1. Asia, Africa, North America Crack Down on Wildlife Crime
February 18, 2013

Police, Customs and wildlife officers from Asia, Africa and the United States have announced the successful completion of an international enforcement operation aimed at cracking down on organized wildlife crime syndicates.

A press release Monday said the operation, code-named "Cobra," which ran between January 6 and February 5, was the first international effort of its kind to focus on the sharing of investigation information and enforcement efforts towards curtailting rampant wildlife crime.

The announcement said the operation yielded hundreds of arrests, seizures of assorted wildlife specimens from several endangered species, and arms and ammunition from poachers.

Operation COBRA was financially supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s African Elephant Conservation Fund, Royal Thai Police, China Wildlife Conservation Association and the FREELAND Foundation, with in-kind contributions by participating countries in North America, Africa and Asia.

Article link: http://www.voanews.com/content/asia-africa-north-america-crack-down-on-wildlife-crime/1605622.html
2. Chronic wasting disease unlikely to spread in moose, says Alberta government

By Bob Weber, The Canadian Press
February 21, 2013

EDMONTON - Alberta officials say the discovery of one moose with chronic wasting disease doesn't mean the infection could spread through the province's entire population of the animals.

Moose can catch the disease, which is similar to mad cow disease, but aren't likely to pass it to other moose.

"There's no evidence that the disease can or will establish a sustaining nucleus of disease in moose," said Alberta Environment spokeswoman Nikki Booth. "They can get it, they just can't transmit it."

On Tuesday, wildlife officials announced that an adult bull moose that had been killed in a collision with a vehicle last November had been autopsied and diagnosed with chronic wasting disease. The Alberta government says it's the first discovery of CWD in a Canadian moose.

The disease has been present in low levels in Alberta deer for a decade. The sick moose was found near Medicine Hat in southern Alberta, in one of the areas where sick deer have been found.

Affected deer become emaciated and exhibit abnormal behaviours — such as excessive drooling, grinding of teeth and difficulty with orientation — before dying.

Moose, deer and elk are in the same biological family and scientists suspected Alberta moose could be vulnerable to diseases carried by their cervid cousins. There are previous examples of deer infecting moose with chronic wasting disease in Colorado and Wyoming, said Booth.

"CWD only occurs in moose when they overlap with infected deer. Our scientists knew that this could potentially happen and now they've found one."

University of Alberta biologist David Coltman said moose are temperamentally unsuited to be vectors of disease among their own kind.

"They're not likely to pass it from moose to moose just because of the way they live. They don't yard up the way deer do. They're quite territorial and solitary. They're ornery."
Coltman said the discovery of an infected moose probably says more about the rate of infection among deer.

"It is telling us that there are enough infected deer out there that it's possible we're going to start to seeing things like this."

While more infected moose are not expected, Booth said Alberta Environment continues to monitor the area for infected deer and will watch for more sick moose as well.

Government scientists are willing to test the heads of any moose that might be sick, said Booth.

The meat remains safe to eat. Scientists say the infectious parts of the carcass are restricted to the brains and material from the spinal column.

There have been no verified cases of people getting ill from infected deer, elk or moose.

Alberta has been trying to stem the flow of deer with chronic wasting disease coming in from Saskatchewan since 2005. The province once culled thousands of deer from herds along the boundary, but that program has ended.

Since last September, 23 cases of the disease have been diagnosed in deer out of nearly 3,000 specimens sent to the province for testing.

Article link: http://www.edmontonjournal.com/health/Chronic+wasting+disease+unlikely+spre ad+moose+says+Alberta/7992609/story.html

3. Wolf management, moose study funds in limbo

LAURA LUNDQUIST, Chronicle Staff Writer
Posted: Thursday, February 21, 2013 12:15 am

A Montana House subcommittee is dragging its feet on approving funding for state wolf management.

