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# Writing About Death, Killing and Nonhuman Animals: An Interview with David Vann

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# Writing About Death, Killing and Nonhuman Animals: An Interview with David Vann

Claire Cazajous-Augé

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Claire Cazajous-Augé: First of all, thank you for accepting to answer my questions. I would like to start this interview with a question about the place of the nonhuman world in your writing. Several of your novels are set on isolated islands, near the mountains, or in the woods. Even when a story takes place in an urban environment, as in *Aquarium*, nonhuman nature is never far. Indeed, Seattle is described as a submarine organism: "The entire city a colony like coral, made of an endless network of small chambers. I imagined each room a polyp, a creature without a spine, tentacled mouth looking up toward the sky, finding a place to sit and excreting its exoskeleton [...]" (26). What role do nonhuman environments play in your stories? How do they influence your writing process?

David Vann: My novel *Aquarium* is set in an urban environment, but I have transformed that aquarium back to a natural environment, making it as if it was underwater. In all of my novels I focus on the landscape. My entire writing process is that. I am writing Greek tragedy, where the characters are in conflict with someone close to them, but the method of writing that tragedy is through the description of the landscape. The way that works is like a Rorschach test. In a Rorschach test you smash paper together after you put ink on it, and it has a random pattern, but the viewer finds meaning, shape and pattern in how the ink has shaped itself on the paper. That is what the human mind does. We are pattern makers, and we want to make meaning. As I have the characters look at natural landscapes, especially water but also forest and even a city that has been transformed, those landscapes inevitably show the inside life and vision of the characters. What the stories end up being about my vision as an author comes from all those moments of landscape description. Nonhuman environments, as you say, are at the center of all of my stories and their role is also to show that that's how stories are created. I have no plan or outline and I'm finding the stories through describing the place.

CCA: In the very beginning of *Goat Mountain*, the narrator laments that, whereas his father told him stories about a rich fauna, he has grown up in a desert, a land that "held nothing"

(5). I wondered if the ecological crisis was present in your mind when you write stories about the nonhuman world.

DV: I definitely think about the various ecological crises that we face now in a lot of my books. In *Aquarium* I speak specifically about the oceans becoming less alkaline, ocean acidification and how sad it is that most of the fish are probably going to die. Calcium carbonate shells and pteropods, and everything that forms the basis of food chains are going to dissolve in a less alkaline sea. As I was writing about landscapes in Alaska and California, I was thinking about how things have changed from when I was a kid and how they had changed before that. My father had photos with fifty or sixty ducks spread out dead on the lawn after they had gone hunting in the weekend, or with the lawn covered with steelhead and salmon after they had gone fishing. My family, and people like them who did not know any restraint, who just killed without much limit, are part of the reason why there are not as many animals around. And, of course, the longer history of the US has that, with the slaughter of the buffalo being the most prominent example. I do feel that, by being born in 1966 and having my first memories in the early 70s, I was already too late to see a richer natural world; it was already much diminished. I saw the changes in Alaska, for instance, where there are so many less fish and less animals. If you visit places like the Great Wall in China, you will see that there's no bird or squirrel or anything. Every living thing has been killed from that place! It is just a dead forest and it is awful. My characters are looking at the landscape and thinking about the role of humans in the landscape. There is some atavistic desire to go back to an earlier world. That is a consistent desire in my books.

CCA: You often describe the encounters between human beings and nonhuman nature as a form of confrontation: the woods of Northern California are presented as a dangerous place filled with deadly creatures such as snakes (*Goat Mountain*), the Alaskan wilderness has no landmarks and the characters may get lost easily (*Legends of a Suicide*) and, on a small Island in the Bering Sea, characters have to deal with a series of terrible storms (*Caribou Island*). Such nonhuman violence mirrors the characters' inner struggles and troubled relationships, but I wondered if you considered it is as more than a symbolic background for human lives.

