

Review

The Patagonian Huemul A Mysterious Deer on the Brink of Extinction

Norma Inez Diaz and Jo Anne Smith-Flueck. ISBN 950-9725-39-0
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THE DEDICATION in this book sums up the authors' aims and aspirations in putting it together. It reads: "To all living creatures bearing the scientific name *Hippocamelus bisulcus*. May their genes thrive for thousands of generations to come".

There are only four chapters in this 149 page volume, and of these pages, the first three chapters occupy only 66. The last, long chapter is divided into 17 sections, and covers just about everything that is known about the Huemul today, including its tenuous state in the face of continued hunting and an apparent lack of political will to act before it is too late.

The first chapter is an interesting account of the history of the Huemul, and the author, Ms. Diaz, has provided some fascinating information and also gives the reader a neat pen sketch of Patagonia itself, as well as the early days of European exploration, from the 16th century on. It was not until 1782 that the first written description of the beast appears, and that was somewhat inaccurate. It claimed, from hearsay evidence only, that the animal was a kind of wild ass. The author even gave it the taxonomic name of *Equus*, meaning horse, of course. Even the officially accepted taxonomic name *Hippocamelus* reflects the early confusion, as its translation is a mix of horse and camel. The laws of scientific precedence prevents a more appropriate name becoming adopted.

In this chapter the reader learns about hunting techniques and the historical range of the Huemul, which used to cover a huge area of the southern part of South America, from as far north as 34° to the very southern tip, at 56°. There is a short, but fascinating, section on the place that Huemul occupy in cave paintings, mythology, and the music of the region. There are also brief mentions of the very trusting nature of this unusual deer, the fact that male fawns develop their first set of antlers at six months of age, and that there are few records of the deer in captivity.

Next come a chapter that is an exact reproduction, in Spanish, of the first scientific treatise ever written about this deer, which was published by the famed German physician and biologist Rodolfo Philippi who arrived in Chile in 1851, and, during a long life, published over 349 papers on natural history.

The third chapter is contributed by Werner Flueck, and is a short critique of Philippi's paper in which he attempts to clarify some of the issues, particularly about taxonomy, and suggests that a related deer, the Taruca, may have been confused with the Huemul. Both Philippi's original, and the third chapter, contain black and white illustrations and anatomical drawings.

The fourth chapter was written by Jo Anne Smith-Flueck, and relates as much current information as seems to be known about this animal. She covers her material in 17 sections that range from a background description through general biology, social behaviour, demographics, threats, education and conservation.

The size of the animal is tabulated, and readers in North America will quickly recognise that this animal is very similar to our own Mule deer and

White-tailed deer. In fact, from some of the eight beautiful photographs offered between pages 81 and 82 it is obvious that they are closely related. The cover photo shows a two point buck who bears an uncanny resemblance to a Mule deer spiker or 'fork-horn', as they are known in hunting circles in North America.

The lengthy 9th section involves a detailed look at threats to this species, which has been listed as endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature since 1973. The author lists illegal hunting, habitat modification, and human activities as important. A major effect, that leads to competition, and especially competition for preferred food items, has been the increasingly widespread introduction of Red deer. The Red deer are a more generalist feeder than the Huemul, and so, when the favourite food item of both is seriously depleted, the Red deer can do well on other plants which the Huemul cannot utilise efficiently.

The section on diseases is the weakest. Smith-Flueck has listed 39 diseases that she feels could be a problem when Huemul and livestock occupy the same range. Some of these have never been reported, in any species, in South America, and at least one has never occurred in the Americas. In communication with the author I discovered that she is concerned, as she ought to be, with the potential for importation of some of the diseases she has listed with stock from other continents, especially Africa. Recent events in the USA, with heartwater ticks coming in on tortoises, and the arrival of West Nile virus, show how tenuous our grip of quarantine may be.

While most of the diseases listed do occur in a variety of different species, and with which Huemul would almost certainly become infected, there is no information about the susceptibility of Huemul to all but coccidiosis, which has been recorded in captive deer.

Smith-Flueck discusses captive breeding programs as an adjunct to conservation programs, and describes past failures, as well as the limited number of successes. She links the benefits of such a program to the desperate need for conservation, which she discusses at some length. She lists 12 sets of precautions that should be taken to avoid past mistakes, and then very cogently makes a case for captive breeding by listing the considerable benefits that would accrue. Her longest list is one of 20 research items that would aid in conservation and that need to be found

out about the most basic elements of Huemul biology.

One of the saddest segments is the one describing the state of knowledge of the Argentinean populace about their own deer. The media are shown to exemplify this ignorance as three news paper cuttings are shown that completely misidentify the species.

Jo Anne Smith-Flueck is currently waiting to finish her research and writing for her PhD. This volume amply demonstrates that she and her husband are the world's foremost experts on the Huemul, and that they have a deep dedication to Argentina, to its people, its countryside and to the living things that dwell there.

The Patagonian Huemul can be ordered in either English or Spanish versions, through the Literature of Latin America (LOLA) web site at: www.thebookplace.com/lola

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