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## Hunter, former game, fish information officer writes on why hunters need predators

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[Hunter, former game, fish information officer writes on why hunters need predators - The Chronicle-News](#)

**FIGURE - Negative spatial correlation: mountain lion range vs. CWD in North America**

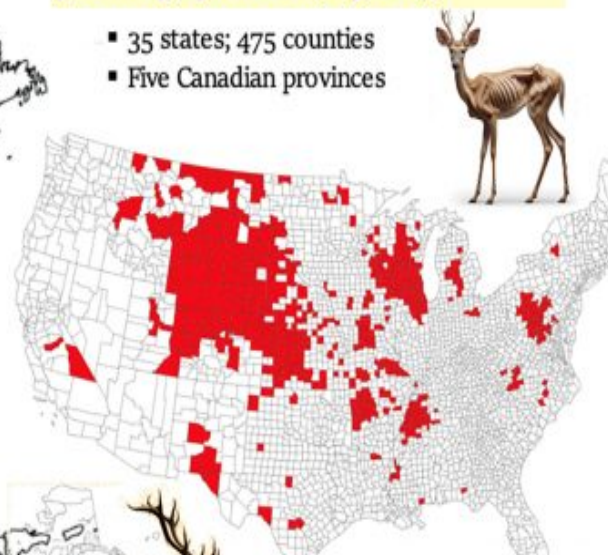
### Range of mountain lions in North America

- There are 20K to 30K mountain lions in the U.S. largely in 15 western states;
- About 5K mountain lions are killed by trophy hunters each year in the West



### Distribution of CWD in North America in free-ranging cervids (July 2024)

- 35 states; 475 counties
- Five Canadian provinces





## Animal Wellness Action

### Ted Williams

“Predator cleansing,” a term recently hatched by wildlife researchers, does not mean what some hunters might imagine and want.

Attempting to create more game by cleansing — i.e., killing — predators is an ancient, counterproductive practice as wrong-headed as ethnic cleansing. But it’s still widely practiced via predator-killing contests, legal and popular in most states, and by some game and fish agencies.

What the researchers have discovered is that the “cleansing” is done by, not to, the predators. Cougars, wolves, coyotes, and bobcats save deer, elk, moose, and caribou by cleansing the wild of a fatal malady called Chronic Wasting Disease. CWD was first seen in 1967 among captive mule deer in Colorado. In 1981 it showed up in wild Colorado elk. Since then it has spread to 35 U.S. states and five Canadian provinces.

“A CWD outbreak among the 60,000 to 100,000 elk in the Greater Yellowstone Basin, the largest concentration of free-ranging elk in North America, is an impending eco-disaster,” warns Dr. James Keen, wildlife veterinarian for the nonprofit Animal Wellness Action. That disaster may be underway. Last November CWD showed up in Yellowstone National Park.

The pathogen is not a virus or a bacterium, but a malformed protein called a “prion.” Humans can’t kill it because it’s not alive. But predators, all CWD-immune, deactivate it by digesting infected flesh. Deactivation is 96- to 100-percent complete, according to four peer-reviewed studies. And because CWD-stricken animals stumble, predators select them.

CWD may jump to humans. That’s why the Centers for Disease Control warns hunters not to handle or eat infected game (in the unlikely event that they can identify it). In 2022 two hunters who ate venison from the same CWD-ravaged deer herd died of prion disease. Given the extreme rarity of human prion infections, this seems an unlikely coincidence.

“Princeton University disease ecologist Andrew Dobson and the late Canadian pro-hunting wildlife ecologist Valerius Geist theorize that killing off the wolf allowed CWD to take hold in the first place,” reports the *Journal of Animal Ecology*. “Predator cleansing is proposed as a possible natural solution for the

Ecology. Predator cleansing is proposed as a possible natural solution for the biological control of CWD.”

The piece goes on to note that CWD is “killing hundreds of thousands, perhaps eventually even millions, of free-ranging deer and elk in the United States and Canada.”

For at least a century cougars have been essentially extirpated from the East, Southeast, Great Plains, and Midwest, which may explain why CWD is now epidemic in these regions.

But CWD is also epidemic where cougars persist. In some of the West, however, the disease is less prevalent where cougars are most abundant.

This from American-Canadian mammal biologist Dr. Paul Paquet who monitors CWD in wolf habitat: “To date and in general, CWD has not thrived where wolf populations are active.”

In Colorado, where trophy hunters annually kill about 500 cougars, CWD is epidemic and increasing. Currently, 42 of 51 deer herds and 17 of 42 elk herds are infected.

CWD is also epidemic and increasing in Wyoming, where trophy hunters annually kill about 350 cougars. In one deer herd in west-central Wyoming, 74 percent of hunter-killed male mule deer were CWD-infected. “It’s the highest that’s been recorded, maybe anywhere in the world,” says Wyoming Game and Fish Department biologist Daryl Lutz. Statewide, CWD in hunter-killed male mule deer was 18.9 percent in 2023, up from 17.6 percent in 2022. CWD in hunter-killed male white-tailed deer was 30.3 percent in 2023, up from 25.9 percent in 2022.

These and similar results in other states call into question the wisdom of permissive, in some cases unrestricted, hunting and trapping of cougars, wolves, coyotes, and bobcats.

If the whole of nature is good, no part can be bad. It’s time for all hunters to recognize predators as allies, not competitors. At least in Colorado, hunters can vote to help deer, elk, and moose by checking “yes” on Proposition 127, a November ballot measure to protect cougars and bobcats.

*Ted Williams is a lifelong hunter and former game and fish information officer.*