DV: This is a good question because it is not only that the natural landscape acts as a mirror in my books, reflecting the inside life and vision of the characters. The natural landscape also has a presence on its own, which can be extreme. In *Caribou Island*, I wrote about a cold, difficult, kind of desolate and immense landscape in Alaska where it is easy to feel alone. There is pressure put on the characters by the storms and the difficulty of the natural environment as they are trying to build a cabin. In *Dirt*, there is a kind of craziness in the characters that comes partly from just being in that terrible summer heat in California and having no break, no escape from it. I am using the environment as a way to put pressure on characters because, as I mentioned before, I am writing Greek tragedy and in Greek tragedy, you want to limit the stage. You trap the characters in places like an island or have them build a cabin and you try to make it a small place they cannot escape. Then you also want to put pressure on them from the natural environment so that the characters are going to break. The goal in tragedy is to push characters to the point where something in them breaks and they are going to reveal who they are, the goodness or badness, through what they say and do to each other. The natural landscape is part of that pressure cooker that the characters are put in.

CCA: When you were a child, you wanted to become an ichthyologist. Fish, be they in the wild or in a human-made environment, are central to three of your novels. In *Aquarium*,

Caitlin goes to the local aquarium daily to study fish. In *Komodo*, the narrator, her mother and her brother go scuba diving in Indonesia and encounter fantastic submarine creatures. In the first short story of the collection *Legends of a Suicide*, "Ichthyology", the young narrator breaks into his neighbors' house and seems hypnotized by their fish tank. Unlike the encounters with earthly fauna, the encounters with fish are often described as moments of peaceful contemplation.

DV: Fish are absolutely central to my life, not only to my writing. When I was a kid, I had seven fish tanks scattered all throughout the house. I really wanted to live with the fish. I imagined getting a tank big enough someday that I could just swim with them. And now that is essentially what I am doing: building a house on an island in the Philippines with reef right out front. Everyday I am snorkeling along that reef and then I scuba dive a lot along the reefs. I realized that what is better than trying to build a big fish tank is just go live by the ocean and dive a lot to see fish. From the beginning, I think that I saw that fish could reflect human behavior, that I could find human experience in fish, so I have used the halibut as my totem animal, for instance. The halibut is a very strange-looking fish that lays flat on the bottom of the ocean, and it has both eyes on the top side of its head. It is a green-brown mottled kind of ugly fish with a grimace for a mouth. What I imagine is that it started as a regular fish with one eye on each side, and then it hit puberty and got all screwed up and its vision distorted, and it ended up with both eyes on one side of its head and its grimace. I can imagine human development as I see fish, and I can imagine personalities. It has always been like that, for me: they seem to me the clearest mirrors in the natural world for human behavior because fish are so specialized. You know, they are funny. When I was in feminist thought classes at Stanford as an undergrad, everyone really liked the angler fish, because the female is this big fish with a big toothy mouth and a little lantern and it catches preys, and the male is really just a pair of testicles with a little fin to swim which fishes nothing! In *Aquarium*, they talk about class and money as they look at the fish. There are some fish that look poor and desperate and others that seem rich. For any aspect of human behavior, you would want to think there is some fish that seems to have specialized and made its whole life about that. Down below there are so many strange creatures in impossible colors and strange behaviors that you would not see on land, except for insects. Yes, I love the fish, and you are right about the peaceful contemplation. For instance, Caitlyn, in *Aquarium*, is able to find peace, vision and possibility underwater. In "Ichthyology" also there is an escape, a peace and safety in this silent underwater world. It is like that for all my characters.

CCA: In *Goat Mountain*, the narrator is given a rifle even if he is only eleven years old, and his father and grandfather take him hunting (killing a deer is a coming-of-age ritual in his family). In *Last Day on Earth*, you present Steve Kazmierczak, a school shooter who killed five students at Northern Illinois University. I have also read that you inherited your father's guns after he died, when you were only thirteen. Could you tell me more about your relationship with guns, and how it affects the stories you write?

DV: In *Last Day on Earth*, I talked about my relationship with guns because Americans like to think that school shooters and mass murderers are freaks or outsiders who have nothing to say about Americans or American culture, that they do not define us in any way, that they do not reveal us, that they are just different than who we are. But America is really good at making shooters and we have more shootings than anyone else has. Our military, for instance, is really good at training shooters to kill without feeling anything and our mental health and prison systems are fairly broken in ways that encourage people toward violence. There are also other aspects of American culture, including the idea that we somehow all

have this right to have any number of guns in our home. It is a real perversion from how the second amendment was originally written. It meant that you can have a militia; in other words, you could arm the citizens so that you would not be taken over by a foreign power. It did not really mean that one individual should have a Glock with thousands of rounds of ammunition and an AR-15, an assault rifle-style weapon, so that they could go kill a hundred people. That was not the intention. But that is what it has become in America. There was a Supreme Court decision in 2008 that made it impossible to have gun control, and since then Trump had appointees to the Supreme Court that made it more conservative. We are just going to get worse for guns, not better, which is a real shame.