A Joint Appropriations subcommittee overseeing state natural resources and transportation funding has spent two days deliberating the Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks budget, particularly as it pertains to wolves and moose.
FWP administrator Ken McDonald said the department is required by state law, passed in 2011, to allocate $900,000 to wolf management. Until now, that money has financed seven wolf biologists and their program.

After meeting on Tuesday and Wednesday, the committee is still undecided on what to do, and part of it may have to do with confusion over where the money comes from, McDonald said.

“We’ve had the money all along, but in the past, it was all federal money,” McDonald said. “Now because (the state has) taken full control of the wolf program, we’re transitioning to a combination of state and federal funding.”

McDonald is asking for the authority to spend more than $535,000 of state-controlled money, which — combined with federal funds — would bring the program up to $900,000.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife service delisted wolves in Montana because the state had an approved wolf management plan, which included a program of collaring, monitoring and dealing with wolf conflict.

The legislative subcommittee has discussed the possibility of withholding the funds or preventing FWP from spending the money on employees, which would effectively eliminate the jobs of the seven wolf biologists. That would still allow FWP to use the money to pay Wildlife Services to kill wolves but that would not provide the scientific information that FWP is required to maintain under the wolf management plan.

Other possibilities discussed included having other biologists do the work.

McDonald said some of the delay gets into questions of how big government should be while some of it may be just trying to understand the nuances of the funding.

If the program is not funded, Montana will be in violation of its wolf management plan and that could prompt relisting under the Endangered Species Act, said Nick Gevock of the Montana Wildlife Federation.

“We’re continuing to work with the subcommittee members so we can keep wolves from returning to the endangered species list,” Gevock said. “Our regular biologists already have their hands full.”

Other research that is in jeopardy is the moose study that FWP began this year to determine the causes of the decline of the moose population.
Studies in other states appear to indicate that warming temperatures are contributing to the decline. Moose numbers are so low in states such as Minnesota that that state is considering listing the moose under the ESA.

Funding for the moose study comes from moose hunting tags. McDonald said that if the study’s funding isn’t authorized, the money will just sit.

The subcommittee meets for a final day Thursday. Friday is the deadline to have each section approved in order to add it to the state appropriations bill, House Bill 2.

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4. Hoof rot strikes elk
February 27, 2013
By Michele Mihalovich

Corrected version. The earlier story said Erland found that the three elk had selenium and copper deficiencies.

Elk hoof rot, a disease seen predominantly among elk in Southwest Washington, has found its way to the Snoqualmie Valley herds.

Harold Erland, a wildlife biologist with the local Elk Management Group, said Feb. 20 that three elk have been found dead with the disease. There are currently 430 elk in the Snoqualmie Valley, with 150 of those living in and around North Bend, he said.

One North Bend elk dropped dead right at a resident’s home on Maloney Grove Road last August, and another was found near the Encompass parking lot, he said.

The third one was struck by a vehicle and was later found dead at Snoqualmie Middle School on Feb. 17 in Snoqualmie, but Erland said the elk showed signs of the hoof rot disease.

Erland said the disease literally causes an elk’s hoof, or hooves, to rot. He said the elk stumbles and limps around, but at a certain point, is unable to forage and starves to death.
Elk with the hoof disease were first observed in southwest Washington in the mid-1990s, and some elk in Oregon were also exhibiting the disease, according to the Washington Department of Natural Resources website.

But this is the first time the disease has presented itself in the Snoqualmie Valley and it's not known how it got here, Erland said.

"Because we don't know how it got here, we're not sure how to contain it," he said. "Cattle and sheep can be inoculated for the disease, but that really can't be done with elk."

Erland, who performed the necropsies on the three dead elk, did not collect blood samples. He said research has shown that elk afflicted with hoof rot often have selenium and copper deficiencies, and he will ask the Department of Fish and Wildlife if he can put salt blocks fortified with selenium and copper out for the elk to see if it helps.

"Right now, the problem isn't that bad for our elk, but I don't want to wait for it to get bad," Erland said. "For right now, we'll be keeping our eyes out for limping elk, because that is a good indication of hoof rot."

