ENVIRONMENT

Hunting for a wildlife management solution

By the Trinidad and Tobago
FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

ON OCTOBER 1 2013, the two year moratorium on hunting came into effect. Eighteen months have passed since then, representing approximately 75% of the total moratorium period. We at the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club supported the moratorium on the basis of the precautionary principle – the rationale being that given the lack of information on our wildlife populations, the wisest thing to do was to take the course of action which would have the least negative effect on our wildlife (ie support the moratorium) while the planned wildlife studies took place and the sustainability of hunting could be determined.

A HUNTER holds an iguana he captured in this file photo.

SIGN promoting conservation.

As the end of the moratorium draws near, there has been much debate over whether or not it should be extended with ample arguments being brought forward for both positions. But there is an inherent problem in these arguments that prevents us from getting to the heart of proper wildlife management: insufficient data.

On one hand, you have hunters who would like to see the season reopened. The primary arguments for this include the loss of access to their chosen legitimate recreation and the proliferation of illegal activities including poaching, pipe-gun usage and marijuana cultivation due to poor or uneven enforcement of the ban. Other statements including suggestions that the temporary ban may cause certain species to multiply out of control (simultaneously implying that hunters are necessary for controlling wildlife populations) and is reminiscent of previous statements that the nation should consider culling ocelots to protect agouti stocks and culling migrant peregrine falcons to protect racing pigeons! Can the wildlife population be seriously threatened by illegal poachers, logging, quarrying, etc but yet at the same time be capable of withstanding the impact of hunting?

This is not to say that the anti-hunting lobby is not prone to their own embellishments, often readily depicting an alarming picture of forests devoid of game species but without the hard evidence to support it.

Persons who are against hunting should also consider that recreational hunters are oftentimes our most active honorary game wardens and some hunting groups try to go even further, like the South Eastern Hunters Association, in planting feed trees in the forest and hosting educational awareness sessions. Like it or not, bonafide hunters will remain an important part of wildlife management in Trinidad and Tobago for a long time to come. They do, after all, have a vested interest in having sufficient game mammals around.

The emotional angle that is sometimes taken is problematic as well. Depictions of innocent forest animals being shot dead by a hunter glosses over the fact that humans kill animals all the time when we believe it is acceptable. And therein lies the distinction between many of those on either side of the hunting fence – hunters see it as acceptable while those against it believe it is not. Whether you believe that killing and/or eating a wild animal is wrong or right is a matter of personal opinion. Clearly in this sort of situation, national decisions cannot rely on personal opinion or emotion.

Ultimately, the policy for wild game management has to be data driven, with game species treated as any other natural resource.

The question then becomes, "How sustainable is hunting in Trinidad and Tobago?" While it is true that the anti-hunting lobby is, for the most part, deficient on data, the belief that hunters can accurately gauge the status of our wildlife solely by their observations is likely also inaccurate. If a hunter goes into the forest with ten dogs and catches two agoutis, does that say anything about the population of agouti in the area? Were there two agoutis or 20 in that patch of forest? It reveals nothing about the carrying capacity of different sections of our country (how much game there could be) or the current population (how much there is) or how sustainable the population is (is the population growing or declining?). But the hunter goes away with the honest impression that there are still agoutis in the area and that those arm-chair environmentalists don't know what they are talking about and both sides continue arguing and achieving nothing.

In the absence of data driven analysis it is inevitable that a variety of views would arise. Even within our own organisation (whose founding members include several passionate hunters, incidentally) there exists much difference in opinion ranging from pro-hunting to anti-hunting. And that's within an organisation whose members share a common appreciation of nature. Imagine the divergence of views in the wider population!

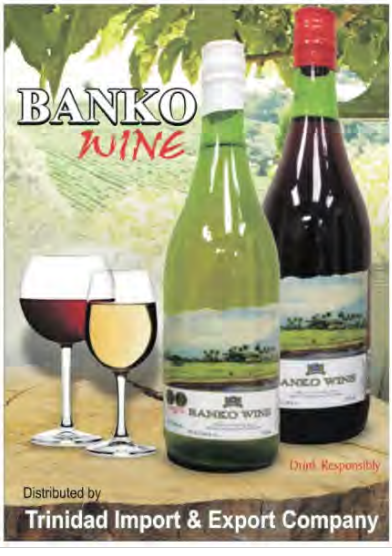
We need unbiased data to manage our game species resource. It starts by conducting proper wildlife surveys so that we can all get a better idea of what the current status of our wildlife is. The Government, via the Environmental Management Authority's National Restoration, Carbon Sequestration, Wildlife and Livelihoods Project (NRCSWLP), is currently in the process of conducting wildlife surveys in conservancies throughout the country. This project has the input of a range of stakeholders including The University of the West Indies, hunting associations and non-governmental organisations. The surveys are being conducted during the moratorium period.

And while hunters have a valid point in that the manner in which the moratorium was announced was abrupt, it is important that they support the surveys (both the current phase and future phases). If this requires an extension of the moratorium period, then we would hope hunters support this, if even just for those areas in which it is required.

Both the pro-hunting and anti-hunting lobby should focus their attention on ensuring the Government executes the remainder of the current survey successfully and that this endeavour results in estimates of our game species that are realistic.

No survey will be perfect and criticisms have been made about certain aspects of the survey but it is important to keep in mind that it is a start, given that no such survey has previously been conducted in Trinidad and Tobago, and the designers would have made the best use of the available resources and provided criteria. It is hopefully just the beginning of ongoing monitoring efforts, and species specific shortcomings (viz recording nocturnal game species) can hopefully be addressed as the survey is refined.

● WILDLIFE *continues on Page 4B*



AN EMPTY hunting camp.

Hunters, non-hunters should support wildlife survey

●WILDLIFE *from Page 3B*

The point is that this survey will form the basis of longer term monitoring. With it, we have one more tool in our toolkit for successful wildlife management – comparative data on the abundance of wildlife in protected and non-protected areas.

Of course, once both sides are confident of the methodology and execution of the survey, both need to be willing to accept the eventual conclusions as well. If the hunters are correct, the surveys will bear this out and it will confirm that recreational hunting, on the scale it presently occurs, is sustainable in Trinidad and Tobago. If the surveys reveal otherwise, both the hunter and non-hunters can take the appropriate action (extended moratoriums, revised hunting period, etc).

But this still would only alleviate concerns over legitimate recreational hunting. If the (illegal) poachers are indeed a big problem then the recreational hunting lobby should readily support an outright ban on the sale of wild caught meat. Subsistence hunting aside, poaching is usually conducted for economic gain. If the economic reward is removed then poaching activity would logically decline substantially – providing that the wild meat ban is adequately enforced, of course. Recreational hunters can then continue liming in hunting camps with an agouti or two on the fire and those opposed to hunting could rest easier, knowing that hunting pressures have eased substantially. This one wildlife management solution may very well benefit our game mammal populations more than any permanent ban or temporary hunting moratorium ever could. Imagine then what a proper data driven wildlife management policy, combined with a ban or moratorium on the sale of wild caught meat, could achieve.

It is time we stop arguing and focus on what we all have in common – a desire to see sustainable wildlife populations throughout our country.

For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit our website at www.ttfnc.org. The club's next monthly meeting will be held today at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain. Today's lecture: "Webs and what they are for" by Dr Jo-Anne Sewlal.

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