

Animals

THE TROUBLE WITH PIGS

Porcine pests leave scars on county farms, parkland

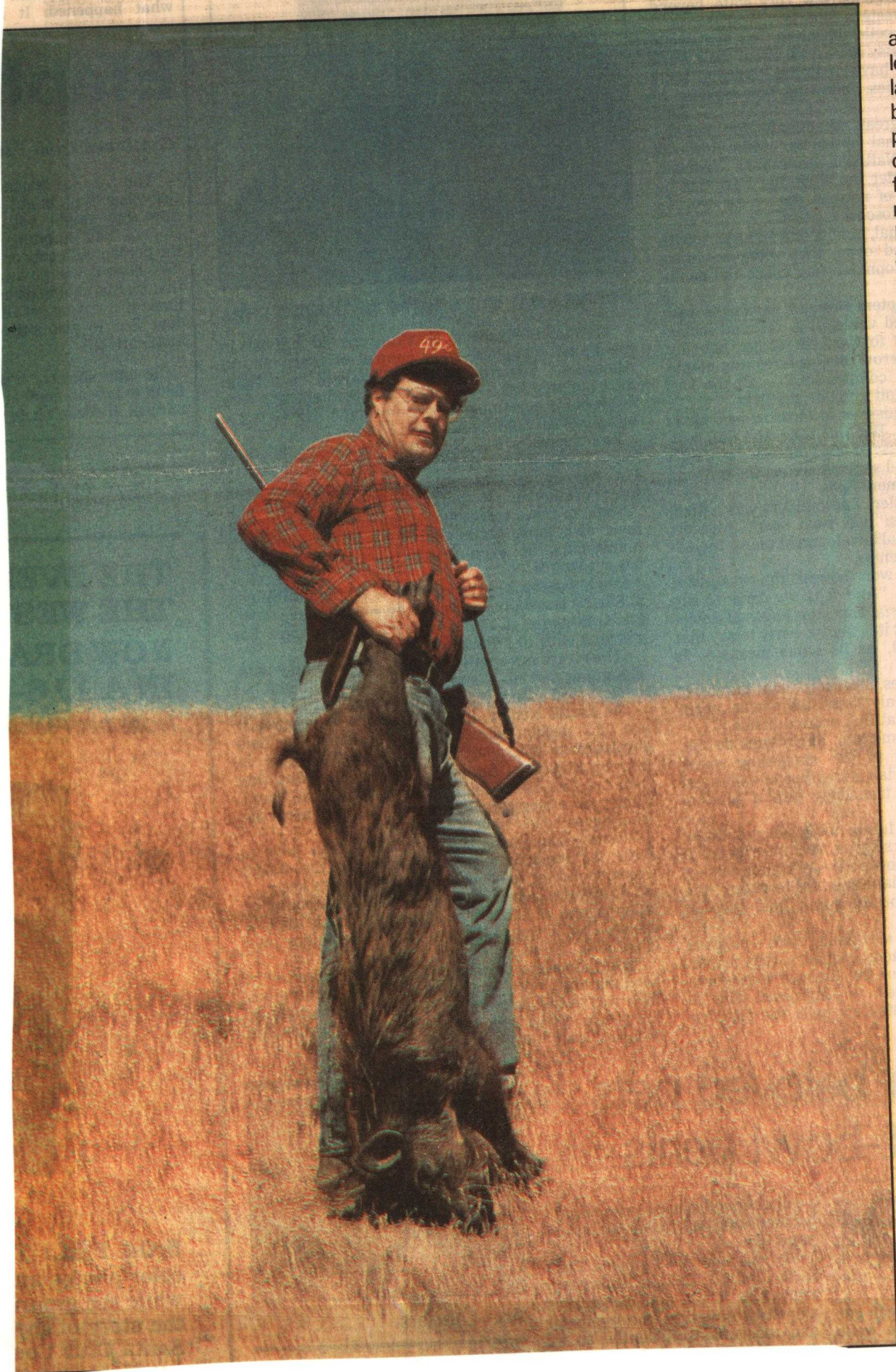


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REFERENCE

SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

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Gary Lease, above and at left, shows land damaged by rooting wild pigs. Despite opposition from animal rights activists, Lease, a UC Santa Cruz professor and chairman of the county's Feral Pig Depradation Commission, believes more sport hunting is the key to controlling the wild pig population.

By TRACIE WHITE
Sentinel staff writer

FROM ranch land to farmland to state parks, a population of marauding wild pigs continues to make enemies across the county as they root up the land, dirty natural spring water and devour native wildlife.