Article link: [http://snovalleystar.com/2013/02/27/hoof-rot-strikes-elk](http://snovalleystar.com/2013/02/27/hoof-rot-strikes-elk)

5. Biologists explore link between amphibian behavior and deadly disease

SAN FRANCISCO, Feb. 27, 2013 -- In a new study, biologists will investigate the connection between amphibians' social habits and a disease that has killed a record number of frogs, toads and salamanders worldwide.

This week, San Francisco State University biologists received a $595,000 grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) to explore the relationship between amphibian social behavior and a fungus called *Batrachochoytrium dendrobatidis* (Bd). This harmful fungus attacks an amphibian's skin and causes the disease Chytridiomycosis.

Many animals have evolved social or cooperative behaviors that increase their
chances of survival. Among amphibians, frogs sometimes huddle together in piles for warmth, and some salamanders lay their eggs in communal nests, perhaps to help each other ward off predators.

"We are investigating the evolution of amphibians' social behavior after a deadly disease shows up by comparing populations with and without a history of this fungal pathogen," said Andy Zink, assistant professor of biology at SF State. Zink is principal investigator on the three-year NSF-funded project, which he will conduct in collaboration with SF State biologist Vance Vredenburg.

In the last 30 years, the Bd fungus appears to have wiped out nearly 400 amphibian species across the world. Because the spores of the fungus are water borne, it is likely to spread among land-dwelling amphibians through skin to skin contact. Therefore, Zink and Vredenburg believe that terrestrial amphibian populations with a longer history of the disease may have evolved away from communal nesting, since this social habit may help the fungus spread.

"If life depends on it, animal behavior can evolve quite rapidly, even in 5-10 years," Zink said. Most animal behaviors have a genetic basis -- an individual's genes shape whether they will be gregarious or antisocial. If being cooperative aids the survival of individuals or their offspring, natural selection favors this trait and social behavior becomes the norm. Zink and Vredenburg plan to test if new threats in the environment may also reverse this trend.

"The arrival of a devastating pathogen like Bd could mean that the costs of communal nesting outweigh the benefits," said Zink, whose previous research has examined egg cannibalism and fighting among earwigs and mathematical models of social evolution.

Using lab and field studies, Zink and Vredenburg will document the communal nesting habits of a common salamander that has been exposed to Bd since the 1970s, but little is known about the fate of populations in the wild infected with this fungus. Known as slender salamanders, these worm-like creatures build nests under logs and rocks. Sometimes as many as 15 females lay their eggs in the same nest.

"These salamanders are the most common amphibian in California," Zink said. "They're easy to find -- you can even spot them on campus. This is the perfect group of species for the questions we're interested in."

Zink and Vredenburg plan to focus on seven of the 28 species found in California, because thousands of individuals of these species are preserved in museums.

Field observations of salamander behavior will be combined with historical data about the Bd fungus in these same populations. The researchers and their
graduate students will use thousands of museum specimens, collected over the last 100 years. By testing DNA from the preservative-soaked skins of these creatures, they will map the timing and spread of Bd among California's slender salamanders.

"We'll look at how the nesting habits of distinct salamander populations correspond to their level of infection and how long the pathogen has been in their community," said Vredenburg, an associate professor of biology at SF State.

The study will be one of the first to examine the relationship between amphibian social behavior and the Bd fungus. Zink and Vredenburg believe this study is important because behavior could be a missing link in understanding how the disease can be better managed.

"Chytridiomycosis, the disease caused by Bd, is the worst vertebrate disease in history, and it's really difficult to predict which species will be affected and what we can do about saving those species," Vredenburg said. "The major factor that hasn't yet been studied in Bd disease ecology is the effects of the behavior of the host."

In addition to focusing on behavior, the researchers will test the skin of salamanders in the field to see whether some populations have beneficial symbiotic bacteria on their skin that may help them survive the fungus. This continues Vredenburg's previous research, which explores the possibility that treating endangered amphibians with beneficial bacteria could help them survive Bd outbreaks without dying.