For my own history with guns, I was given a pellet gun at seven and I was trained how to use a rifle. I got to be a good shot with it. I shot a squirrel behind the shoulder, for instance. At eight I was given a shotgun, which is deadly to people. And then at nine I was given a 3030 rifle like in the western movies. I killed my first two deer when I was eleven. So I had real life experiences like those described in *Goat Mountain*, when the character kills the deer. I shot my first deer in the neck, and when I came to look at it, it just looked like Bambi. It felt wrong. The next one is like one in the book: I wounded it in the spine, and I paralyzed it so it was still alive. My father made me come up and put my rifle to the back of its head, which really felt like executing this thing that was bigger than me, that was alive and breathing and afraid and looking at me. That was really disturbing psychologically. After my dad died, even while he was alive, I stopped trying to hit deer. I would just close my eyes and shoot in the general direction. I also made up invented deer that were not there, shot them and everyone came running up looking for blood. After my dad died, I just stopped going hunting. I did not have to anymore.

I resent the easy access to guns, because I think my dad's suicide is partly because he had a 44 Magnum pistol with a hair trigger you just lightly tap and it goes off. It was so easy to kill himself with that. It did not give him time to have second thoughts about it. He was a dentist who had handled a lot of mercury. He might also have actually been poisoned by it. There was a high suicide rate among dentists, and he might have been mentally ill from that. Having a gun around was just too easy a way to die. I am obviously really against the general citizens having lots of guns and especially people with mental health issues, who have served in the military or been in prison. I think there should be limits for who gets guns. Writing *Last Day on Earth* made me more anti-American and it made my stories a bit darker. I think you can see hints of it in *Dirt*, *Goat Mountain* and *Bright Air Black* about Medea. They are all a bit darker because of that experience of researching a mass murderer.

CCA: Death, and particularly the act of killing, is very much present in your work: a poacher is killed (*Goat Mountain*), a son commits suicide (*Legends of a Suicide*), a young man kills his classmates (*Last Day on Earth*), a woman fantasizes about the manner in which she could kill her brother (*Komodo*), and characters often go on hunting and fishing trips. How do you manage to speak the unspeakable, or to write the unwritable?

DV: It is really difficult to write about taboos, about moments when we cross the line for what is normal or possible. If you kill someone, especially if you kill someone in your family, you have crossed the line, you have broken taboo. I think one reason why we write and read tragedies is that we want to test the rules. As we read about someone doing something that crosses the line, like the boy killing the poacher in *Goat Mountain*, or as I am trying to understand how my sister would want to kill me in this fictional scene in *Komodo*, we have to question what is it that holds our families and our societies together. The characters of *Goat Mountain* talk about this: one of

them says that the problem is that he could do it again, that now that he has done this there are no rules holding him back. There is nothing to say, there is nothing that we can count on to make our relationships with each other safe. That is how tragedy can be scary. In *Bright Air Black*, as we see Medea kill her children, for instance, we understand that anything is possible. There are no rules at all anymore, there is no limits to what our behaviors can be, and we can go right back to barbarism, where we all just kill each other and take things from each other. As I write those moments, I am trying to write about these rules.

My novels are all about religion. That is actually the main thing that binds them together, because I started as a religious studies major, but also because all these rules that we are living by unconsciously come from religion. We are following all these rules without even realizing it, even though they may not make any sense and they may not fit our lives. We act unconsciously, and out of control, like characters in Greek tragedy. We end up doing things we did not mean to do and we hurt the people we love most. It is partly because we are acting according to rules that we did not make and we do not understand.

CCA: Human and nonhuman corpses are described with many—and often gruesome—details. Do you proceed differently when you write about the deaths of human beings and those of nonhuman beings?

