

A response to the letter to the editor by Eduardo J. Ramilo and Claudio E. Chehébar about the article “Predicaments of endangered huemul deer, *Hippocamelus bisulcus*, in Argentina: a review” by Flueck WT, Smith-Flueck JM (2006) Eur J Wildl Res 2:69–80

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Huemul recovery in Argentina revisited

Ramilo and Chehebar’s (DRP) response begins like a scientific debate, but turns out to be one of rhetoric. DRP claims our review (Flueck and Smith-Flueck 2006) is extremely incomplete and widely discredits existing data on most topics, yet no supporting data nor citations are offered. We applaud activities favoring huemul, including the many due to DRP policy. Instead our paper questioned if these are sufficient for huemul recovery. Our thrust—the state of knowledge on biophysical factors affecting populations (Table 1,2)—was not criticized nor even mentioned. Does this mean that DRG agrees that mayor gaps of knowledge exist? Let us examine their claims:

1. DRP claims that diagnoses were discredited as hypotheses and dogmas.

Yet DRP admits several diagnoses are hypothetical. The first huemul meeting in 1992 resulted in diagnoses based mainly on opinion rather than data. It was agreed that basic ecological aspects of huemul were unknown or barely described, all previous attempts in captivity had failed, and crucial research needed to be done (News Section, Z Jagdwiss 1993, 39:208). Later meetings (1995, 1998, 2002, 2006) reported on progress made, yet most bio-

physical aspects important to recovery still remain unknown (Table 3 (Flueck and Smith-Flueck 2006)). With no data, factors considered important to huemul recovery are valid only as working hypotheses. We never discredited hypotheses nor made accusations; we criticized the evolution of working hypotheses into dogmas without evidence. All negative factors presently listed on the Argentine Federal Fauna web site are cited from the 1992 meeting.

2. Diagnoses were collectively agreed upon.

Yes, but *only* in the first meeting. Later, some attendees voiced disagreement, yet conclusions remained according to editors’ choice; thereby all listed participants became *de facto* part of the proceeding’s conclusions, e.g. imposing specific methodology. In the 2006 proceedings, every recommendation made for Argentina by an expert panel was edited out. Thus, all but one of the attending scientists refused to ratify the meeting’s conclusions (acknowledged in a footnote), yet DRP considers these recommendations as “collectively agreed” upon and international institutions have already referred to these recommendations as if they were a consented outcome.

3. DRP views huemul recovery as very complex and not dependent on isolated projects, and agrees on the importance of proposing and discussing the pros/cons of opportunities for huemul recovery, to be done as a united effort in a mutual respectful and constructive atmosphere.

DRP’s reference to isolated projects is a proposal made during the National Recovery Workshop (Flueck and Smith-Flueck 2006). As an organizer, DRP was able to invite all stakeholders as we had secured 100% financing.

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To our knowledge, nobody was left out. The proposal (financially backed) mainly concerned field research, and if considered feasible at a later step, a conservation center with captive stock and a full research program could be formed, as well as a complete reintroduction program using adaptive management. The independent field project would have resulted in studies of radio-marked huemul in eight unprotected and unknown populations (32 GPS and 48 VHF), in line with meeting recommendations (1992–2006). The Recovery Workshop was an optimal platform for all stakeholders to discuss all pros/cons in a constructive and respectful atmosphere. Yet the discussion started and ended when a federal spokesperson insisted (in recordings) that the proposal: should remain on stand-by far into the future; be the last tool to consider; was completely unadvisable; and further insisted there was no sense in discussing feasibility. As DRP as organizers did not object, the proposal was canned.

4. DRP claims not to be a dominating group in huemul conservation.

DRP exercises major influence on huemul policies such as:

- a -responsible for 23,000 km² of federal parks with huemul (non-federal reserves adding only <7%)
- b -co-organized the Huemul Recovery Workshop
- c -drafted and determined final state of the Huemul Recovery Plan
- d -appointed to coordinate implementation of the Huemul Recovery Plan
- e -organized or co-organized binational huemul meetings and edited proceedings (1992, 1998, 2006)

DRP advised a provincial government not to authorize the project “Huemul population census during winter in Chubut”, which consequently was not authorised even before the proposal was received by responsible authorities (Flueck and Smith-Flueck 2006). DRP wrote about their intervention, which was disseminated in the Gondwana network, composed of at least 17 NGO’s. Thus we cannot accept their claims to never having intervened and to not having taken part in any process conducive to preventing the censusing study outside of their jurisdiction (an issue not mentioned in the review). To our knowledge, no population in Argentina has yet been censused.

DRP ignored the signed Workshop agreement to form a scientific committee to review the draft recovery plan (Flueck and Smith-Flueck 2006). Although public hearings are an established process in Argentina and national parks have adhered to federal programs that promote access to information and public hearings, none were convened for the huemul recovery plan. This plan (author-less, unreviewed, no public input) has now been officially adopted by federal and provincial governments.

5. DRP claims the review on manipulating huemul favors helicopter captures.

After *analyzing* the pro/cons of various methods for huemul, we concluded that while net gunning (no drugs) is feasible, ground darting can be problematic (Flueck and Smith-Flueck 2006). DRP does not provide arguments favoring darting, only that it has been used in Chile. Recent experiences in Chile began with a professional trainer from New Zealand. The first huemul had to be darted three times, dying after a few days. The next deer survived though hit between the shoulder blades, just below the head. The dart on the 4th animal bounced off the pelvis bone. Teams of four to six people captured huemul in a reserve with a high density and animals accustomed to humans. Still, ground efforts to search huemul were tremendous and not cost effective and, “a helicopter would have cut costs immensely” (T Blue, letter). DRP also failed to mention that during all recent efforts to ground dart huemul in Argentina (Flueck and Smith-Flueck 2006), none have yet been captured. Our review concluded that helicopter captures are most appropriate where huemul are widely dispersed over difficult terrain.

6. DRP 2001 and Ramilo 2001.

Ramilo (2001), used correctly in Flueck and Smith-Flueck (2006), was received and archived in 2001 at the Argentine National Research Council, where the ‘complete reply’ (DRP this issue) was also recently sent. DRP refers to DRP (2001), but Ramilo (2001) was accurately translated to say that “ample areas contain huemul populations in a good conservation state”. It further states that the huemul status has not yet reached a critical state to justify ex-situ tools for preventing extinction, claiming that time still remains to guarantee species survival by using in situ tools (Flueck and Smith-Flueck 2006). DRP (2001) now states there are ample suitable areas in good conservation state with huemul. Yet a max. 1,200 km² occupied by 300–600 huemul hardly qualifies as ample areas, represents only 4% of forests previously used by huemul, and does not even include non-forested lowlands. Also, ‘suitable habitat’ has not yet been defined.

7. The citation for ‘previous attempts in captivity have failed’ is incorrect, an oversight when the original 239 references had to be reduced to 74: it came from the 1992 proceedings edited by DRP. Our review showed that in fact there had been several successful cases.

Neither this critique by DRP nor their ‘complete reply’ (to which we responded elsewhere¹) hold up under scrutiny. Different views on huemul recovery requirements are

¹ Available from authors.

related to different risk assessments. It is not uncommon that agencies' views differ from other interest groups; public hearings and, in some cases, lawsuits have been employed (MacCracken et al. 1998). A recently formed Huemul Task Force (IUCN-SSC) should contribute towards huemul recovery by providing a new opportunity for stakeholders to evaluate options.

References

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