



Encyclopedia of Life

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Chamois Podcast and Scientist Interview

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Growing up in a village in the foothills of the French Alps, Francis Roucher used to hunt the chamois. But on the day one of his shots went astray, Roucher was transformed from hunter to game manager, working to reverse the chamois' decline.

Transcript

Ari: From the Encyclopedia of Life, this is: One Species at a Time. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

Here's a story about one sort of relationship that a person can have with an animal. And how that relationship can change. First, the person.

Roucher: My name is Francis Roucher. I'm living at the foot of the Alps.

Ari: Those are the Alps in the southeast of France. And it's those mountains that you see from Roucher's front lawn, soaring above a legion of rolling hills and shorter peaks. They form a smaller mountain range called Chartreuse, and it's breathtaking. Francis Roucher is 79, and a retired surgeon.

Roucher: I'm not running after media, after journalists, at all.

Ari: We come running after you.

Roucher: But I didn't ask it. Pfff. I don't care!

Ari: The reason I went running after Roucher was because of his hobby. Which brings us to the animal in this story. Something called a chamois.

Roucher: It's between a goat and an antelope. The ancient people in France called it the rock antelope.

Ari: Chamois live – and I should say that the plural of chamois is also chamois – chamois live amidst the mountains. They have brownish-golden fur, a white face with a dark stripe running from each eye to their nose, and two short, curved horns.

The first time Roucher saw a chamois, he was 16. Just Roucher, the chamois...and a rifle. Roucher's hobby: hunting. For fun, and for meat. He learned the most humane way to hunt was to aim for the chamois' heart.

Roucher: It destroys the beginning of aorta. So no blood come – immediately, no blood comes to the heart, and no blood to the brain. He has no pain. So it taught me to shoot very, very accurately.

Ari: For Roucher, there was something exact about the hunt. And something electric. For years, he hunted the chamois close to his home in Chartreuse, a population – it turned out – that was in decline. But Roucher's hunting, it came to an end in the late 80s.

So why did you stop shooting them?

Roucher: The last chamois I shot in an upper meadow – a chamois got out of the trees so I shot it but not very, very well. So the poor chamois – he was 3 or 4 years old – went down, you know, trying to be on his feet and could not. And fall down just near to me. But his head high and looking at me. "What have you done, sir? I was just so happy in my meadow." You see these big eyes, like black eyes, like antelope: they are very soft. And they look at you. Il ne peut pas pensé... They couldn't think people are dishonest.

Ari: He quickly brought the animal's suffering to an end by firing off a second shot. But that was it for Roucher.

Roucher: Well, I stopped hunting. I was fed up with hunting.

Ari: Once Roucher quit his hobby, he had time to think about the dwindling numbers of chamois in Chartreuse. And he got concerned they were being over-hunted. And so:

Roucher: I switched to game management, which is much more interesting than shooting. So, the shooters were my instrument of work. My tool.

Ari: He had to balance two things. On the one hand, he wanted to maintain a healthy population of chamois. And on the other hand, he had to satisfy the hunters who didn't want to be told that they couldn't hunt. So he came up with a compromise. A controlled cull where only a limited number of animals could be hunted each year. It took him a while to convince the hunters but he earned their trust, and eventually they came round. These days, the numbers of chamois are back up, and the hunters still get to hunt.

The day after I visited Roucher, I took a walk in Chartreuse to find some chamois. Mist swirled and danced along the ridges and a lush green carpet of grass and trees cascaded amongst a tumble of rocks and boulders. My guide was Philippe Bouquerat, a local forest ranger with a sun-leathered face and a shock of light hair. He agrees that there are more chamois today than before, and at least some of that increase is due to Roucher.

After an hour of walking, Bouquerat and I spotted a couple of adult chamois. We crouched down.

Bouquerat: Right now we are watching chamois.

Ari: Why is it important to be quiet?

Bouquerat: When we are entering our space, we can disturb them by our noise and our smell.

Ari: What's it like to see a chamois?

Bouquerat: To see chamois is seeing a part of the wildness.

Ari: I gazed at two chamois in the distance, but there was one I missed seeing. Bouquerat leaned towards me and started whispering.

Bouquerat: You have female, yeah, and on the left of the female, you have a small one, a baby.

Ari: Ohhhhh...

Bouquerat: On the left.

Ari: Tiny, tiny. A little baby chamois. All told, we saw 25 chamois that day. Gliding up and down the slopes. And because their numbers are back up, both wildlife watchers and hunters can appreciate them, each in their own way.

Meet the Scientist

Meet ranger Philippe Boquerat, who you heard featured in the Chamois podcast:



Where do you work?

I am a ranger working for the French Forest Service (Office National des Forêts) in the western part of the Alps near Grenoble (mountains).

What do you study?

I am not a scientist but more than a ranger role : I have to avoid error about precious species (flora and fauna).

What are titles you would give yourself?

Nature lover and mountain skier.

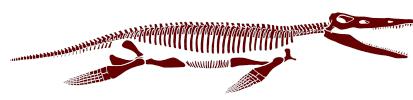
What do you like to do when you are not working?

Reading, travelling, nature watching.

What do you like most about science?

I am not a scientist but they help me to understand the world.

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