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6. Six Ways Sequestration Will Hurt Parks, Wildlife

Spending cuts mean fewer tours, campsites, and jobs.

Kenneth Brower

for National Geographic News

Published February 28, 2013

Lovers of the United States' landscape, wildlife, and parks will feel the pain of mandatory spending cuts set to take effect this Friday, warn leaders of the nation's land agency.

At a press conference just days short of the March 1 deadline, Jonathan Jarvis, director of the National Park Service, and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, outlined how so-called "sequestration" will hurt the country in general and national parks in particular. (See pictures of the top ten national park landmarks.)

1. Hits to the national wallet. The national parks return more than $10 for every dollar invested by the taxpayer, Salazar pointed out. The park system is a profit center as productive as any in our economy. In 2011, Maine's Acadia National Park drew 2.4 million visitors, contributed $186 million to the state's economy, and supported 3,000 jobs. Yellowstone National Park drew 3.4 million visitors, contributed $333 million, and supported 5,000 jobs. Everglades National Park drew 934,000 visitors, contributed $147 million, and supported 2,400 jobs. And these are just three of the 398 national parks, monuments, memorials, reserves, preserves, historic sites, seashores, lakeshores, and battlefields across the country.

"In 2011," summarized Salazar, "279 million visitors came to our national parks, pumped 30 billion dollars into the economy, and supported 252,000 jobs."

The report for 2012, just out, shows that park visitation grew by three million, to 283 million.

The park system is also doing its part to address the U.S. trade imbalance. Last year, according to Salazar, the parks drew 62 million international visitors and $152 million in foreign capital. International visitors stay longer in the parks and spend more.
Before the specter of sequester rose, the Park Service set a goal of attracting a hundred million foreign visitors by the end of 2021. (See National Geographic's recommendations for the best national park hikes.)

The sequester will require a 5 percent cut in the budget of each park. While this might not seem like a devastating percentage, the secretary said, in fact it would strike at the heart of the limited discretionary funds available to the Park Service.

In the context of the Department of Interior as a whole, he said, it would be like closing down the entire Bureau of Land Management.

2. Campground and cave closures in the Southeast. As examples of the belt-tightening required of every park to achieve a 5 percent cut, Director Jarvis picked the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, where five campgrounds and picnic areas will be closed; the Blue Ridge Parkway, where seven contact stations will shut down; and Mammoth Cave National Park, where a portion of the cave tours will be eliminated. That may be good news for the bats, but not for the hundreds of thousands of visitors who explore these caverns each year.

3. Unhappy kids in the Northeast. At Cape Cod National Park, the Provincetown Visitor Center will be closed. At Independence National Historical Park, the interpretive program will be cut in half.

"And at Gettysburg," said Jarvis, "this year being the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, we'll be reducing our education programs. Twenty-four hundred kids from the towns in the area will not be able to participate." (See vintage photos of the national parks.)

4. Empty silos in the Midwest. The Minuteman Missile Site in South Dakota will close all tours, turning away 50,000 annual visitors. The Cold War, in that sense, will grow a little colder.

5. Snowy park roads in the West. The month of March, just as the sequester would hit, is when many parks open. It's also when the National Park Service hires "seasonals," the men and women who fight fires, provide extra law enforcement for peak months, and do search-and-rescue-hiring that will have to be curtailed. Also in March, water systems are reactivated and snowy roads are plowed.

"In the Rocky Mountain region, in Yellowstone and Glacier, we will be delaying plowing of the roads to open those up, sometimes as much as a month," Jarvis said.

"That delay will have a direct impact on gateway communities around Cody or Jackson Hole, or up in Glacier at Whitefish. The communities there, they know
their season starts the day the roads open and closes the day the roads close. That can be as much as a million dollars a day lost to the local economy."

