

Study: International Olympic Committee should ban lead shot to help wildlife, water

12 February 2014

With the world watching the Sochi Winter Olympics including the biathlon shooting events, now is the time for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to ban the use of lead shot to prevent wildlife poisoning and health threats to surface and groundwater, says a new paper co-authored this month by a University of Guelph biologist.

Thousands of tons of lead shot discharged every year during training by Olympic shooters pose a threat to birds and mammals and to water resources, says Vernon Thomas, professor emeritus in the Department of Integrative Biology.

His paper "Banning the Use of Lead Shot: Options for the International Olympic Committee" appears in the current issue of the journal *Environmental Policy and Law*.

He wrote the article proposing IOC policy options with David Anderson, former Canadian minister of the environment and former chair of the governing council of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP).

They began working together on environmental policy when Anderson joined U of G in 2007 as part-time director of the former Guelph Institute for the Environment.

Thomas said the Winter Olympic biathlon now under way in the Sochi Games is not the problem, as lead shot is recovered and recycled from targets.

In the Summer Games, clay target [shooting](#) releases lead shot, but even that amount of lead discharged every four years is minimal, he said.

The real problem stems from athletes training between the Olympic Games. Thomas said each Olympic shooter discharges more than a ton of lead shot each year on and around practice shooting ranges.

"The real concern is the amount of shot released during the four-year interval by the many hopefuls in each country and the Olympic team members of each country who practise assiduously with over 1,000 shots per week.

"This lead shot – many tons – is rarely recovered and poses real toxic risks to wildlife that may ingest it and to groundwater quality."

He said non-toxic substitutes – especially steel shot – have been available for about two decades.

Only lead shot is approved by the International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF), which regulates Olympic trap and skeet shooting events. The ISSF also oversees qualification of athletes for the Olympic Games for each member nation.

Thomas said ISSF rules on lead shot use contravene an IOC Charter rule meant to ensure that all Olympic events are sustainable and pose no environmental harm.

Lack of attention to the environmental effects of Olympic shooting is also inconsistent with UNEP's efforts globally to eliminate lead in paint, fuels and batteries, he said. "You can't be concerned about lead from other sources and then turn a blind eye to the magnitude of lead from lead shot."

UNEP is represented on the IOC Sport and Environment Committee.

He said the IOC and UNEP have received copies of the new paper and another article about Olympic shooting policy co-authored by Thomas and published last year in *AMBIO*, a publication of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences.

If the IOC were to ban the use of lead shot, he said, all Olympic shooting and qualification events worldwide would have to use non-toxic shot.

Thomas said officials could phase out the use of lead shot after the 2016 Olympics.

He has also studied the impacts of lead shot from hunting.

Up to four per cent of North American waterfowl was killed each year after being poisoned by ingesting lead shot discharged from waterfowl hunting. The United States banned waterfowl hunters from using [lead shot](#) in 1991; Canada followed suit eight years later.

Last fall, California banned all hunters from using lead ammunition, based partly on another 2013 AMBIO paper by Thomas that outlined lead-free alternatives.

Provided by University of Guelph

APA citation: Study: International Olympic Committee should ban lead shot to help wildlife, water (2014, February 12) retrieved 17 October 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-02-international-olympic-committee-shot-wildlife.html>

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