

Jan. 11, 2007, 2:35AM

Coyote killing contest prompt howls

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press Writer © 2007 The Associated Press

BAKER, Mont. — The barren buttes surrounding this small ranching town will offer scant places for coyotes to hide this weekend as hunters converge for a "calling" contest to see who can shoot the most coyotes.

Part predator control, part economic development ploy, the annual event began five years ago in a bid to pique outside interest in Baker via a \$6,000 purse funded by entrance fees, local businesses and the Baker Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture.

While organizers see success in the event's growth, the increasing popularity of such contests is prompting a backlash from animal rights groups and even some hunters, who contend the events trivialize the sport by turning it into a cash-fueled spectacle.

For the coyote, the hunts reflect the lowly place the animal still holds across the American West. Even as a debate rages between state and federal officials over whether its high profile cousin, the gray wolf, should be removed from the endangered species list, the coyote is stuck with the label "varmint", to be killed on sight.

Most states have few if any restrictions on killing the animal, said Stephen Price, president of coyoteclub.org, which connects hunters with ranchers hoping to eliminate the animals from their land.

In Baker, a town of about 1,700 tucked against the North Dakota border, supporters of this weekend's contest say it will deliver a much-needed jolt to the area's economy, drawing some 180 participants from as far away as Chicago and Seattle. They also say fewer coyotes means fewer livestock killings.

"I don't know why God put them on this Earth," said Jerrid

Geving, a hunter who organizes the Baker event. "If He put them on this world to give us sport for hunting, maybe. But I'll tell you what, they do a lot of damage to livestock."

Despite widespread support for that sentiment, not everyone agrees contest hunts are the answer.

Randy Tunby, a sheep rancher in nearby Plevna, Mont., has turned down requests from contest participants to hunt on his land. The results of such hunts, he said, are spotty at best.

"I'm not saying it's not a good thing to do; we ourselves call coyotes. But if you have problems with coyotes getting into your livestock, it's going to be haphazard if people coming into the contest get those," Tunby said.

Tunby prefers the services of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's predator control program. According to USDA records, its Wildlife Services division shoots, poisons, traps or otherwise destroys about 80,000 coyotes a year on private and public lands nationwide.

John Shivik, a research biologist with the services' National Wildlife Research Center, said any effort to reduce livestock damage must specifically target those animals causing problems. Contest hunts might miss the worst offenders, he said.

Coyotes caused an estimated \$47 million in damage to the cattle industry in 2005, according to the USDA. Sheep losses topped \$10 million in 2004.

Groups including the Humane Society of the United States and Predator Defense say neither private hunts nor public agency killings offer a real solution because of the coyote's ability to rapidly reproduce.

"You kill some coyotes and six months later it's as if you didn't kill any at all. What are they accomplishing other than just being barbaric?" asked Brooks Fahy, executive director of Predator Defense.

In Montana, coyotes can be hunted 24 hours a day, 12 months a year, with no limits. That provides out-of-state hunters with ample "trigger time" not available in their home states, said Geving, who already has bagged six coyotes this winter around Baker.

Price and others describe a booming interest in coyote hunting, with an estimated 500 "calling contests" nationwide and more added every year. They get their name because hunters howl and make distress calls to mimic prey, attracting coyotes. Many, Price said, are conducted on the sly _ invitation-only events meant to avoid the ire of animal rights groups.

Baker promotes its event with fliers and on the Internet. Even protesters are welcome, said Karol Zachmann, president of the Baker chamber of commerce.

"Actually, that does good for us if they come and meet us and find out we're not all that bad," she said.

To some hunters, turning the challenge of coyote hunting into a contest with large sums of money at stake defies long-standing traditions of the sport. Jim Posewitz, a leading voice in the field of hunters' ethics, says that to purists, the contests violate the basic tenet of "fair chase" _ the notion that hunting is a private struggle between predator and prey.

"I don't think hunting is a contest between human beings," said Posewitz, a biologist who spent 32 years with the Montana wildlife agency before founding the Orion Hunters Institute. "We like to think it's a more meaningful relationship that we have with wildlife than simply viewing them as a competition between people."