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## Coyotes win another one for the yipper

Mendocino County cancels contract with Wildlife Services to eradicate coyotes

Killing contests, other measures to kill coyotes have been banned in state

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Public values are shifting toward conservation and ecosystem stewardship



In late April, Mendocino County officials suspended their contract with Wildlife Services, the U.S. Department of Agriculture agency that kills coyotes and other predators on behalf of ranchers. **Thomas Knudson** Sacramento Bee file

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Score another round for the coyote.

The resilient carnivore, celebrated by Native Americans as creator and shape-shifter, has eluded federal traps and guns in Mendocino County, at least for now.

Jane Braxton Little

In late April, county officials [dumped their contract](#) with [Wildlife Services](#), the U.S. Department of Agriculture agency that kills coyotes and other predators on behalf of ranchers. Instead of fighting a lawsuit filed by wildlife groups, Mendocino settled it by suspending the \$144,000 annual contract pending completion of an environmental impact study of the program.

It's the latest in a string of victories for Wile E. Coyote, [North America's oldest indigenous species](#). Wildlife advocates have long complained about "killing contests," in Modoc County and elsewhere, that reward the marksman bringing in the most and the biggest coyote carcasses during a multiday free-for-all. In December 2014, the California Fish and Game Commission voted 4-1 to ban predator derbies statewide.

Whether dumb luck or guile, California coyotes' recent roll began in 1998, when voters passed a ballot initiative prohibiting the pesticide compound 1080, sodium cyanide and steel-jawed leg-hold traps.

Two years later Marin County officials rerouted their Wildlife Services budget to ranchers. Instead of trapping, poisoning and shooting coyotes, the funds help ranchers install nonlethal protections against predators: fences, erratic lights and guard animals. The city of Davis dropped its contract with the federal agency in 2012, and Sonoma County followed in 2013.

With the Mendocino decision, predator protections are creeping from urban areas into California's rural northern counties. What must seem like egregious overreach to ranchers is more than meddling by city-based animal rights activists. It reflects a shift in public values toward conservation and ecosystem stewardship. And it affects more than coyotes: California voters approved a 1990 ballot initiative making mountain lion hunting illegal. Last summer the Fish and Game Commission implemented a [statewide ban on bobcat trapping](#).

Today the creature long vilified as an unwelcome varmint has become the ambassador species of a movement aimed at eliminating wanton slaughter of native predators. [Project Coyote](#), the leading advocate, chose *Canis latrans* because it is “the most misunderstood, maligned and persecuted native carnivore in North America,” said Camilla Fox, the organization’s founder and executive director.

Square in the movement’s crosshairs is the euphemistically named Wildlife Services. It’s an apt target: In 2014, Wildlife Services poisoned, trapped or gunned down [61,702 coyotes – one every 8 1/2 minutes](#). In addition to the carnage, wildlife activists are outraged by [documented accounts of agents using cruel and indiscriminate methods](#) to kill predators, including releasing dogs on defenseless coyotes and leaving traps unchecked for months.

The irony is that beyond the legislative and litigation arenas, coyotes are winning all on their own. Despite over a century of focused and well-funded eradication efforts by federal, state and local agencies, the species is thriving.

At a time when at least [2,000 species are going extinct annually](#), the coyote population has tripled since 1860. The iconic yipping that is a soundtrack for every big-screen oater is now heard in Chicago, New York City and Boston. Coyotes enjoy an evolutionary bag of tricks that allows them to survive almost anywhere. Eradication efforts not only generally fail; they make coyotes smarter.

“It’s like a football game where the score is coyotes 63, humans 3,” said Bob Crabtree, founder and chief scientist at the [Yellowstone Ecological Research Center](#).

Even ranchers who staunchly advocate predator controls acknowledge the coyote’s ability to survive by citing a well-worn adage: When the last human dies, a coyote will be there to gnaw on the remains.

If that is the final round, odds are another coyote will be there to ring the bell.

*Jane Braxton Little, a freelance writer, covers science, natural resources and rural Northern California from Plumas County.*