

THE IMPORTANCE OF DUCK DIVERSITY

By Norman Seymour

A newspaper article recently caught my eye in which scientists reported finding conclusive evidence that over-fishing and climate change have contributed to an “alarming” decline in the diversity of fish species in the world’s oceans. One of the authors stated his belief that the marine ecosystem may be “falling apart before our eyes and we don’t realize it.” Are these strong words possibly over-stated? Maybe. But scientists have long known about dramatic declines in the abundance of many fish species, and now the decline is evident in the number of species, too.

A short time later, after paddling around an island on the St. Lawrence River where I grew up and began waterfowl hunting, I wondered if something of this sort could be happening to North American ducks. Fifty years ago such an outing would have revealed ducks of a dozen species. Today it is rare to see anything but mallards and Canada geese.

Should this be troubling to those of us concerned about the future of traditional duck hunting?

The concept of species diversity is a basic tenet of ecology, related to and reflecting stability within ecological systems. It’s a simple concept based upon reducing risk and hedging bets against future, unpredictable change. There are analogies in many aspects of our lives, but all play out around the risk of “putting all of one’s eggs into one basket.”

For example, take financial investing. One might do very well investing in the stock of one company. However, for peace of mind and to reduce risk, a diverse investment portfolio makes greater sense. In an ecological sense, a predator, for example, is usually better off if it has alternative prey options and is not dependent on one food source. The prey also benefits because it isn’t the only item in the predators diet. In general, there is a direct relationship between stability, by definition something that is good, and diversity within an ecological system.

Reflecting on the changes I had witnessed on the river, I recalled that in my youth black ducks were once the gold standard of dabbling-duck hunters, with teal, wigeon and other species like pintails available but viewed as optional. And though it is uncommon today to see dabblers other than mallards, the greatest change has occurred with diving ducks. Redheads and canvasbacks once were relatively abundant, but scaup were always the mainstay, the bread and butter duck of big-water hunters. Layout boats, scull boats, sinkboxes and big decoy rigs were common. However, by the 1960s can and redhead decoys were showing up at yard sales and soon after scaup decoys followed suit. The

ranks of the diving duck fraternity began thinning, primarily because of declines in overall numbers, although scaup flocks were holding up rather well.

Scaup and goldeneyes of either sex once were offered to hunters as bonus ducks along the river after mid-October. They provided increased shooting to hunters without, in the view of regulators, jeopardizing the stability of the species' populations. This was true elsewhere across the continent where scaup were used to "take the heat" off cans and redheads while continuing to provide shooting for diving-duck hunters. I remember feeling uneasy about the 10 scaup limit during the 1960s. My companions and I frequently shot our limits. I have pictures of our scaup hunts on the Delta Marsh in Manitoba that are reminiscent of pictures one sees of market hunting days. All our birds were killed legally.

By the 1980s shrinking flights of scaup – both lesser and greater – were beginning to cause concern among the conservation-minded. The 1985 fall flight was a low point for ducks of almost all species. Certainly a deep and lingering prairie drought was having an impact on lesser scaup production, but few asked whether liberal regulations were contributing to the decline of a "species" that once ranked second in abundance to the mallard. (In the North American breeding-ground survey, scaup are listed as one "species" even though the count includes both lessers and greater.) Interestingly, habitat conditions on the northern breeding range of greater scaup had not dramatically deteriorated.

The scaup decline began to get the attention of managers when lessers failed to recover after the return of water to the prairies in the 1990s. Though most managers were unprepared to implicate hunting mortality in any serious way, few revived the idea of returning scaup to the list of "bonus ducks." More importantly, some wondered if scaup might need additional protection.

The concept of a bonus duck is a curious one. It's based on the assumption that there are surplus ducks in a population, ducks not needed for future breeding stock. The concept is valid. Managing a population to sustain a harvest is based on this idea. It also seems reasonable to allow hunters to kill in the autumn that component of a population that will inevitably die from causes other than hunting before breeding the following spring. Hunting regulations designed to selectively kill males, which typically outnumber females, are especially useful in protecting breeding stock. The problem is that this requires a level of precision of biological knowledge much higher than is available today. We know that former bonus ducks like scaup and pintails, birds highly sought by hunters, have declined more dramatically than other species.

Concern over the declining trend in scaup is now officially recognized. The scaup limit in the Mississippi Flyway today is two birds daily. In my youth, waterfowl management would have viewed a limit this low as inconceivable.

