

October 17, 2023

Letter of Support for the Catalina Island Conservancy's Catalina Island Restoration Project

To Whom It May Concern:

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) works in over 70 countries around the world to conserve the lands and waters upon which all life depends. In advance of that mission, TNC owns and manages a multitude of globally significant preserves, including 76% of Santa Cruz Island, the largest of the eight Channel Islands of California.

For decades, managers of the Channel Islands – including the Catalina Island Conservancy, the U.S. Navy, the U.S. National Park Service, and TNC – have worked to address the ecologically devastating consequences of livestock and game animals that were unfortunately introduced to the islands back before it was understood how unique and sensitive these island ecosystems are. In every case, managers reached the same conclusion: the only effective and sustainable way to stop the degradation caused by these animals, prevent extinction of native biodiversity, and ensure the islands will be resilient into the future is to remove those invasive populations.

For decades, the Catalina Island Conservancy (CIC) has analyzed the impacts of introduced mule deer on the island and worked to find ways of mitigating those impacts. Today, the evidence of the severity of the threat the deer pose is overwhelming. And the Conservancy has exhausted all other alternatives. Catalina Island can have either a functional, biodiverse and resilient ecosystem – or it can have deer. It cannot have both.

The CIC has engaged global leaders in large animal eradications and is developing a plan that will incorporate state-of-the-science best practices. These include making sure the project is designed and implemented to meet standards of humane dispatch of the animals, and to ensure the safety of the hunters and the public. In that regard, it is important to emphasize that the science and practice of eradication has been in very rapid development over the past few decades, and the increasing, integral use of helicopters has been transformative. They have made eradication efforts far more efficient, and have enabled conservationists to address a wider variety of devastating pest species, on ever larger and more complex islands. Helicopters are now commonly used in a variety of ways in eradication projects, from the transport of materials and personnel to the monitoring of eradication success.

One critical benefit of helicopters in eradication projects is the way they can improve safety for the eradication team. Island terrains are often remote and rugged, and helicopters can provide a safe means of accessing sites that would be otherwise impossible or dangerous to access. Another key benefit of helicopters is that they can enable a project to proceed more quickly, which can dramatically increase the likelihood of the project's success. Eradications can only succeed if they outpace reproduction of the target species. Completing an eradication quickly reduces replacement and therefore the number of individual animals that need to be dispatched. If a project fails, then animals will have died without a long-term conservation benefit.

Another critical – and perhaps counterintuitive – benefit of using helicopters in projects that require hunting large animals is how, with skilled professionals, the use of helicopters as an aerial hunting platform can increase the humaneness of the overall operation. Precision shooting is recognized by the American Veterinary Medical Association as meeting the standards of euthanasia for wildlife. Skilled, disciplined markspeople in helicopters can minimize the amount of time that an animal is aware it is being hunted, and with a precision shot, can greatly reduce the risk of stress and suffering, and wounding and escape. An exceptionally qualified team hunting from a helicopter can be a highly effective strategy for reducing risk and increasing efficiency of an eradication effort, and enabling a conservation manager to also achieve its animal welfare objectives in the effort.

Helicopter shooting is recognized globally as a methodological best practice in large animal eradication projects. There is a robust scientific literature documenting this.

Helicopters were used on a variety of successful, recent large animal eradication projects in the California Channel Islands, including very high-profile projects of the National Park Service and The Nature Conservancy. For example, aerial shooting was integral to the success of the feral pig eradication project on Santa Cruz Island in the mid-2000s. That project was one of the most rapid eradications of its kind. And upon its completion, managers were at last able to redirect their attention from managing an ecological crisis on the island to restoring and stewarding its extraordinary natural and cultural resources, many of which occur nowhere else on earth. With all the invasive introduced mammals removed from the island, the endemic, endangered island fox underwent the fastest recovery and delisting of any mammal in the history of the Endangered Species Act. Next month, managers will be celebrating the recovery and delisting of two soon-to-be-formerly threatened and endangered endemic plants. Eradication of invasive mammals works.

The Nature Conservancy joins conservationists across and beyond California in commending the Catalina Island Conservancy for its leadership in addressing this difficult and long-standing problem, and for the care they are putting into the planning so as to minimize impacts on the community. The dramatic and inspiring recovery of native plants and animals seen across all the other Channel Islands following removal of invasive herbivores affirms that this is the right – and necessary – thing to do.

Sincerely,



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