

## My Turn

# We are allowed to think like mountains

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The wildlife conservationist (and former Carson National Forest superintendent) Aldo Leopold developed his thinking about the best ways to live with predators while he lived and worked in Taos County in the 1910s. If he'd shown up to the June 13 New Mexico Game Commissioners meeting at the Kachina Lodge, he probably would have shaken his head. He's been gone more than six decades from Taos County and he would have heard nothing new from those in power.

At that meeting, New Mexico citizens sternly cautioned the Game Commission to rethink their proposed rules on how they want hunters and private landowners to deal with mountain lions.

The ranchers and trappers and hunters who commented think everything is OK.

The Game Commission wants to allow elk and deer hunters to be able to kill mountain lions while hunting (for a nominal fee: less than a new X-Box video game from Walmart) and they want private landowners to be able to trap and mutilate mountain lions on their land without a permit. The ranchers and trappers who attended the meeting agreed with them.

Some people gave firsthand experiences in two-minute comments. One woman commented that she's kept a wildlife camera at a water trough for more than five years and had never seen a mountain lion. As she took her seat, a man whispered, "Try tying up a sheep down there."

And there's the difference.

The ranchers said they see lots and lots of mountain lions. And of course they do: the ranchers live near the food.

Everyone who gave comment had some story to tell.

I have my bias. Where I grew up, on the Navajo Reservation, the mountain lion is Nashd'tsoh. It is an animal of wisdom and power. I spent my teenage years in the rural desert of southern Utah, often following mountain lion trails. I had two dogs killed and eaten by mountain lions. I also had two dogs maimed by traps laid out by ranchers to catch mountain lions.

I teach at Taos High School. I've lived in Taos County less than a year. But I've already followed lion trails in Garrapata Canyon.

I've already found their scat and fresh tracks near Jicarita Peak. I know they're out there. But I don't know how many are out there. And neither does the Game Commission.

Our personal experiences are all limited. They only take us so far. This is why we've developed methods for thinking outside our own experiences, beyond the confines of space and time. It's called "science." Scientific thinking helps us steer away from bad decisions long before we reach them. It helps us think on longer time scales.

Aldo Leopold knew that.

When he was young, he believed we needed to kill predators in order to have a healthy landscape. But he learned during his career that he was wrong. He had the moral courage to admit it. He saw how killing apex predators like mountain lions actually caused the range to wither as elk and deer populations exploded.

Our science has since told us stories about mountain lions: we know that they don't need to be hunted and killed to keep their populations in check. They kill each other over territory. And with territories of often more than a 100 square miles, mountain lions are naturally scarce. We also know there is a direct link between mountain lions and water. Mountain lions keep elk and deer herds moving and prevent them from mowing down the green areas around streams. They also kill small herbivores like rabbits and desert rats that can overgraze grasses on the range and cause moisture loss and (over time) drought.

But stories only go so far.

Data only goes so far. Data is science-driven. Interpretation of data is culture-driven. Aldo Leopold knew that. That's why he said it was important to think on longer time-scales.

It leads us to "thinking like a mountain," as Leopold said.

In the meeting, I admired the rational restraint and the quiet courtesy of the commissioners. I hope they can apply that same restraint as they decide how to live with Nashd'tsoh.

The Commission can wait for real numbers of mountain lions before they change their rules. The mountain lions aren't out in the hills arming themselves with AK-47s.

There's no incoming invasion.

We're all going to be OK. The overwhelming public comment at the meeting was clear to the commission: think like mountains.

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