

Deer Kills: a Bad Idea – for Animals, Ecosystems, and People

Human beings do not have total control over all other species despite our species' huge impacts. The dramatically increased presence of white-tailed deer throughout the East Coast and elsewhere in the last couple of decades is mainly due to the transformation of the landscape brought about by our species -- suburban sprawl in particular. Altering the landscape brings about countless changes, some of them conspicuous, some of them at a microscopic level, some to our liking, some not. To reverse unwanted changes, we must again change the landscape.

Deer kills are essentially the same as deer hunting administered for many decades by the Pennsylvania Game Commission and other state wildlife agencies. Broadly speaking, hunting and suburban deer kills operate the same way:

- (1) Destroy sections of forest, providing abundant new low-growing vegetation – deer food.
- (2) Kill enough deer so that the population is noticeably smaller immediately afterwards but few enough so that surviving deer produce an overall increase in the local population.
- (3) Same as (2) the following year and for years to come as long as other factors remain the same.

The increase in the deer population after a sizeable kill that does not amount to an extermination is a response to the new landscape with more food per animal than the old landscape with more deer. That is why some places in the Philadelphia area where deer “management” consists of killing deer have had deer kills every year far beyond a decade.

The part of the landscape known as “edge” – forest edges or clearings – is where sunlight provides the most low-growing vegetation. That is where deer obtain most of their food. Edge may consist of backyards, gardens, golf courses, roadways, or Game Commission clearcuts – wherever the forest that used to stretch from the Atlantic Coast to the Mississippi River is interrupted. Edge is deer food regardless of human intentions.

As Dr. Thomas Eveland said in his presentation Why Killing Deer Makes Poor Park Management, in Philadelphia on June 15, 1998, “A quick surge in a deer population can occur if hunting is implemented where it hasn’t been before. In any event, if hunting is started, it’ll have to continue.”

As Dr. Allen T. Rutberg wrote in “The Science of Deer Management: An Animal Welfare Perspective,” “The most visible weakness in the assertion that hunting is necessary to control deer populations is that it has largely failed to do so over the last two decades. ... Just because deer are being killed doesn’t mean that deer populations are being controlled.”

How should problems associated with deer be solved, then? The main thing is to recognize each of the typical complaints – Lyme disease, the eating of vegetation, and car-deer collisions – as human-caused problems that must be solved through changes in human practices. Responsible Policies for Animals, Inc. (RPA) is glad to provide details of the approaches briefly outlined here. Many items in the attached reading list give details. RPA believes one consideration in important choices like home purchasing and car driving should always be what animals are likely to be encountered and whether one is prepared to co-exist humanely with them.

The American Lyme Disease Foundation does not recommend killing deer to prevent **Lyme disease**, and in some locations where all deer were removed, incidence of the disease did not diminish. Useful short-term approaches include avoiding walking through brush when outdoors and to check for the very small ticks that spread Lyme disease after time outdoors.

Car-deer collisions depend on how much and how fast human beings drive. They peak during hunting and mating seasons. Special signs and patrolling can help. Roadside reflectors that cause deer not to enter roadways when cars are approaching between dusk and dawn are highly effective if installed and maintained properly. See www.strieter-lite.com or phone 309-794-9800.

Fencing can keep deer away from **vegetation** people wish to protect, over large or small areas. Vendors with expert staff include Benner's Gardens – 800-753-4660 / www.bennersgardens.com; Master Gardening – 301-694-1238 / www.mastergardening.com; and Wildlife Control Technology – 800-235-0262 / www.wildlife-control.com. It also helps to plant species deer do not prefer to eat.

Large-scale, long-term solutions to which we all can contribute will be the most effective, the most humane, and the best for people and ecosystems. Developing a genuine ecological perspective rather than of the last few centuries based on convenience, domination, manipulation, exploitation, and short-term private gain will help bring about the changes that are needed for human beings to live in peace with white-tailed deer and other wildlife as well as with each other.

