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Get the lead out and save the California condor

John Moir

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It's an inspiring experience to see California condors flying free. The giant birds sweep across the sky while white triangular patches on their wings' undersides flash in the sun. Shivers run up your spine. But in spending the past several years writing about the heroic effort to save our largest bird, there are two disquieting words that I have heard all too often: lead poisoning.

Lead poisoning was the main reason that by 1982 this majestic bird's population had plummeted to only 22 condors. And lead poisoning continues to this day as the condor recovery program's greatest obstacle.

Condors eat only dead animals, and the birds can inadvertently consume poisonous lead-bullet fragments found in hunter-shot game. It was lead that forced the capture of the last wild condor in 1987. Nevertheless, 20 years later, many hunters are still using lead ammunition - and released condors continue to die. Now there is a chance to make a much-needed change to protect the condor and other wildlife. The state Senate is considering legislation (AB821) that would restrict the use of lead ammunition.

When a lead bullet slams into a game animal, it shatters into scores and sometimes hundreds of highly toxic pieces. Biologist Grainger Hunt showed me dozens of X-rays he had taken of hunter-shot deer. A typical black-and-white image revealed an astonishing sight: Scattered among the deer's shadowy ribs and vertebrae were more than 200 brilliant white particles of lead. "This 'lead snowstorm' spreads widely from the wound site," Hunt said. Consuming even one of these tiny fragments can poison a condor, other wildlife or even hunters.

In hiking with biologists to backcountry flight pens and remote wilderness areas, I came to realize that the 135 condors now released in the western United States are not truly free. Biologists must focus much of their attention on an intensive management program aimed at preventing or treating lead poisoning.

Released birds have to be regularly trapped and their blood tested for lead exposure. Condors with high lead levels have to be confined and injected twice daily with a chemical that binds with lead and carries it out of their bodies. Dozens of condors have gone through this expensive medical treatment known as chelation. Some poor birds have been poisoned several times and needed multiple chelation treatments at the estimated cost of thousands of dollars per bird per procedure. Despite biologists' best efforts, some

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condors suffer long and horrible deaths by starvation when lead poisoning paralyzes their digestive systems. The condor cannot fully recover until sport hunters switch to non-lead ammunition.

Although it was clear as early as 1984 that condors were dying from lead, skeptics have questioned whether bullets were the poisoning source. Never mind that biologists have been finding lead-bullet fragments in the digestive tracts of poisoned condors for years, and that the lead poisoning episodes spike during hunting season. Last year, a study from UC Santa Cruz looked at the specific "fingerprint" of the lead isotope composition found only in lead bullets and discovered that it matched the lead in the blood of condors.

There is no doubt.

While it's true that alternative ammunition is more expensive, bullets are a minor part of a hunting trip's costs. Transitioning to non-lead ammunition is good for condors, it's good for other wildlife and it's good for humans.

The time has come to restrict the use of toxic lead bullets and let the condor fly free.

John Moir is author of "Return of the Condor: The Race To Save Our Largest Bird From Extinction."
www.returnofthecondor.com

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