At Grand Teton National Park, the Jenny Lake Visitor Center will close. In Yosemite, plowing of the Tioga Road, a principal route over the Sierra Nevada, will be delayed, affecting 2,000 to 3,000 travelers a day. Delays in plowing the road to Wonder Lake, in Alaska’s Denali National Park, will affect as many as 4,000 visitors a day.

6. Thistles and pythons and carp and wild boars. Jarvis reminded the press that national parks need constant defending from invasive plants and animals. Funding cuts will compromise control programs throughout the park system, he said, including efforts to remove yellow star thistle from Yosemite, Burmese pythons from the Everglades, and feral pigs from Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

People planning to visit national parks in the months ahead are urged to check the National Park Service’s website for information on closures.


7. Montana hunters, trappers kill at least 223 wolves

February 28, 2013 10:24 am • Associated Press

With at least 223 gray wolves killed by Montana hunters and trappers during a season that ends Thursday, Gov. Steve Bullock and wildlife officials said they now have the right rules in place as the state seeks to reduce the predator’s population.

Montana’s wolf harvest numbers are up roughly 25 percent from last winter. That’s on top of 104 wolves that were killed by government wildlife agents and ranchers last year due to livestock attacks or other conflicts.

Yet because the animals breed prolifically, Fish, Wildlife and Parks Director Jeff Hagener said he expects at most a modest drop in the population from last year’s estimate of about 650 wolves.

About 400 to 500 animals statewide would maintain a sustainable population, he said, but that’s just a rough guideline and not a definitive goal.

Next season could see a sharper population drop, after Bullock on Feb. 13 signed a law that loosened hunting and trapping rules. That came in the wake of
pressure from livestock owners and hunters who have pushed for the state to be more aggressive against the animals since wolves lost their endangered species protections two years ago.

Bullock said in an interview this week that the new law gives the state the leeway it needs to effectively manage the animals. It lets hunters take up to three wolves, eliminates no-kill zones around Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks, reduces non-resident hunting fees and allows for electronic calls to lure the animals.

"I think that the bill I signed strikes a reasonable balance, and is an opportunity for us to be able to manage them, but manage them in a way that we don't get the right to manage taken away from us," Bullock said.

Wildlife advocates have warned that allowing too many wolves to be killed could again put the gray wolf's future in peril in Montana, following a two-decade restoration effort that brought the species back from widespread extermination across the Northern Rockies.

In Idaho, where the 2012-2013 wolf season runs through June, hunters and trappers so far have killed at least 245 of the animals.

Hunters in Wyoming killed 43 wolves out of a 52-animal quota during a season that ended Dec. 31. The state took over wolf management just last year after overcoming concerns from federal officials that the state's management policies would not protect the animals.

Federal officials are monitoring wolves in the three states for five years to determine if endangered species protections should to be reinstated. That could also happen if wildlife advocates successfully petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to intervene.

Bullock and Hagener said that even with the more liberal hunting and trapping rules now in place, Montana wildlife commissioners can step in and rein in wolf killing if needed.

That could include re-imposing quotas in some areas, which were lifted across most of the state last year. Hagener said such limits would make the most sense in areas with relatively few livestock conflicts, such as along the Rocky Mountain Front.

By contrast, more aggressive policies are suited to areas where wolves continue to cause problems even after entire packs have been removed by wildlife control agents, such as around Avon, Phillipsburg and the southern Bitterroot Valley, Hagener said.
"We have some areas where we probably have an overabundance, and other areas where there's more of a stable number," he said.


8. Drought-starved habitat, snow hit Kansas wildlife hard

By Michael Pearce
Wichita Eagle

*Posted on Thursday, 02.28.13*

Robert Penner's rural Ellinwood bird feeders have been busy for the past 10 days. The normal crowd of scarlet-colored cardinals, lemony goldfinches, bouncy juncos and other regulars have kept him entertained.

But the building numbers of meadowlarks, tree sparrows, pheasants, quail and red-winged blackbirds have him concerned.