Pushed onward by the drought, the ever increasing legions of wild swine have infiltrated new ground this year, tearing up the baseball field at the California Youth Authority on Empire Grade. They've caused extensive damage at Nisene Marks State Park above Aptos, at Cabrillo College and at the Grey Whale Ranch.

Just what to do about these long, slim, razor-backed swine has opposing groups in an uproar. The county is battling the state Fish and Game Department; hunters and animal-rights activists have also faced off. Meanwhile, the pigs continue to root their way across the county, with farmers and ranchers close on their tail.

"We're all going in different directions," said Jim Nee, a biologist who was hired as feral pig coordinator by the county in December.

"There's a lot of animosity. We need to get together."

The problem, which has irked farmers and ranchers for years, isn't unique to Santa Cruz County. Wild pig populations extend from Mendocino County down the coast to Santa Barbara County. With the disappearance of natural predators, feral pigs have run wild throughout the state. In the early '60s, the pigs inhabited just eight to 10 counties in California. Today, they're found in 37 counties in the state.

"We've had trouble about five years now," said Lud McCrary, a rancher north of Davenport. "But they're just getting worse. The last couple of years, we've really started to feel the damage."

Most of the damage on McCrary's property has been to rangeland. The pigs root around in the pasture looking for food, ripping up perennial grasses. They pollute the natural spring water and destroy the native wildlife, said McCrary.

Since pigs don't sweat very well, when they get warm they wallow in water or mud to cool off, often polluting springs and small wetlands, said Nee. In the north part of the county, many of the ranchers get their water from natural springs. The pigs

also carry diseases such as tuberculosis, leptospirosis and Q fever.

"They're just like a rototiller," complained Deward Strong, who manages the Swanton Pacific Ranch north of Davenport. "I want to get them stopped before they get into the brussel sprouts or the artichokes."

Alice Harper, a member of the Native Plant Society, said the pigs have become a serious threat to many of the small reptiles in Nisene Marks State Park, including alligator lizards and garter snakes. They also threaten a number of the native flowers that grow from bulbs, including tiger lilies.

Agricultural commissioner Lenord Craft has complained to the state Fish and Game Department that state regulations and red tape have stymied attempts by local officials and landowners to stop herds of wild pigs from devastating the countryside.

Craft has requested that regulations regarding depredation permits be liberalized to make it easier for landowners to hunt down the pigs. County officials and landowners complain that by the time permits are awarded, the pigs are usually out of the area. By the time the pigs return, the permits have run out.

"We're not going out there to take out the pigs like Rambo, just the ones that are causing damage," said Craft.

Farmers and county officials also complain that regulations requiring the pig carcasses be delivered to charities are not always practical.

"Usually you're doing this at nighttime under very adverse conditions," said Nee. "The goal is to make it easy for landowners to solve their own wild pig problems. We hope to get the Fish and Game Department to alter the regulations.

"If that fails, we'll introduce legislation."

Terry Mansfield, of the state Department of Fish and Game, said he doesn't believe changing existing legislation will help alleviate the problems.

"Basically we feel the existing authority allows us to do more than is now being done," said Mansfield. Miscommunication and misunderstanding by county officials are currently limiting those options, he said.

Pigs/ Hunting animals won't help the problem'

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Despite opposition from animal rights activists, Gary Lease, a UCSC professor and chairman of the county's Feral Pig Depredation Commission, believes more sport hunting is the key to controlling the wild pig population.

"I don't see how we're going to get around hunting," said Lease, who has been hunting feral pigs since 1973 in Santa Cruz County. "Trapping is time and labor intensive. It takes a lot of work to get them set up. The kinds of traps we are going to need will be expensive to build."

McCrary also wants to see more sport hunting in the county, but, he said, even on his property, there are severe limitations.

"Up here we have a lot of neighbors. There's a lot of people that gather mushrooms and things like that. There's mountain bike

riders. Hunting is kind of dangerous. We don't encourage hunting on our property."

Ted Rico, a representative of the Progressive Animal Rights Alliance, said that there are many people in the county who are adamantly opposed to any killing of the wild pigs.

"It's the hunters and farmers who introduced the pigs initially to the county," said Rico. "Clearly the best solution would have been to use the natural predators to control the population. But of course the farmers and hunters have decimated the natural predator populations.

"The more humans try to intervene the more we mess them up. We're so out of balance with nature. The best thing we can do is try to intervene as little as possible.

"Killing off some pigs won't help the problem. I guess there is no simple solution."