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Please keep these topics in mind to follow this report; hunters contributed \$50 million to 25 Central and West Texas counties in 1996. In a 13-month period, Animal Damage Control agents caught 128 coyotes over a portion of Reagan County and all of Irion County. Bounty payments added 47 more scalps, making a total of 175 head. And last, rancher participation in the two-county predator program dropped 50 percent from 1988 to 1996, or from 1170 sections to under 600 sections.

I was in South Texas when I picked up the figures on the hunters' contribution to our economy. In the same edition, the classified section of the Corpus Christi newspaper ran ads of ranches offering leases for \$2850 a gun, or some three or four times more than the usual rate around Mertzon. No mention was made of extra service. No wonder leases were so easy to sell at the ranch. Without knowing, I was running the biggest open range discount house east of the Pecos River at 600 bucks a gun for a season lease.

A price of \$2850 to harvest three deer equals the gross income on 40 feeder lambs or five steer calves. Takes a lot more time for a redcap to reach the age he spends his dough on lease hunting than it does to wean a steer or a mutton lamb. Yet the state's hunter population runs over 900,000 head and the cities brim with overpopulation, promising more to come. The trick was going to be to sell extended term

leases, so when the coyotes ate up the fawns like they had north of us and out west of the Pecos, we'd have the hunters stuck with the deal.

On the long drive home from the coast, the 50 percent drop in the herders' support of predator control in Irion and Reagan counties came to mind also. Instead of contributing my part, I decided I was going to start using the club dues to put up deer blinds and advertise for hunting. All it took to change over from becoming a supporter to a free rider was saying, "I don't like government trappers" three times in a row. After the third declaration, add, "It's the county's responsibility to pay trappers, not mine."

Works every time using the same thought process to meet other situations involving the conscience. Orphan homes and such like pester me all the time over the telephone at the ranch. They hang up right away after I tell them, "This is the United States of America, home of the brave, and not a sanctuary for a bunch of sniveling kids." First time I used the ploy, I felt sorry for the orphans, but today the Almagated Union for the Salvation of the Most Pitiful Widows in the World couldn't move my heart, much less my pocketbook.

Predator control for the first time last year ran higher per head on my flock than shearing expense. Shearing expense, however, is a selfish expense, paid only to harvest my wool clip. But using the 50 percent dropout figure on a

total of about 50,000 or 60,000 head of sheep in the protected area, I am getting twice as much for my money helping outfits unable or unwilling to pay their part.

Suppose the ranch winters 2000 head of sheep. On the books, the numbers need to reflect the side benefit of how many head of other folks' sheep and goats and first-calf heifers are protected by my dues. I don't know how the IRS treats chumps who throw their dough around like squirrels raiding a bird feeder, but every day the newspaper scribes claim the new IRS is going to be as lenient and loving as the ring-around-the-rosy referees at the nursery school.

A herder was by the ranch the other day telling of how 25 years ago, he made a lot of money from wintering oldcrop lambs on his outfit in Central Texas. After trying every kind of guard animal except Polly parrots and killer bees, he was now concerned about the deer crop.

"What is a big surprise," he said, "is that now that it's too late, I receive assessments every year for predator control from a trapping club I saw fail 20 years ago from lack of interest."

Often, community support increases after the sheep and goat men are wiped out and the packs move in on the townsite. In Midland, new day coyotes, unafraid of man, pick off kitties and dogs every evening on the outskirts of the city. Kids playing outside are brought indoors. Ridiculous as it seems, country-wise parents, fearful of reprisal by

environmentalists, pass up the chance of shooting the marauders as they raid garbage cans and eat the pet food.

In the old days, ranch people delighted in buying each other rodeo tickets and giving to the Boy's Ranch, or supporting the church. Who knows? When the country runs out of sheep and goats, maybe the churches and the Boy's Ranch will come to our rescue.