DV: When I described the body of the boy who kills himself in *Legends of a Suicide*, I was not trying to write horror, or trying to gross people out, or trying to be graphic, or trying to have anything that would be gratuitous violence. I thought I was going to write a story that would end in my father's suicide, but instead the boy kills himself, and that was a complete surprise to me, something I did not see coming at all. That is one of those transformations that happens in the writing, the surprise to the author that opens up the material in a different way and makes it possible to write what I could not write before. I could not write about what my dad's body would have looked like. It was too disturbing to think about that. I could not describe his head half blown off and the pieces of his brain on the ceiling. That was just so gruesome. It was also so disturbing and shocking to lose him all of a sudden. I had a hard time writing about my grief right afterwards. But once it had shifted and it was the boy's body, and it was the father finding it, everything was distance. Now I could describe the grief in so much detail because I was finally making my father's death real instead of being in half denial about it. You know as a kid I had these imaginings that it was someone else's body and my dad was running through the snow somewhere in Alaska. In *Goat Mountain* the buck's body is described in such detail because killing, even when we do not want to kill, is what makes us human. We are very strange animals in that way: we can kill based on ideas or because someone told us to, and even if we find it reprehensible.

CCA: In many of your books, and especially in *Goat Mountain*, the syntax is quite elliptical, sentences seem fragmented, and verbs are missing. Is it a way to express that the narrators and the characters struggle to come to terms with their actions, killing especially, even though it is part of their family history and rituals?

DV: You are right that in *Goat Mountain* the language is different. Actually, in all the books from *Legends of a Suicide* through *Caribou Island*, *Dirt*, *Goat Mountain* and then *Bright Air Black*, I am progressively pushing toward old English, which is the Germanic side of the English language. English is half-French half-German, and so this

Germanic side of the language feels to me like a more immediate, brutal and less mediated language. It is a more immediate apprehension of the world, probably because of the paired stresses. I was trying to write something closer to that rhythm, because I was trying to get back, as you suggest, to an earlier and more brutal mind. The men in *Goat Mountain* are sleeping on the ground and hunting together, which is something they could have been doing a thousand generations before, anywhere in the world. Family history, rituals, killing and the ritualization of killing all go to an earlier, more brutal world, and that language seems to fit that. It culminates in my book about Medea because it is set 3250 years ago. That proto-Greek language at that time would have been similar. I was trying to recapture some of that by having that language and Laura Derajinski, my French translator, did an amazing job in *Bright Air Black*. She came up with a translation that tries to approximate some of those sentence rhythms and the Germanic side of language, which is theoretically impossible to do because I am writing about the non-French side of the half of English! But she managed to do it in French.

CCA: You said you write Greek tragedy. The influence can be obvious, as in *Bright Air Black* which tells the myth of Medea, or more subtle. For example, in several of your novels, the narrators and the characters have *hamartia* like the heroes of Greek plays: they commit an action that shatters the fragile balance of their lives and that sometimes leads to their downfalls.

DV: As I mentioned before, there is often a taboo that is crossed, and the characters commit some terrible act. In the end, they are going to regret having done it. It does upset the balance and does lead to their downfalls. There is usually something really early on in my books that happens and that ends up leading to the final fall of the characters. I guess the main way I see the books being Greek tragedies is simply that: the characters hurt the people they love most.

But I am influenced by all the other elements of Greek tragedy, such as dramatic unity. In all my novels, except *Caribou Island*, you do not get a break from the main action. You are stuck with this one problem and you are going to have to follow that from the first page to the last. All my novels also follow unities of place and time. *Goat Mountain* has just five characters and takes place in just two and a half days in one place, on a mountain side. It is very rare to find novels that actually are that limited.

CCA: There is also a theatrical dimension to your writing: *Aquarium* and *Legends of a Suicide* feature major plot twists, and *Aquarium* and *Komodo* have long and lively dialogues in which characters argue in a very theatrical way.

DV: I am aware of it being a lot like theater. John Miller, my mentor at Stanford, was influenced by theater and had me read a lot of plays. I tend to use dialogues quite a lot and they are crazy. The characters can do or say anything. Conversations go off in strange directions which is also what theater does. Theater is actually absurdly unreal and the conversations characters have, they could never have them in real life. But when we are watching the play, if it is a good play, we are made to believe that this is real and it feels so intense because it is crazy and it is not the stuff we normally say and it pushes much harder than what we normally say.