"Those are stuff that don’t normally come to feeders," said Penner, Nature Conservancy of Kansas avian program manager. "That’s an indicator they’re really struggling to find food. There’s just not much out there with all of this snow."

Actually there wasn’t much food or cover even before the two snowstorms that left 15 to 20 inches of snow over a wide swatch of Kansas.

Never easy on wildlife, these deep snows come after two years of extreme drought that had already left the landscape lacking food for wildlife, said Jim Pitman, Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism small game biologist. Pre-storm cover was already barely thick enough to offer protection from predators and the elements.

In the long run, the moisture could help rebuild habitat lost to the drought.

But for now, the one-two punch of poor habitat and the smothering snow doesn’t bode well for many animals, Pitman said, and could be especially deadly for some prairie birds.

Many prairie species have few birds to spare.

Penner said grassland bird populations on Nature Conservancy properties have "plummeted" since the drought began.
“We had eggs just getting fried in the nests because of the high temperatures, and then the young ones that hatched had no places to hide,” he said. “We’ve had almost no (reproduction) for two years. Populations were already dramatically reduced.”

Pitman agreed, saying Kansas’ pheasant population going into last fall’s season was probably the lowest in decades because of poor reproduction.

That resulted in a multi-million-dollar bite from the rural economy as sportsmen didn’t spend money on their annual quest for long-tailed rooster pheasants.

He fears hawks, coyotes and owls could further reduce a pheasant population that has few places to hide in the snow.

Bobwhite quail, which are generally more drought tolerant and have had decent populations the past few years, also could struggle to find food because of their small size.

Some habitat was lost after nearly 500,000 acres of Conservation Reserve Program grasses, places where wildlife have found shelter and food in past winters, was cut for hay or grazed by cattle last summer.

The federal government makes payments to farmers to grow native grasses instead of crops to reduce crop surpluses, combat erosion and provide good wildlife habitat.

It’s one of the few times in the program’s 27-year history that haying and grazing have been allowed to help reduce the stress on Kansas livestock owners.

Ron Klataske, Audubon of Kansas director, said the loss of CRP grasses “is going to have a possibly dramatic impact on the survival of many wildlife species.”

He predicted the missing habitat could lead to wildlife losses that could, if conditions don’t improve, take years or decades to recover.

Penner said another problem is that many birds also are being killed on Kansas highways.

There, thousands of birds have congregated on the cleared shoulders of roads to feed in areas opened by plows or chemicals.

“Coming back from church Sunday we were braking almost constantly trying to avoid birds,” he said. “They’re coming in from where they usually feed in the fields, sometimes in flocks of hundreds. They’re not used to being around vehicles so a lot are getting killed.”

As well as pheasants and meadowlarks, high numbers of red-winged blackbirds, longspurs, robins and horned larks have recently been seen dead on Kansas roads.
But as bleak as conditions have been in some areas, biologists say they could have been worse.

Pitman was thankful temperatures haven’t been brutally cold, which requires wildlife to need more food to survive.

A thick layer of ice, such as from freezing rain or prolonged cold after significant melting, can make scratching out food nearly impossible.

In the past, such icing or rapidly building snow drifts also have entombed roosting ground birds and lead to widespread die-offs.

Though hardly balmy, the long-term forecast seems to have enough sunshine, above-freezing temperatures and wind to help expose some feeding areas and cover within a few days.

For the wildlife that survives the deep snows, the sooner they can get to food and shelter the better, so they can rebuild their bodies.

Pitman and Penner said birds still weak at the start of spring nestings usually produce fewer eggs and young. Klataske is concerned about species soon migrating northward.

“It takes a lot of energy to get hundreds, if not thousands of miles,” he said. “They can’t just jump on a plane or train.”

But in the long run, the snows in which many birds perished, could be a God-send for their species because of the moisture.

