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EDITORIAL

Bite the Bullet for Condors

Biologists captured the last fully wild California condor in 1987 for an ambitious captive-breeding program that offered the only hope for North America's largest bird. In large part because of the lead bullets they ingested, the condors' population had dwindled to 22.

The birds are now soaring again, thanks to a \$35-million effort to save them. But no one took steps to clean the environment of the toxic substance that brought condors to the brink of extinction in the first place. At least five released condors in California and Arizona have died of lead poisoning, probably from bullets in carrion left behind by hunters.

Eight other condors would have died in California from lead poisoning had they not gone through system-cleansing therapy. Now the birds are regularly trapped and brought in for blood tests. Human caretakers leave carrion around so there will be untainted food for them to eat.

"Wild," when it comes to condors, is a relative term.

It's not an easy matter to save condors from natural predators, encroaching civilization or their own unchecked curiosity. Because condors learn so much from their elders, and those condors were in captivity, the birds still sometimes don't realize that coyotes are a threat or that junk food (in their case, bottle tops and other bits of small, shiny trash) isn't good for them.

Such things can't be helped, but lead bullets are another matter. In the last few years, ammunition manufacturers have crafted workable bullets made of nontoxic metals. They're still about twice as expensive as the lead kind, but as their use grows, the price is bound to drop and the technology improve.

A group of environmentalists, wildlife biologists and hunters has asked the state Fish and Game Commission to ban lead bullets, beginning with the areas frequented by condors. The commission, which will take up the issue Feb. 4, should take this reasonable proposal seriously. It doesn't raise taxes or harm the California economy. It makes one hobby more expensive, an acceptable cost for sparing a flagship species. Lead shot has been banned for hunting waterfowl for more than a decade because of its danger to bald eagles. Still, the sport has survived.

Government agencies are trying to wean hunters off lead voluntarily with education campaigns. That's too slow. With only 57 condors in the California wilderness, the state should move swiftly to save its signature endangered species.

To Take Action: Though this is not an official public-comment period, the public is welcome to send opinions to the state Fish and Game Commission at P.O. Box 944209, Sacramento, CA 94244-2090, or e-mail fgc@dfg.ca.gov.