

Missed opportunities: a reply to the ECO report

Diane Saxe recently released her first report as Environmental Commissioner of Ontario (ECO). Under the previous ECO, the annual report was called just that – the Annual Report -- but the 2016 edition of it was titled the Environmental Protection Report, which leads to questions about what the ECO's positions and intentions are.

The ECO's report is an annual opportunity to review, comment on, and, when necessary, criticize various provincial Ministries on their failures to protect the environment. One of the primary focuses of the most recent report touches on moose population declines. On the upside, it's nice to see non-hunters are finally concerned about Ontario's moose populations. Thanks for jumping on the bandwagon -- hunters have been sounding this alarm for many years now.

However, when it comes to the issues around moose management in Ontario, just like the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF), the ECO has taken the easy way out.

In her report, Saxe slams the MNRF for making management decisions without adequate data and suggests that Ontario needs mandatory reporting of moose harvest. Much like voter polling, the MNRF doesn't necessarily need responses from every moose hunter in order to get a reasonably accurate estimate of licensed moose harvest -- unbiased responses from a representative sample of moose hunters is all that's required for management purposes. She correctly states that Aboriginal moose harvest is largely unknown, but fails to provide any useful insight into how to address this significant problem. The MNRF could easily implement mandatory reporting, but it's not likely going to solve our moose problems.

Saxe's report also recommends that the MNRF capitalize on wildfires to generate moose habitat, and to review the effectiveness of forest management practices. Again, these recommendations are nothing new and they echo recommendations that the OFAH has been making for years.

Additionally it is hypocritical to commend the MNRF for abandoning their proposal to liberalize wolf and coyote hunting in the north because there was "no evidence that it would improve moose populations", while recommending more hunting restrictions, "whether or not hunting is primarily responsible for the decline".

Let that sink in for a moment -- the Environmental Commissioner says she requires evidence to support more wolf hunting, but doesn't require any evidence to restrict licensed moose hunting. We can't ignore the unintended consequences of her recommendation on thousands of families that rely on healthy moose meat to supplement their diets.

Her recommendation will also accelerate the decline in moose hunter participation, which will in turn contribute to the decline in funding available for moose management efforts through the Special Purpose Account. This doesn't seem like the best way to get moose management on track, does it?

The OFAH and moose hunters across Ontario are concerned about the health of our moose populations. The sustainability of the moose resource is paramount. The MNRF has implemented various changes to licensed moose hunting in the past couple of years and while the OFAH doesn't see merit in all of the MNRF's management decisions, in the spirit of adaptive management, we need to give them a chance to work. The government simply can't make changes every year without critically reviewing the short and long-term impacts.

The ECO had a prime opportunity to look closely at the state of moose management and to provide some tangible recommendations. Instead, all we got was a regurgitation of concerns and ideas that the OFAH, and moose hunters all across Ontario have been discussing in recent years.

To paraphrase MPP John Vanthof -- no one is more concerned about the long-term survival of moose than those of us who have hunting as part of our heritage. Ontario's moose hunters will continue to do their part to reverse population declines, but it doesn't appear that the ECO's recommendations will help get us there, and in fact, these recommendations will likely make things worse.

To that effect, we invite the ECO to review the OFAH's recommendations on our website. We've been having this conversation for years with moose hunters and the MNRF -- it's time for the ECO to join that conversation.



Angelo Lombardo
Executive Director