Before the storms, Penner said reproduction for many species of ground-nesting birds looked bleak this spring because of a near complete absence of residual cover. “Hopefully this moisture will soak in, and we’ll get some good rain and some green grass growing this spring,” he said.

Pitman agreed, saying many species of wildlife need good conditions for reproduction this year.

“The long-term benefits probably far outweigh the current impact with mortalities,” he said. “We have to have some moisture and early growth if we want to turn (low populations) around.”

Article link: http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/02/28/3259059/drought-starved-habitat-snow-hit.html
9. Warmer winters bedevil moose in Minnesota

Chuck Raasch, USA TODAY  1:09p.m. EST March 1, 2013

Scientists aren't sure, but a blood-sucking tick may be one cause of the species' decline. As many as 120,000 ticks have been found on a single moose.

Minnesota's decision last month to end its moose-hunting season because of the animal's rapidly declining numbers in the state has made the gangly, iconic symbol of cold northlands a new player in the debate over climate change.

Some scientists attribute the threats to climate change; others say more study is needed. Doug Inkley, a senior scientist at the National Wildlife Federation, says moose are "the canary in the coal mine. As a large-bodied animal that needs cool temperatures, it is particularly susceptible to climate change."

While the polar bear's problems are well-publicized, he says, "moose are in our back yards. This is a very unfortunate and prominent declaration that climate change is in our back yards."

The most stressed moose population now appears to be in Minnesota, where it has fallen from 8,840 to 2,760 in seven years, a drop of 69%, including a drop of 35% in the past year alone. In response, the state closed the fall hunting season and embarked on a high-tech study of what is killing the moose.

"It is survival of the fittest, and ... moose are ending up on the wrong end of the stick," says Gary Botzek, executive director of the Minnesota Conservation Federation.

He suspects that milder winters in recent years are raising the survival rates of blood-sucking ticks that attack moose by the tens of thousands and that warmer-than-normal summers have further stressed the animals.

The drop in the moose population was a "much steeper decline than we had seen in the past," says Lou Cornicelli, who is leading Minnesota's study. He says he's not sure what is causing the decline. The state put GPS collars on 100 moose last month to check whether ticks are the primary cause. Other factors could be a brain worm carried by deer or kills by a growing wolf population, he says.

The stress on moose depends on the latitude where they live. Moose populations are doing well in Alaska and Maine, where colder climates and vast, changing landscapes are moose heaven. Maine, in fact, is considering raising the number
of moose-hunting licenses from 3,725 last year to 4,000 in 2013. Its population is estimated at 76,000.

Lee Kantar, Maine moose biologist, says the population has stayed healthy because it is farther north than other stressed populations and because Maine’s logging industry creates an ideal environment for moose that depend on young trees and ever-evolving forests for food and shelter.

David James, an Alaska state moose specialist in the Fairbanks region, says the state’s moose population — estimated in the tens of thousands — remains healthy.

In states on the southern end of moose range, warmer winters, dwindling habitat, disease and predators are all being studied as possible reasons for falling moose populations.

"The answers are a lot more complicated than people want them to be," says Russ Mason of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Mason says a commission is likely to recommend against holding the state’s first modern moose hunting season this year because the population — an estimated 451 moose in the Upper Peninsula — is barely stable.

Montana is counting its moose population and studying what is killing them. "We still have a relatively healthy population but not as healthy as it was," says Ron Aasheim of the State Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

New Hampshire, where ticks are a problem, has cut its hunting licenses from 408 last year to 281 for 2013. The moose population has dwindled from an estimated 7,000 in 1996 to about 4,500 today.

Kristine Rines of the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, says the state has had shorter winters, which the ticks exploit.

Rines says biologists have found as many as 120,000 ticks on a single moose. The insects not only cause anemia but force moose to rub, reducing their coats and making them susceptible to hypothermia.

Botzek says Minnesotans worry about losing an animal that has long symbolized the state's outdoors.

"Moose are pretty important animals to our psyche here in Minnesota," he says. "We lose moose, I don't think we are getting them back."

