

U.S. funds body armor research

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The U.S. military is turning to the animal world in an effort to develop lighter, tougher and longer lasting body armor.

A Massachusetts Institute of Technology engineering graduate student, Benjamin Bruet, is part of a U.S.-funded team that has tested horns, antlers, fish scales and other natural materials to study how animals shield themselves in the wild, National Geographic News reported.

Bruet is optimistic his research will be successful. "Within 10 years, drastic improvements will have already been implemented that will revolutionize the battle suit," he told NGN.

A major factor in developing new materials is weight.

Nick Taylor, manager of an Austin, Texas-based retailer of body armor, told National Geographic News: "For military use, your basic (body armor) setup is 15 to 20 pounds. The average soldier also wears about 40 pounds of gear on top of that, plus a helmet is 3 pounds."

And any new product must be thoroughly tested, he said, noting Zylon was introduced in the late 1990s as being lighter, thinner and more flexible. But two police officers were shot and killed wearing Zylon vests before scientists discovered the material may degrade quickly, becoming ineffective after a few years.

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