

Subverting the Will of the People on Hunting

Seattle Times 1999

IN November 1996, Washington voters approved Initiative 655 to ban the and unsporting trophy-hunting practices of bear baiting and hound hunting of bears, cougars and bobcats.

Voters approved I-655 in 30 of 39 counties and in 47 of 49 legislative districts in the state. It was a landslide, with both urban and rural areas overwhelmingly favoring the initiative. It was the only all-volunteer petition to qualify for the 1996 statewide ballot.

Now, a total of 75 votes - 25 in the state Senate and 50 in the state House, along with a signature from the governor - may undo what 240,000 petition signers and 1.4 million voters enacted.

State Sen. Pam Roach and a small group of other extreme pro-hunting factions - who vehemently opposed I-655 during 1996 - have introduced five bills (Senate Bill 5001, SB 5068, SB 5133, SB 5120 and House Bill 1012) to gut the initiative. They want to reinstate the unspeakable practices of shooting bears feeding at bait piles and shooting bears, cougars or bobcats off tree limbs after they have been chased with a pack of radio-collared dogs.

I-655 did not ban the hunting of bears, cougars and bobcats - only the unsporting trophy-hunting methods banned already for deer, elk and other big game. And, importantly, I-655 allows the state to use bait or dogs to kill individual bears or cougars that threaten public safety or private property. I-655 balanced the need to control problem animals with the broader ethical concern of not allowing untroublesome animals to be killed as trophies in inhumane and unfair ways.

The fact is, Roach and her hunting allies made their arguments against I-655 during the 1996 campaign and voters rejected them. Does it surprise anyone that the public has so little confidence in lawmakers when they try to substitute their judgment for that of the voters? If Roach and other baiting and hounding advocates feel strongly about overturning I-655, they should qualify an initiative for the ballot with volunteer petitioners and ask the question directly of voters. They should not conduct an end run around the voters.

Roach and others are calling for a repeal of I-655 based on their purported concern for public safety, citing an alleged increase in cougar-human "incidents" from 560 in 1996 to 900 in 1998. There are several flaws in their reasoning.

-- First, the state defines cougar "incidents" in absurdly broad terms. The preponderance of the so-called "incidents" are mere sightings of cougars. While it is not surprising that sightings would increase in number - given that human development continues to encroach on wildlife habitat and that cougars have a higher profile since the I-655 campaign - many sightings are undoubtedly cases of mistaken identity with golden retrievers, deer and even tabby cats reported as cougars. Worse still, other "incidents" are surely fabricated accounts called in by opponents to undermine public confidence in the initiative.

-- If the state were to count deer sightings as deer-human "incidents," we would have hundreds of thousands of incidents each year. We would have millions of raccoon-human "incidents," demonstrating how meaningless the concept is in gauging legitimate conflicts.

-- Overly broad definitions aside, sanctioning the trophy hunting of cougars with packs of dogs will not eliminate the possibility of occasional cougar-human encounters. Reputable cougar scientists spoke out during the I-655 campaign and convincingly declared that trophy hunting will do nothing to diminish the remote possibility that a cougar will attack a person. Cougar incidents - rare as they are - occur in states with or without hound-hunting seasons.

It is important to note that Washington did not break new ground by passing I-655. California - with six

times as many people as Washington and twice as many cougars - has banned all cougar hunting since 1971. After voters codified the cougar hunting ban in 1990, trophy hunting groups - citing safety concerns - lobbied the Legislature to put the issue to another popular vote. In 1996, voters affirmed the cougar hunting ban yet again with a bigger majority than ever.

In Oregon, voters approved an initiative nearly identical to I-655 in 1994. Once again, trophy hunting groups trumped up charges against cougars. There too, voters reaffirmed the hound-hunting ban by a huge majority.

Cougar populations have not increased significantly in Washington because of the passage of I-655. Too little time has elapsed to allow that to occur. Yet, even if more time had passed, there would be no surge in cougar numbers. Cougar scientists have long ago proved that cougars regulate their own numbers and do not overpopulate. Please contact your state legislators and Gov. Locke and urge them to honor the will of the people and to respect their recent judgment.

Lisa Wathne is Washington field representative for the Humane Society of the United States