It is an interesting fake job that theater tries to create. It is totally artificial. It gets you to believe it is real, so you get hit with the extra impact of this stuff that people could not say. All my novels are written like that. I try to offer a bit of crazy every

page or two. That is what the main influence from theatre is: the strange direction that gesture and dialogue can go.

CCA: You write a lot about your family's history, such as your father's suicide (*Legends of a Suicide, Caribou Island*) or your relationship with your sister (*Komodo*). Your novels test family ties to the point of destruction. Would it be too far-fetched to say that writing acts as a therapy of sorts and holds a form of cathartic power, which would be more powerful than a traditional therapy (indeed, in *Halibut on the Moon*, the main character resents his therapist)?

DV: My writing has acted as a form of therapy to me and does have cathartic power, because I am going back through what was most disturbing in our family's life, beginning with my father's suicide, the most disturbing event in my life. Writing it is a second chance to go back and take what was terrifying and meaningless in real life, to make it coherent and meaningful, and to have it connected to stories. So, although some people are afraid of tragedy, or think it is depressing, it is actually supposed to be reassuring. It takes all of our demons, all of our bad behaviors and all the landscapes of hell that we sense in ourselves and it finds a safe place to put them and have them constrained in the end. In the end we are reassured because we have taken care of that bad stuff and it has found its place. I do not think it is cathartic and therapeutic only for the writer; it has that effect on the reader too, which is something that American culture essentially does not understand. American culture really deeply wants characters that you like, with stories that make you feel good. American culture has just denied all that has been valuable for 2500 years of literary culture. What I mean now is that not only that Americans do not read tragedy, but in our universities, you have to give trigger warnings. In class, if you are going to talk about a novel about suicide, for instance, you are supposed to warn your students, to tell them they do not have to read it or can leave and not be part of this discussion because they might get upset. Education is supposed to challenge you, to push you, to upset you and to disturb you. Literature is not supposed to be safe and have trigger warnings. Our greatest accomplishments in arts have been those things that upset us, that make us hold up a mirror and have to think about who we are. If we deny that we just become simplistic and it becomes possible to do stupid things like follow Trump or vote for Brexit. I think that when literature is disturbing and tragic, it helps lead us away from our badness.

CCA: You have Cherokee ancestry. Does this heritage play a role in your writing?

DV: This ancestry has a huge role in my stories, especially in *Goat Mountain*. At first, I could not figure out why this book was so anti American and why the boy kills off the Holy Trinity. He kills the poacher, who becomes Jesus, the figure of the buck becomes the Holy Ghost who cannot be completely annihilated, and his grandfather becomes a terrible Old Testament God: he brings things into existence and also destroys them, and he does not really care about what happens to anybody. Writing a book that kills off the Holy Trinity was not my plan. Actually, I did not have any plan of what I was doing. First I had no idea why there was all this discussion of Christianity, religion, the Bible and Cain and Abel in there. I did not understand the book at all to the last fifty pages, it was crazy to me. And then I understood that probably this is my native American heritage, where Christianity was arguably one of the worst things that happened to Native Americans, because it took away all their culture. Another religion coming in does more than just killing you and sending you on a trail of tears, bringing smallpox, and taking away all your rituals and beliefs, all the systems that



hold you together. It is a really terrible kind of conquering that happens through religion, and so I think that killing off the Holy Trinity was a fight back at that. Killing the buck also becomes a kind of descent into hell and I realized the whole book was actually my depiction of an inferno. This is the closest I have come to depicting hell. That is why there are only men and no women. I think it has a huge role in that. It also has a little bit of a role in *Halibut on the Moon*, where the character of my father thinks about his ancestry and talks with his own father about that. Now, I am writing a novel which is about my native American heritage and which focuses on Chief David Vann during the Trail of tears. Chief James Vann, which is actually my dad's name, was the richest Cherokee about 200 years ago and had a bunch of slaves.

CCA: Your characters are men, women and children whose actions force them to take an unexpected path. Similarly, your writing does not seem to follow any predefined direction. I have read that when you write, you do not always know what is going to happen in your stories. Could you tell us more about your writing process?

