Legislative Committee Update

by Amanda Duchardt, CBH/SAA Legislative Director

CBH/SAA friends and family! I hope you are all happy, healthy and practicing archery!

The Legislative team continues to track the progress of the Catalina Island Conservancy's (CIC) application to California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) to **eradicate all mule deer on Catalina Island**. At the December Fish and Game Commission (FGC) meeting, members of the public including Catalina residents, CBH/SAA (Amanda Duchardt, Patrick Brannon, and our lobbyist Bill Gaines), and our partners in the California Hunting and Conservation Coalition (CHCC) were allocated 1 minute each to speak on the topic. Together, we provided over 30 minutes of testimony in opposition to the CIC's proposal. Although the FGC has no authority over the application or its approval/denial, CDFW staff was in attendance and was able to hear our side of the conversation and our request for an independent scientific study in partnership with CDFW to determine the number of deer that can be managed on the Island while meeting reasonable conservation goals. Key points of testimony in opposition to the proposal to eradicate deer included:

- Lack of scientific data supporting a decision/need to eradicate deer on Catalina
    - CIC studies lack scientific methodology and rigor (e.g., accurate population counts)
    - CDFW memos note lack of evidence of deer browse and habitat quality inside and outside enclosures being substantially similar
    - Past failed applications by CIC rejected by CDFW based on lack of science
    - CDFW/CIC has time to conduct research and "get the decision right" based on best available science
    - False claims that deer impact native habitats leaving the Island more susceptible to wildfire involving non-native grasses
- Incorrect application process under a Scientific Collection Permit vs Depredation Permit
- Waste of deer/meat associated with aerial eradication methods
- Lack of CIC community outreach and transparency of goals, methods and data
- Concerns about loss of Islanders heritage
- Catalia Islanders mistrust of past Conservancy methods and actions (e.g., feral cats decimated populations of burrowing owls and other ground birds, draining of Cottonwood Reservoir washed all aquatic garter snakes into the ocean, etc.)
- Increased safety risks to people and possible wildfires from aerial eradication methods
- Potential negative economic impacts to Catalina in the short and long and term (e.g., eradication proposed during height of tourism season in August 2024)
- Loss of unique hunting opportunity and CIC's lack of commitment to managing a successful hunting program
- Catalia Island cannot be returned to a "naturalist setting" like the other Channel Islands and would be in conflict with Mr. Wrigley's dream of creating an Island setting for the benefit of the common man (e.g., not extreme conservatism)

Notably, Commission President Erik Skalar stated that the philosophy of the FGC and CDFW is to "follow the science" when it comes wildlife management decisions and encouraged listeners to submit written comments to CDFW. Commission Vice President Erika Zavaleta reiterated Commissioner Skalar's statement that the FGC had no role in the CDFW permit process but her stance on the proposal was less clear stating that she "supports the CDFW process and the science on this because something needs to be done to address both the harm to endemic island species and the growing public safety risks associated with introduced mule deer on Catalina. And other options like letting hunters do the work are either not practical, not effective, or not as safe."

The CIC also provided testimony and is scheduled to hold a Community Forum on January 31, 2024, to talk about the "Catalina Island Restoration Project", including the proposal to eradicate mule deer. Several CBH Legislative Representatives have signed up to attend and will continue to gather information on this important issue. Based on the CIC testimony and information provided on their website, the CIC aims to convert fire prone invasive grasslands back to island chaparral, which they claim is impossible without the eradication of mule deer that were introduced to the island over a century ago. Overall, the goal of providing protection for 60 unique species of plants and wildlife found only on Catalina Island is an admirable endeavor but the threat that deer pose to this goal is unsubstantiated.

The CIC further claims that management of deer populations though hunting is "untenable" because of the "cost for guided hunts and logistical constraints posed by the Island's terrain". However, the cost of hunting on Catalina is primarily driven by fees and requirements mandated by the CIC including membership to the CIC, firearms Liability insurance with a minimum coverage of $500,000, and a $200 exchange fee per tag (half of which is refundable as long as the Private Land Management [PLM] tag is returned to the conservancy office within 5 days of successful take, AND no later than December 26). Despite current costs, there is a waiting list for guide services and tags every year. The idea that the Island's terrain is also a constraint is questionable. Only a small portion of the Island is open to hunting and hunters continue to be successful. To read more about hunting on Catalina Island, refer to the CIC website at https://catalinaconservancy.org/resources/permits/hunting-permits/.