10. Mississippi lawmakers consider bounty on wild hogs

Hogs called epidemic in state

UPDATED 9:20 AM CST Mar 07, 2013

JACKSON, Miss. —Wildlife officials said wild hogs are an epidemic in the state, which is leading Mississippi lawmakers to think about putting a bounty on them.

Wildlife officials said the feral hog problem is causing hundreds of thousands of dollars in crop damage each year. 16 WAPT saw the problem first-hand in 2011 in Yazoo County. The animals were more visible then because of flooding and the lack of high ground.

"They are causing damage to wildlife habitat and farms, and we are seeing a lot of damage to our forests," said Ed Penny, of the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks.

The state already has a bounty program for keeping beavers in check. Now, Mississippi legislators are looking for a way to cut back the wild hog growth.

"They are proliferating in untold numbers. We've got more today than we did yesterday afternoon," said Sen. Giles Ward, R-Louisville.

Ward said the state may have to come up with the money for the bounty program because the cost to farmers is mounting.

"The farmers in Mississippi are suffering hundreds of thousands of dollars to their crops from these feral hogs that are going through and rooting up everything," Ward said.

But state wildlife officials said educating the public, and hunting, trapping and killing the hogs would be more effective than setting a bounty.

"Bounty programs in the past history have different levels of success," Penny said.

Mississippi allows wild hog hunting year-round.

Wildlife experts said it's hard to count the wild hog population growth. A sow can produce two to three litters a year.
If you feel like our crowded planet is taking a tough toll on the wild, you're not alone.

A new poll finds a clear majority of Americans believe the world's growing human population is driving wildlife species toward extinction and is making climate change worse. Respondents also said addressing the human population -- which topped 7 billion in 2011 -- is an important environmental issue and that society has a "moral obligation" to address wildlife extinctions related to population growth.

The national poll of 657 registered voters was commissioned by the Center for Biological Diversity. It was conducted by Public Policy Polling on Feb. 22, 23 and 24. The poll has a margin of error of +-3.85 percent.

Population isn't talked about much, but this poll shows it's an emerging environmental issue that Americans recognize as a critical component of protecting wildlife from extinction.

We're hearing it from scientists, too, who say population growth as a driving factor in so many of our environmental issues today. You don't have to look far, whether it's sprawling development crowding out Florida panthers and sea turtles, loss of wild habitat for San Joaquin kit foxes in California or the climate crisis pushing polar bears ice seals toward extinction. It's heartening to see that most Americans understand these connections and don't want to see them ignored.

Here are some highlights from the poll:

- 64 percent said that, with the human population expected to hit 10 billion by 2050, wildlife will be adversely affected.
- 61 percent said they are already concerned about the rate that wildlife are disappearing.
- 60 percent said they "strongly agreed" or "somewhat agreed" that human population growth is driving animal species to extinction.
60 percent said our society has a "moral responsibility" to address wildlife extinctions in the face of a growing population.

59 percent said they "strongly agreed" or "somewhat agreed" that addressing the effects of human population growth is "an important environmental issue."

57 percent believe human population growth is "significantly impacting the disappearance of wildlife."

57 percent said they "strongly agreed" or "somewhat agreed" that population growth is making climate change worse.

54 percent said stabilizing population growth will help protect the environment.

The Center for Biological Diversity launched its human population campaign in 2009 to highlight the connection between the world's rapidly growing population and the effect it has on endangered species, wildlife habitat, the climate and overall environmental health. As part of the campaign, the Center has given away nearly 500,000 Endangered Species Condoms intended as a way to get people talking about this critical issue.

The Center advocates for a number of ways to address population, including universal access and adequate funding for family planning services, empowerment of women, sustainable development, a reduction in the consumption of natural resources and personal decisions that lessen the impacts on wildlife and the environment.

If we're going to address some of the biggest environmental problems we face, population has to be part of the conversation. This poll is evidence that Americans are ready to start talking about population and dealing with impacts.

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