

KNOWLEDGE BASE

Hunters in a Warming World



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Scientists in diverse fields are hard at work investigating climate change. For hunters and other conservationists, the question revolves around wildlife populations and the habitats that sustain them.

Conservation organizations have a major stake in policies and strategies relating to climate change and have stepped up in leadership roles. The Boone and Crockett Club's position statement on climate change approved in 2009 reflects what has always been the Club's strength: an emphasis on policy (see sidebar). The Wildlife Management Institute shouldered several key roles, including leadership for the Sportsmen's Climate Change Advisory Group and publication of the book, *Season's End: Global Warming's Threat to Hunting and Fishing* (published by the Bipartisan Policy Center, 2008). In 2004, The Wildlife Society, the premier organization for wildlife science and management, completed a comprehensive review of the research relating to climate change and wildlife. The resulting publication, *Global Climate Change and Wildlife in North America* (Technical Review 04-2) can be downloaded at wildlife.org.

A brand new report by the National Wildlife Federation, *Nowhere to Run: Big Game in a Warming World*, hits directly on the questions that matter to hunter-conservationists. For each of the major big game species in North America, it outlines the evidence on how populations are responding to climate-related change and what these trends portend for hunting. While focusing on key game populations, the report affirms hunting as the economic engine for wildlife management in America; thus any threat to hunting is a threat to conservation overall. The full report may be downloaded at nwf.org.

When you live in nature and in the north, the effects of climate change are already obvious and affecting lives. My last decade as an employed professional, spent in Alaska, was deeply involved in issues concerning subsistence hunting and fishing. It was a real eye-opener to learn from whale hunters that the traditional methods used by countless generations involving the use of small boats to follow leads in the ice were no

longer viable. The ice was gone, plain and simple. Alaskan hunters described many examples of how changing environmental conditions were invalidating long-used methods and necessitating adaptation.

I've often thought about how different the perceptions must be for those who live further south, especially in cities and landscapes heavily shaped and controlled by human activity and where change may not be in evidence. Certainly there is no shortage of information and images of how things are changing elsewhere. But living in and experiencing a changing ecosystem is quite a different thing than reading about it.

Two decades ago my family acquired our forested land in north-central British Columbia. For as long as the locals could remember this was "moose country," that species a mainstay of rural diets and the guiding industry. As the new millennium commenced, we observed that huge swaths of the surrounding forests were turning bright red, followed by gray a year later as trees died in the millions. Many dropped on their own, and others were felled in massive salvage operations. The landscape quickly changed from dense, dark woods to more open forests. Within five years deer and elk had moved in, establishing populations sufficient enough for managers to implement hunting seasons. First-ever reports of cougar activity soon followed.

What accounts for such rapid change? The scientists attribute it to warmer winters; specifically, the absence of prolonged periods of severe cold that used to be typical. One effect was to change the survival and reproductive biology of a tiny insect, the mountain pine beetle. An unstoppable beetle epidemic raged through British Columbia and flowed over a Rocky Mountain pass into Alberta. According to government's 2012 estimate, the epidemic had spread to 18.1 million

hectares (about 45 million acres) of British Columbia's forests. One thing is sure: the forest landscapes around here look nothing like they did just 20 years ago, and rural families are having to adjust. Moose hunting is way down, but deer and elk offer new possibilities for filling the freezer. Trappers report that martens have grown scarce, but weasel catches are way up. Sheep-producing families are figuring out how to cope with cougar predation in addition to their long-time adversaries, the wolves and coyotes.

Such experiences affirm that global warming is not about gradual change as in "Hmmm, the winters don't feel quite as cold as they used to." Rather, it's like being in the middle of an unfolding drama as one thing triggers change in another, and another, and so on throughout the ecosystem. Or as John Muir said about nature, "everything is hitched to everything else." ■

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INTRODUCTION TO THE BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB'S POSITION STATEMENT ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND WILDLIFE

As a leader in conservation for more than 125 years, the Club has supported far-reaching conservation policy. In this tradition, the Club seeks a climate change policy that protects and builds on America's investment in wildlife and habitat, addresses forest and rangeland health, and maintains a strong economy, while reducing greenhouse gases. Therefore, while the Club has not endorsed specific climate change legislation, the following principles must underlie any final legislation. In principle, climate change policy should:

- Fund habitat mitigation and wildlife population adaptation;
- Accelerate conservation and restoration of forests and rangelands (including grasslands and native prairie) to sequester carbon and prevent uncharacteristic wildfires;
- Invest in energy conservation and technologies that reduce emissions into the atmosphere; and
- Maintain affordable energy sources; ensure that private land fragmentation does not result from higher input costs.