DV: I used to plan an outline and I thought I knew what I was doing in my stories. And then *Legend of a Suicide*, with the novella "Sukwann Island," happened. The surprise halfway through "Sukwann Island" changed my writing forever. After that I realized that what is much more interesting than a plan is the surprise that happens, the transformation of the story going in different directions or when a character sees something strange in the landscape that transforms them, or they do or say something strange to another character close to them. Those are all the reasons that are worth writing. So, since then I have written without knowing where I am going. When I was writing *Goat Mountain*, I thought I was writing some other book and then I tried for three days and failed. I was writing a book set in Australia and the outback and it did not work. And then there was a pickup truck going down a creek bed, and so I just transitioned to the pickup truck going into the mountains, to go hunting. *Goat Mountain* is my best book. I think it is the best example of this kind of subconscious or unconscious writing process. Everything about it was a surprise. The relationships between the characters, the vision of religion, and everything that happens in the dramatic action.

I think this writing process comes from theatre. In high school I studied with someone who was influenced by Polish laboratory theatre, by Grotowski and the idea of not staging or faking emotion, but just having your voice be like dry grass to indirectly represent sadness, for instance, and having improv theater where you do not know what is going to happen, each performance being its own creation. The books I publish are the same as the first draft. It is basically a one-time performance that the reader experiences, the same way I did. And the way I do it is I read through the previous twenty pages of the novel for about forty-five minutes or so and then I am convinced I will never read them again, but then I reread the last couple of pages and then I fire off a quick paragraph and I read the last couple pages again and then fire off more paragraphs.

CCA: Your writing seems to be inspired by the tradition of American rural writing. To conclude this interview, could you tell us more about your literary influences?

DV: You are exactly right that my writing comes from a tradition of rural landscape writing in the US. Our publishing industry, because it is based in New York, would have you believe the great American novel is urban and takes place in the tri-state area like Philip Roth, for instance. Actually, the longest and most important tradition

of literature in the US is rural, and mostly in the South and in the West. New York is almost unapologetically blind to it. Some of my main influences do come from the tri-state area and some of them were Jewish writers like Grace Paley, for instance, and her really great short stories. I had a class with her, and I think all the time of what she taught me: good stories have at least two stories in them and characters deserve the open destiny of life. I think about these things all the time. That tradition had a big influence on me. I could also name Tillie Olsen, Philip Roth, or Isaac Bashevis Singer. But the biggest influence for me has been landscape writers who are rural in the South or the West, like Cormac McCarthy, for instance, with *Blood Meridian*, which is my favorite book, or Flannery O'Connor's stories that are set in Georgia. Katherine Anne Porter, Faulkner, Hemingway are my biggest influences, and Marilynne Robinson and Cormac McCarthy are the American writers I like best now. But then I have been influenced a lot by reading Greek tragedies, by studying Latin, Chaucer and a lot of medieval sources, and by translating *Beowulf* from old English. I was also influenced by helping teach Italian literature, and seeing lots of independent film. I also have guilty pleasures like reading Kurt Vonnegut. When I was studying literature, I was told we were not supposed to read him, that it was not supposed to be great literature, and I thought he was for fun. And he was great! Three or four of us got to meet with him and someone asked him what advice he had for young writers. He told us to go out and get married and divorced as quickly as we could. Very good advice in retrospect!

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## ABSTRACTS

Born in 1966 in Alaska, David Vann writes novels and short stories which were awarded several prizes. In this interview, the author talks about his relationship with non-human animals, the

ecological crisis, death and guns. He discusses his background, including his family history, his Cherokee heritage, his literary influences, and his relationship with the American society, which has led him to write novels and short stories with serious, even taboo subjects, in a language that can be brutal or theatrical. This interview was conducted in February 2021.

Né en 1966 en Alaska, David Vann est l'auteur de romans et de nouvelles ayant reçu de nombreuses récompenses. Dans cet entretien, l'auteur parle de son rapport aux animaux non humains, à la crise écologiques, à la mort et aux armes à feu. Il revient sur son parcours, notamment son histoire familiale, son héritage Cherokee, ses influences littéraires et son rapport à la société américaine, qui l'a mené à écrire des romans et des nouvelles aux sujets graves, voire tabous, dans une langue parfois brute ou théâtrale. Cet entretien a été mené au mois de février 2021.

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**Mots-clés:** tragédie, mort, animaux non humains, chasse, mise à mort, armes à feu

**Keywords:** tragedy, death, nonhuman animals, hunting, killing, guns

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