

Dear Chair Ware and Members of the House Agriculture, Chesapeake and Natural Resources Committee:

As a resident of Roanoke, Virginia, I respectfully urge you to vote in support of HB1247, which would ban wildlife killing contests. I was lucky enough to learn early on what the phrase "Virginia is for lovers" truly means. Virginia has exquisite and diverse outdoor landscapes, and I started exploring them at a young age. My father's family is based in the Virginia Beach area, so my earliest memories include seeing dolphins in the bay when visiting my grandparents. My mother's family lives in the heart of the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains in Roanoke. Growing up, I hiked on the Appalachian Trail with my family before I could even tie my own shoes. I can recall the abundant wildlife that I was able to observe at a safe distance, from deer to coyotes to black bears to an untold number of bird species. I earned my bachelor's degree in Northern Virginia on the outskirts of Washington, D.C., which made me miss the quiet mountains I called home. Now, I am a proud homeowner in Roanoke, Virginia. It has become abundantly clear to me throughout my experiences that "Virginia is for lovers" doesn't just encompass the beautiful nature we are privileged to enjoy. It means that whether you are passionate about hiking or boating or exploring the city, Virginia has what you love.

Virginians come from a wide variety of backgrounds with different value systems, and I understand that not everyone shares my perspective. That said, identifying as an "outdoor recreationist" or "nature lover" has never inspired me to want to kill innocent wildlife in large numbers for no reason other than to win money and prizes in a contest. And I cannot understand why Virginia continues to allow wildlife killing contests in the state. These are heinous events in which participants compete to kill the biggest, smallest, or largest number of a particular wildlife species — most often coyotes, foxes, and bobcats. At least 18 contests have been held in Virginia from 2015 to 2021. As just one example, during the multistate Eastern U.S. Predator Calling Championship weigh-in, held in Virginia since 2017, participants killed over 800 animals and were awarded more than \$20,000 in cash and prizes over the course of one weekend last year.

After engaging in killing sprees, participants usually do not even make use of the animals whose lives they have taken, discarding bodies out of public sight. Learning this stopped me in my tracks, as it contradicts the professed values of hunters whom I have known throughout my life.

Wildlife management professionals are even plainly calling out these money-driven competitions as being inhumane and serving no legitimate purpose. As Jim Zieler, hunter and former chair of the Arizona Game and Fish Commission, told the [Washington Post](#) in 2019, "There has been a lot of social outcry against this, and you can kind of understand why. It's difficult to stand up and defend a practice like this."

Mike Finley, former chair of the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission, has called wildlife killing contests "[slaughter fests](#)" and "stomach-turning examples of wanton waste." In [testimony](#) to the Oregon Senate Judiciary Committee, he wrote, "Killing large numbers of predators as part of an organized contest or competition is inconsistent with sound, science-based wildlife management and antithetical to the concepts of sportsmanship and fair chase."

Further, the [best available science](#) does not support the misguided beliefs of event organizers and participants, who often defend these killing sprees by claiming that “reducing predators” will boost deer or turkey populations or make farm animals safer. Randomly killing coyotes disrupts their social structure, which, ironically, encourages more breeding and migration, resulting in even more coyotes. In fact, there are a number of commonsense, [nonlethal steps](#) that Virginians — both urban and rural — can take to coexist with coyotes.

I firmly believe that Virginia is for lovers, not killers, and I’ve yet to hear one reason that wildlife killing contests benefit greater wildlife conservation efforts, outdoor recreationists, or Virginians at large. If we have learned anything as a society over the last year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I would hope it is that we should listen to science and relevant experts. The science isn’t blurry or gray here. Wildlife killing contests contradict modern conservation science, as well as hunting ethics, and have no place in Virginia’s wildlife management plans.

As a growing number of states take responsible steps to crack down on wildlife killing contests — including Maryland, whose legislature recently passed a ban with broad bipartisan support — it’s time for Virginia to align its wildlife management practices with constituents’ values and take a stand against wildlife killing contests. The Virginia that raised me is better than what these contests represent, and I urge the Committee to vote in support of HB1247 to ban these gruesome events.

Sincerely,

Sydney Hearst
Roanoke, Virginia