we have employed over

The use of gin traps are illegal in South Africa



<http://www.qsl.net/2e0waw/gintrap/150517-apprentice-hi.jpg>

the past three hundred years have not proven successful. New concepts have emerged in the past decade that have been viewed with scepticism by many people yet some have deployed some of it with certain levels of success. The three pillars of effective predation management are livestock management, ecological management and predation prevention of which predator control is only a small part.

Let us focus on predation prevention. A colleague once mentioned that we should teach predators to revert back to their natural prey but if one considers that sheep and goats have been part of the landscape for the past three hundred years then they are also natural prey for predators. The density of sheep per hectare is also much higher than most of the natural prey species and thus offer an easier meal than steenbok for example. As a starting point one should therefore keep predators at bay and away from the flocks. Farmers I engaged recently related their success in predation prevention to two main management principles: compounding lambing into one or two short periods and keeping lambing flocks behind lock and key

until lambs are two months old. Farmers don't need any guidance on compounding lambing seasons – it is a simple and widely implemented sheep farming principle. Behind lock and key means stocking the lambing flocks in camps with proper predator proof fencing. Predators are less likely to attempt predation on three month old lambs than on new-borns up until two months old. Once lambs are strong the flocks may be allowed to roam around the other parts of the farm.

Flock management is not the only predation prevention tool; there are others also that have stood the test of time. Guard animals such as Alpacas, Anatolian shepherd dogs, blesbuck and donkey stallions are also deployed to keep predators away from flocks. Dogs require management while the other animals may not need intensive care and management. What experienced farmers tell us is that animals must be rotated to keep the predators guessing and rather avoid a confrontation with guard animals than risking injury for the sake of some lamb. Protective collars are widely used with great success to protect animals that may be targeted by predators. Scaring

devices that emit sounds, scent and light are also part of the predation prevention tool box. Predators are no fools and will soon learn that the farmer is conning them to stay away from livestock. These different tools must therefore be cycled regularly to maintain the element of surprise.

As in any population some individuals are highly intelligent and these ones will outwit the farmer no matter how well he manages his flocks, his farm and the ecology on his farm. Jackals will tackle sheep from the back when they have learnt that protective collars are difficult to negotiate to the animal's jugular. This leaves ewes often very badly maimed and agitates farmers immensely. Such predators become the super predators that control should be aimed at. They will overcome all obstacles the farmer places in their path, even guard animals like Alpacas.

When the farmer reaches that final frustration point with the most cunning of predators, he should not act in fury but as rational as possible. Laying out poisoned baits is something that is not only illegal but also immoral. My mind is filled with the images of thousands of

Many non-targeted animals such as the Aardwolf (left), African Serval (middle) and vultures (right) to name but a few, fall prey to indiscriminate trapping and poisoning.





https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/d/d8/Kangal_Shepherd



<http://modernfarmer.com/2014/06/modern-farmers-guide-guard-donkeys/>

Although guard dogs generally need management, the Anatolian Shepherd dog has been used with much success on many a farm

Donkey mares or gelded males are great guardians of livestock

vultures, eagles, aardwolf, bat-eared foxes, leopards and even valuable Border collies that fell victim to poisoned baits. Shooting the culprit still remains one of the most selective and effective tools a farmer can use. However effective it may be, it still requires highly developed skills and therefore it is more productive to engage a professional predator hunter. Shooting all jackals on site is no guarantee that predation will end; it requires a skilled hunter with an intimate understanding of predator behaviour to take out the real culprit. Some

farmers believe all jackals are livestock thieves and wage a losing battle against them. Those who study the behaviour of the super jackal on their farm and remove that individual will win the war on predation.

The Predation Management Forum offers farmers free advice on predation diagnosis and management. Its *Best Practices for Predation Management* gives sound advice on all aspects of predation management and can be downloaded at www.pmfsa.co.za under

“knowledge library”. The days when the state departments would assist with predator control are over. It is now up to farmers themselves to launch the final onslaught against predation but it is going to require that mind shift. We either change our perception about predation management or we will keep on waging a losing battle. Use the *Predation Management Forum* for advice – log in and request assistance or lose the battle!

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Sheep with protective collars



<http://conservationaction.co.za/stock/#prettyPhoto/92/>