If you would like to contribute to our efforts to oppose the CIC proposal to eradicate deer on Catalina based on lack of science and inappropriate use of a Scientific Collection Permit, please donate to the CBH Legislative Defense Fund here: https://cbhsaa.net/Legislative/Donate

Switching gears, CBH/SAA representatives (Amanda Duchardt, Patrick Brannon, and our lobbyist Bill Gaines) also attended a CDFW stakeholder engagement meeting regarding the **Bobcat Management Plan** on January 11, 2024. You may recall, California legislation AB 1254 (effective January 1, 2020), made it unlawful to hunt, trap, or otherwise "take" bobcat, except under special circumstances including a depredation permit. It also tasked CDFW with developing a bobcat management plan to inform and coordinate management decisions regarding bobcat populations. The legislation specifies that the plan shall include (Fish and Game Code Section 4158):

1. A current statewide bobcat population estimate based on the best available science.
2. An assessment of the overall health of the statewide bobcat population (e.g., population trend, disease, toxicant exposure, and genetics).
3. A comprehensive strategy to manage bobcat populations and their habitat throughout the state, including, but not limited to, an assessment of the effects of climate change, such as from drought and wildfires; toxicants; and human development on the state's bobcats, the bobcats' prey, and the bobcats' habitats. The comprehensive strategy shall utilize the principles of adaptive management and incorporate recommendations for monitoring.
4. An investigation of efficacious nonlethal solutions to prevent bobcat predation on livestock, primarily chickens or other domestic animals that the Department of Food and Agriculture deems needing widespread protections from bobcats.
5. Recommendations for regulatory or statutory changes necessary to implement the bobcat management plan.

CDFW initiated the bobcat management plan initiative in 2020, collected data from 2021-2022, and performed data compilation and analysis in 2023. Currently, CDFW is developing the management plan and hopes to have a draft in front of the FGC later this year. The timeline for the FGC to act on the plan is unknown. These efforts always seem to take MUCH longer than anticipated so we'll see…

In general, I was impressed with the comprehensiveness of the study including the number and diversity of methods and data sources that CDFW is leveraging to develop the plan. CDFW identified 48 study areas throughout the state and collected data using camera arrays, fecal DNA, GPS-collar movement, mortality and disease data, and human wildlife conflict data. Additional data is being gathered from the California Department of Food and Agriculture, California bobcat population genomics survey, CDFW Wildlife Incident Reporting system, and working groups. Want to provide your input? Email the Wildlife Diversity Program at wildlifemgt@wildlife.ca.gov

Based on the data gathered, CDFW will create a model for statewide population estimates. The management plan is expected to provide details about the historical and ongoing management and legislation regarding bobcats, bobcat biology, bobcat population monitoring project, disease and toxicology, prey populations and competition, movement ecology, habitat connectivity, habitat loss, tribal authority perspectives, human wildlife conflict, and adaptive management and population monitoring. Many in the hunting community are hopeful that the bobcat management plan will support a decision by the FGC to authorize a bobcat hunting season commencing January 1, 2025, "in any area

determined by the FGC to require a hunt." CDFW staff noted that the plan will include recommendations for sustainable take if hunting is permitted.

But before anyone thinks that a bobcat hunting season is a done deal… I want to note that representatives from Project Coyote and The Center for Biological Diversity also participated in the meeting and were quick to oppose bobcat hunting citing the usual anti-hunter rhetoric about "the majority of Californian's being opposed to hunting." Patrick Brannon (CBH), Mark Hennelly (California Waterfowl Association) and I provided a balanced perspective on hunting and thanked CDFW for their efforts on the plan. We are optimistic that the plan will find that bobcat populations in California are healthy enough to support a hunting season. As always, CBH will advocate for wildlife management decisions supported by the science.

Reminder: Whether you've been involved in archery or hunting your whole life, or are new to this sport, **you have something of value to add to the conversation and I encourage you to reach out to me and the CBH Legislative Committee and share your knowledge and experience!** We look forward to hearing from you soon!