The Mississippi Flyway always has been blessed with a diversity of ducks, both dabblers and divers. Unlike their counterparts in the Atlantic Flyway, who for decades have generally shot any species that crossed their decoys, Mississippi Flyway hunters historically not only had preferences, but options. When redheads and canvasback

numbers declined, hunters focused on scaup. Shooting a bufflehead was greeted with derision back at the boat ramp, but this is no longer true.

Mississippi Flyway hunters are losing their options. Choice has become a thing of the past. The trend in overall numbers has been downward and now this applies to species. In many places shooting or even seeing species other than a mallard or wood duck is uncommon, even rare. Indeed, if it wasn't for mallards, hunters across much of North America would have little opportunity to kill a limit of ducks, much less a limit of species of their choosing. The diving-duck hunter has become a rarity. The diversity of species hasn't declined as such – no species is remotely threatened with extinction. But the diversity of species *available to hunters* has declined. Decreased abundance of species once preferred by hunters has meant they are rarely seen or legally protected.

Yet, waterfowl management fiercely resists asking if liberal hunting regulations have contributed to the decline of species availability. The widgeon is a case in point. Will this declining duck become the next “species of concern”? Widgeon have become the choice of many hunters now that the pintail is receiving increased protection from the gun, and the widgeon is probably not a species that can absorb much additional hunting pressure.

In my opinion, we have reached the point where we must ask whether a misguided attempt to provide maximum hunter opportunity now jeopardizes the future of traditional duck hunting. Will waterfowling in the future mean essentially mallards and geese?

Some argue that the reduction in the scaup limit is premature. They say there is no scientific evidence that the reduction will lead to a significant increase in the breeding population. This might be true, but what other options are available to waterfowl management to halt the decline or rebuild populations? Management cannot meaningfully increase natural production without massive and costly effort. We know from research that initiatives on the prairie can potentially increase lesser scaup production, but how close are we to implementing a major initiative? How likely is it that we can ever meaningfully boost natural production of greater scaup which breed in remote northern habitats? Moreover, if we adopt plans to significantly increase production, what is the timeline? When are hunters likely to see more scaup? In the meantime, why is it “premature” to reduce the limit on scaup when their numbers have been declining for more than a decade?

Management and its science to date has not been able to stabilize much less reverse this alarming trend. Relying on hunters to voluntarily restrain themselves has not worked sufficiently well either. Even though a good many have embraced the concept, there are practical hurdles that are unlikely to be overcome. How, for example, do hunters protect female scaup when it often is virtually impossible to distinguish between males and females under hunting conditions?

I believe the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is doing the right thing by further restricting the kill of scaup in the Mississippi Flyway. If those who recommend these restraints are in error, then at least they have done so in the name of conservation. Isn't

this something that deserves our support? And if the downward trend in scaup can be reversed by more restrictive regulations, isn't this a positive thing for the future of diving duck hunting?

Waterfowl managers in the Atlantic Flyway have few options to protect species of concern, especially in the northern part of the flyway. Their only truly effective management option for any species is restricting hunting regulations. If this comes at the cost of hunter opportunity, then I say this is the price that we must pay. Duck hunters in the Atlantic Flyway have had to adjust their expectations downwards for decades. Many have increasingly come to believe that killing a wild duck is special, indeed a privilege. Across other parts of the continent, hunters also will have to learn to live with less opportunity.

I believe the time is long overdue to for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ask if its liberal hunting policies have adequately protected species that are vulnerable to over-shooting. The strong reliance on mallards in setting regulations for all ducks has jeopardized less resilient species. The loss of diversity, used in the sense of species available to hunters, is a measure of the service's failure to protect the traditions of our sport.

Of course, it is important to keep things in perspective. I was recently chatting with a friend who told me about a late season hunt by two young fellows in an area where he and I once hunted. They returned home to describe their anticipation and excitement in breaking ice to get where they wanted to shoot. They reported enjoying a terrific hunt. My friend asked what they had shot and their reply was mallards and snow geese. In our day, seeing a mallard or snow goose would have been a rare event and a late-season shoot in that location for us would have produced a bag of scaup, goldeneyes and black ducks. Whose enjoyment is greater? Can you miss what you've never known? I was encouraged to hear the story of these young hunters, but I remain firm in my belief that the increasing decline in duck species available to hunters is an issue we can no longer ignore.

If we take care of the ducks, the ducks will take care of us.