Solutions must include restoring forest to the extent possible, including where no deer currently exist. Changes that will help: minimizing needless farming such as intensive feed-crop production for animals not needed for the human diet; curtailing and reversing suburban sprawl, which contributes to economic problems, air and water pollution, the breakdown of families and communities, and significant urban problems from loss of the tax base; and ending construction of new roads. The New Urbanism is on the right track.

In terms of individual American homes, trees are the only plantings that appreciate in value. Learning to emphasize native tree species rather than water-, fuel-, and time-wasting non-native grass lawns can help restore forest where houses and other structures already exist. Eventually, whether houses remain or not, trees will form forest canopies that will slow or prevent the growth of huge deer-food supplies. As Virginia Scott Jenkins writes in her book *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession*, “A new landscape is a cultural creation, and it remains to be seen whether the environmental movement in this country can enlist as potent a group of supporters and teachers for the twenty-first century as the lawn industry, the Garden Club of America, the U.S. Golf Association, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture did during the twentieth century.”

Thomas Berry explains in his essay on education “The American College in the Ecological Age,” that “the emerging ecological phase” of human existence must, in building on the “scientific-technological phase” that has made our society much of what it is today, correct the destruction brought about by that last phase, in which “[o]ur concern for the natural world is one of utility or as an object to satisfy intellectual curiosity or aesthetic feeling.”

No matter how quickly deer may die when shot – and wounding is common notwithstanding claims to the contrary – it is never humane to kill an animal short of his or her natural lifespan except to end irremediable suffering. Almost all human enterprise as we know it today developed without responsible policies for animals. Responsible Policies for Animals, Inc., a 501(c)(3) educational nonprofit organization, works to show influential people and institutions how to establish responsible policies for animals that are also responsible policies for people and ecosystems.

Recommended Reading

William S. Alverson, Walter Kuhlman, and Donald M. Waller, *Wild Forests: Conservation Biology and Public Policy*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1994.

Animal Protection Institute, *Humane Ways To Live with Deer*. Brochure provided by the Animal Protection Institute. www.api4animals.org or 800-348-7387.

Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988.

Michelle S. Byers, "Sprawl Boosts Risk of Lyme Disease." *New Jersey Conservation Foundation*, April 16, 2003, Volume XXXV, Number 14.

David Cantor, "Killing Deer No Solution to, and Deer Not the Cause of, Pennsylvania 'Deer Problem.'" *Proceedings of the Conference on the Impact of Deer on the Biodiversity and Economy of the State of Pennsylvania, September 24-26, 1999*. Available from Responsible Policies for Animals, Inc., free of charge: RPA4all@aol.com or 215-886-RPA1 (-7721). Also at <http://pa.audubon.org/dcp.htm>.

David J. Cantor, "Land Use, Not Deer, Is Villain." *USA Today*, January 2, 2001 (letter). Available from Responsible Policies for Animals, Inc., free of charge: RPA4all@aol.com or 215-886-RPA1 (-7721).

David J. Cantor, "White-Tailed Deer: The Phantom Menace." *The Animals' Agenda*, September/October, 1999. Available from Responsible Policies for Animals, Inc., free of charge: RPA4all@aol.com or 215-886-RPA1 (-7721).

Alicia Chang, "Study: Risk of Lyme Disease Increases as Forests Shrink." Associated Press, February 23, 2003.

Dr. Thomas Eveland, *Living with Deer*. Booklet provided by The Fund for Animals. www.fund.org or 301-585-2591.

John Hadidian, Guy R. Hodge and John W. Grandy, eds., *Wild Neighbors: The Humane Approach to Living with Wildlife*. Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 1997.

Virginia Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994.

James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.

James Howard Kunstler, *Home from Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World for the 21st Century*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Robert Ornstein and Paul Ehrlich, *New World New Mind*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.

Holmes Rolston, III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1988.

Allen T. Rutberg, Ph.D., "The Science of Deer Management: An Animal Welfare Perspective," in William J. McShea, H. Brian Underwood, and John H. Rappole, eds., *The Science of Overabundance: Deer Ecology and Population Management*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997.