

News nuisance

How a questionable report put trophy hunters on trial by media

IT started out as a study of past scientific research to assess the impact of humans on wildlife. But by the time the mainstream press got through with the report—in part authored by Canadian biologists Chris Darimont and Paul Paque—it ended up as a frenzied exhortation against hunting.

Originally published this past January in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the study examined 33 scientific papers on the effects of human harvest on wildlife. It concluded that by targeting "large, reproductive-aged adults," anglers and hunters have ignited profound evolutionary changes favouring smaller, less desirable fish and game animals.

At that, newspaper reports soon began to appear claiming that hunters and, by association, anglers, have been irreparably defiling the genetic integrity of the world's wildlife by picking off the most prized trophies.

Environmental groups then joined the fray. The David Suzuki Foundation,

for example, used the report to illustrate why hunting should not be expanded in Ontario's Kawartha Highlands. And the Raincoast Conservation Foundation, of which Darimont and Paque are members, lobbied eBay to halt all sales of so-called trophy hunts on its online auction site.

What the press overlooked, however, is that the study concentrated primarily (with 400-plus references out of 475) on international commercial fisheries for cod, salmon and other fish, in addition to 25 references to plants (mostly ginseng) and three references to shellfish.

And to assess the effects of hunting, the report referred only to an isolated experimental hunt for bighorn sheep and a 1989 review of a reindeer hunt in Norway. Why just those two examples? While volumes have been published on the impact of commercial fisheries, says Darimont, comparatively little has been reported on the repercussions of sport hunting. "These were the only two that fit within our guidelines," he says.

Aside from the fact the study's data on hunting are far from exhaustive, at least one leading wildlife biologist says the authors have missed the mark with their conclusions drawn from the bighorn hunt. While hunters do indeed target the sheep with the biggest horns, those animals with full curls are generally past breeding age and therefore the most expendable, says Valerius Geist, professor emeritus of environmental science at the University of Calgary.

Furthermore, he says, large horns or antlers aren't the sign of a prime breed-



Beyond breeding: Trophy sheep are expendable

ing male anyway. Rather, exceptionally large antlers or horns indicates the owner may be a non-breeding male—far from being the epitome of male superiority, such individuals do not participate in rutting. "They are freaks," Geist says. "They may be the biggest, but they are not the best."

Describing himself as a hunter and angler who's fundamentally against targeting fish and game trophies, Darimont nonetheless stands by his study. "This was not an attack on hunting and fishing," he says. "What it does show is that the way we hunt and fish has very real implications."

—George Gruenfeld

THE FULL STORY

ORIGINALLY published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (www.pnas.org) this past January, the full name of the study is "Human predators outpace other agents of trait change in the wild." A copy of the report can be downloaded in its entirety from the Web site of lead author Chris Darimont, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California in Santa Cruz (people.ucsc.edu/~darimont).

KNOW IT ALL

TRUCK STOCK

It was hardly the typical way to develop a trophy fishery, but the roots of the world-renowned brown trout population in Alberta's Bow River can be traced back to a broken down truck. In 1925, the vehicle was en route to more distant locales when it gave up the ghost on a bridge over Carrot Creek, a Bow River tributary near Canmore. Not wanting to see his precious payload perish, the driver decided to dump it into the Carrot. His cargo? Some 45,000 brown trout fry. More than 80 years later, the ancestors of those fortunate fish continue to thrive—much to the ongoing delight of the Bow's anglers.

—Aaron Kytle

