

UC Davis

Recent Work

Title

Investigating wildlife use of underpasses under I-87: science and the perils of publicity

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3zk0m532>

Authors

Ray, Justina
Hilty, Jodi
Weber, William
et al.

Publication Date

2003-08-24

INVESTIGATING WILDLIFE USE OF UNDERPASSES UNDER I-87: SCIENCE AND THE PERILS OF PUBLICITY

Justina Ray (Phone: 718-220-5158, Email: jray@wcs.org), Jodi Hilty, (Phone: 718-220-5158, Email: jhilty@wcs.org), and William Weber (Phone: 718-220-5158, Email: bweber@wcs.org), Wildlife Conservation Society, 2300 Southern Blvd. Bronx, NY 10460

Roland Kays (Phone: 518-486-3205, Email: rkays@mail.nysed.gov), New York State Museum, CEC 3140, Albany, NY 12230

Scott LaPoint (Phone: 518-638-8393, Email: scott4406@yahoo.com), SUNY Environmental Science & Forestry, 1618 Mahaffy Rd., Fort Edward, NY 12828

Abstract

The issue of connectivity in roaded landscapes is a controversial one. Conservationists argue for significant expenditures on wildlife-friendly highway designs, while opponents fight against such spending. A recent study evaluating wildlife use of underpasses in the Adirondack region of New York ran headlong into this controversy, inadvertently fueling a debate about the general efficacy of wildlife underpasses through misleading coverage of research results in the popular press. This poster will detail the road traveled by this project: from conception through implementation, to the publicizing of results and the subsequent media fallout, and will conclude with the steps taken to clarify the study conclusions and lessons learned about publicizing science that is of public and political interest.

Because the proposed construction of the "Rooftop Highway" between Interstates 81 and 87 could effectively complete the isolation of the 24,000km² Adirondack Park, measures to mitigate negative impacts on wildlife are a priority in the region. The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and the New York State Museum (NYSM) recently partnered on a small research project investigating the extent to which underpasses and culverts constructed under a nearby Adirondack highway (I-87) were utilized by wildlife. Although these structures were not explicitly designed for wildlife, they might still function as animal passageways. Interviews with NY DOT and other agency personnel strongly encouraged implementation of a study of this nature to help inform the design of new wildlife crossings.

During a six-week period in spring 2002, we monitored 19 culverts and underpasses of various types along a 141-km stretch of I-87 using camera traps and supplemental footprint tracking. The results of this study, published in spring 2003 in the *Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies*, made it clear that culverts along I-87 benefited humans, but were rarely utilized by wildlife, pointing to the low conservation value of unplanned culverts for large Adirondack wildlife. A secondary message was that wildlife passages under future roads and highways should be designed to curb human use of such passages.

A draft press release by the authors accurately summarizing the study results was unintentionally distorted in institutional press releases from WCS and NYSM media offices. Local newspapers that picked up the story generally interviewed the authors and offered accurate coverage that focused on the costs and benefits of the proposed "Rooftop Highway." This perspective was lost, however, in small pieces printed in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. These stories distorted the study's findings that almost no animals used the small I-87 culverts, by incorrectly claiming that wildlife underpasses universally do not work for wildlife. The lack of interviews for these national stories further deprived the authors of an opportunity to clarify this point.

While the full impact of the *Washington Post* article is difficult to judge, it has apparently been cited by some officials and decision-makers as evidence against the effectiveness of wildlife underpasses. This misrepresentation of our results was a blow to all those working to improve connectivity in roaded landscapes, including the authors. We describe the steps taken by the scientists and institutions involved in this study to move constructively forward from this point. We also draw attention to the political climate surrounding this particular issue and a large volume of email exchanges, both of which served to greatly magnify the impact of this relatively minor study.

Biographical Sketch: Dr. Justina C. Ray is associate conservation zoologist for the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) based in eastern Canada. Her particular interests and expertise are in carnivore ecology and conservation and landscape conservation planning in temperate and tropical systems. Dr. Roland W. Kays is the curator of mammals at the New York State Museum, with particular research interests in the ecology and conservation of tropical and temperate carnivores. Scott LaPoint graduated with a B.S. from Paul Smith's College in 2001, and is beginning an M.S. program at SUNY ESF in August 2003 focusing on roads as barriers to mesocarnivore movement patterns. He led the fieldwork and authored the article discussed in this poster. Ray, Kays, and LaPoint recently completed a landscape-level study of carnivore communities in the Adirondack region. Dr. Jodi Hilty is a landscape ecologist and conservation biologist and currently serves as assistant director for WCS's North America Program, based in Montana. Her research focuses on understanding thresholds of human impact on biodiversity. Dr. Bill Weber, a social scientist, is the director for WCS's North America Program, based in New York. He is internationally recognized for his work, with his wife Dr. Amy Vedder, conserving mountain gorillas in Rwanda and now also works on Adirondack wildlife and community conservation issues.