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https://missoulian.com/opinion/column/article_3b400554-12cb-4684-977a-c309befd8d65.html

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https://billingsgazette.com/opinion/column/article_6b801ce0-fb66-57d9-945d-82ecd04ebe4d.html

Missoula Currents, on May 28, 2026:

<https://missoulacurrent.com/dark-money-wildlife/>



FOOTLOOSE MONTANA

Dark money in politics — dark money in lethal wildlife management | Anja Heister

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Across America, concern about dark money in politics is growing. When Pete Buttigieg recently spoke in Butte about Initiative 194, a ballot proposal designed to prevent corporations from contributing “anything of value” to political campaigns or candidates — he touched a nerve that extends far beyond elections. Because in Montana, one of the clearest examples of concentrated special-interest influence is lethal wildlife management.

For decades, Montanans have been told that increasingly aggressive wolf killing quotas, expanded trapping seasons, neck snares, predator killing contests, and anti-predator policies and massive, recreational trapping of "furbearing" animals merely reflect “science-based wildlife management.” But follow the money and a different picture emerges: a tightly interconnected political culture in which trophy hunting and trapping organizations exert extraordinary influence over lethal wildlife policy.

For example, the state of Idaho makes payments to the Foundation for Wildlife Management, infamous for offering cash payments and prizes to wolf killers in Idaho and Montana; FWP receives donations connected to major trophy-hunting and trapping interests, including the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the Montana Trapper Association. These organizations fund a senseless war against wolves and "furbearing" animals. They also try to normalize the distorted view that Montana’s wolves and other wild animals are not essential members of the living world but rather targets whose deaths should be incentivized and celebrated.

FWP — a private trophy hunting and trapping club?

When organizations, whose predominant interest is to protect trophy hunters and trappers, contribute financially to wildlife-killing programs, they help shape public narratives and political expectations surrounding predators. They create a culture in which Montana’s wolves and other wild animals become politically expendable and increasingly vulnerable to extreme, out-of-control lethal "management" policies implemented by anti-wolf and anti-wildlife legislators, a state wildlife agency that benefits financially from sending wolves to their brutal death in a neck snare, foothold trap and getting shot in their gut to inflict maximal suffering.

The parallel to Initiative 194 impossible to ignore

If we recognize that corporate money can distort democracy, why would we assume organized financial influence cannot distort wildlife governance?

Just like dark money from corporations with certain interests influencing politics (which petition 194 would end), so does dark money from trophy hunting and trapping organizations help ensuring a continuation of senseless trophy hunting of wolves and trapping of wild animals for their fur and for profit.

Wildlife policy may seem emotionally distant from campaign finance reform, but the underlying issue is identical: concentrated power shaping public systems in ways that do not reflect broader public values. Most Montanans do not trap or shoot wolves, in fact, a recent survey found that

74% of Montanans' support wolves. Most Montanans do not support cruelty toward wildlife such as trapping, in fact, 52% support an end of trapping altogether. Yet, every year, wildlife management becomes more cruel and more aggressive, e.g., longer trapping seasons, expanded snaring and kill methods, more trophy bear and mountain lion killing, weaker protections and increasingly aggressive anti-predator rhetoric.

Yes, the slaughter is "scientific" in the sense that proponents of lethal "use" of our wild kin have figured out how many individual animals can be shot, run over with snowmobiles, mass-killed at wildlife killing contests, and how many can be drowned or their neck broken, stomped and beaten to death in traps and snares, before their population collapses. So what? The ensuing annual wildlife slaughter to please trophy hunting and trapping interests is ethically indefensible.

If we had a state wildlife agency that takes care of the whole — the land, the species, the ecosystems and our relationship with all, supported by science and ethics, that would be something to be proud of.

The reality in Montana is that a relatively small but politically organized network of corporations and organizations exerts outsized influence over governmental institutions that are supposed to serve the public as a whole. Unlike ordinary citizens though, corporations along with trophy hunting and trapper organizations often bring money, lobbying capacity, campaign relationships, and ideological cohesion. Over time, certain politics or lethal wildlife management become normalized not because it reflects broad public ethics, but because it reflects the values of those with the greatest institutional access and financial influence. This is not democracy.

If Initiative 194 is ultimately about protecting democracy from concentrated influence, perhaps we need another petition to prevent trophy hunting and trapper organizations from contributing “anything of value” to political campaigns or candidates and to FWP.

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