

Assignment: To write a thesis-support essay that could appear on the editorial page of a serious and influential newspaper or magazine aimed at readers identifiable by age, political outlook, economic/educational level, and (if applicable) sex.

The Unpleasant Dilemma of Suburban Deer

by Pat Kirkham

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Take a moment and think of the white-tail deer. What image comes to mind? Is it one of a stately buck, poised by a woodland stream, or possibly a doe and her fawn grazing near the edge of a prairie? Unfortunately, in many suburban areas of the United States a controversy is brewing which centers around this gentle herbivore. Take, for example, Schuylkill Center in suburban Philadelphia. Schuylkill is a five-hundred-acre environmental park which shelters many endangered species of wild-flowers and trees. Schuylkill is also home to almost four-hundred white-tails which are decimating the center's botanical collection. Richard James, executive director at Schuylkill estimates that a maximum deer population of no more than twenty-five animals would be the proper natural balance. In the last fifteen years, suburban development has claimed huge tracts of land, creating a patchwork of land use patterns and drastically shrinking the white-tails' natural habitat. The remaining open land is being put under extreme stress by the growing population of deer that have no natural predators left except man. At Schuylkill, as well as many other suburban sites, the need to reduce white-tail deer populations to more manageable levels is painfully evident. The controversy lies in the methods being proposed to reduce suburban deer populations to more manageable levels.

Politicians and citizens groups, as well as environmentalists, animal-rights activists and land-management professionals, have been bitterly debating which methods to employ in order to stabilize current deer populations and reduce future herds. Politicians are wary of taking any stand for fear of being labeled Bambi killers. Citizens groups are generally well-meaning but often too disorganized to accomplish any specific goals. Animal-rights activists and environmentalists run the gamut from constructive criticism to outright guerilla tactics. For example, the Sierra club is currently suing the U.S. Forest Service for allowing the deer population to become so large that it threatens the botanical and biological diversity of Wisconsin's Nicolet National Forest. At the other end of the spectrum, the Humane Society of the United States has charged that any method used to reduce deer population is nothing more than a charade to cover up the willful abuse of animals. Many land-management professionals, such as Richard James at Schuylkill, are desperate and willing to go to any lengths to rid their land of the white-tail. James asserts, "We're going to nail these deer. I do not consider them to be wildlife anymore. I push them out of my way to get to work. They are unrestrained urban cows."

The only thing all these groups agree on is that there are four feasible methods and their variations both to stabilize current deer populations and reduce future herds. The options are relocation, sterilization, culling, and hunting. Even to the casual observer, none of these methods represents a perfect solution; however, some appear more ridiculous than others. In my opinion, the best solution lies in a combination of these methods coupled with a large dose of common sense, cooperation, and above all, education.

On the surface, relocation seems to be the fairest and most humane method. Many citizens groups, such as the one connected with the Ryerson Conservation Area in suburban Chicago, feel this is the only method to pursue. On closer examination, this plan is unworkable and in fact inhumane to the deer. Simply redistributing the population from suburban to rural areas will not work for several reasons. First, most rural areas are also experiencing an over-abundance of deer. This makes it very difficult to find a rural area willing to accept large quantities of them. Also, past experience with deer relocation has taught us that many white-tails later die from the stress induced by the trip. Game biologists emphasize this reality—the white-tail deer are extremely stress-prone and, therefore, poor candidates for relocation. Aside from these facts, which in themselves doom relocation as an option, the cost must be considered. Unfortunately, the cost in tax dollars is prohibitive in today's economy.

Sterilizing white-tail deer is a real paradox. Many land-management professionals, such as Mr. James at Schuylkill, believe this method to be so totally unworkable that it borders on the ridiculous. James cannot see how sterilizing his current population of white-tails will help save his botanical collection. The paradox lies in the fact that sterilization will prove to be the best option for saving both the natural environment and the deer in the future. The use of dart-gun contraceptives to prevent white-tail doe from conceiving is a cost-effective, viable method of population control. The key to its development lies in securing adequate public funding. We have the technology; we need the funding to further develop the drug and experiment with it on a large-scale basis. Unfortunately, killing excess deer in places like Schuylkill will have to continue for some time in order to control the present herds. However, future emphasis ultimately lies on sterilization as the best option for a long-term solution. With proper funding, a good beginning could be made at Schuylkill.

In reality, culling, or baiting the deer into a small enclosed area and allowing professional marksmen to make short work of them, is a humane form of population control. But culling the herd is by far the most unpopular method of controlling white-tail. Animal-rights activists and citizens groups in particular find culling abhorrent. Wildlife activists connected with the Ryerson Conservation Area, for example, set up picket lines and physically tried to prevent deer culling when it was first attempted there by forest preserve officials. Culling draws so much public outcry and emotion that even experienced wildlife managers are reluctant to try it.

Shooting deer involves one quick shot through the brain, with presumably little pain or anxiety to the deer. The consequences of not shooting excess white-tails are varied, but often include slow starvation or physical trauma. Is watching a bloody and broken deer drag itself away from an encounter with a plateglass window more humane than culling? These scenarios happen with greater frequency every year. The inhumanity lies in the fact that animal-rights activists, among others, choose to ignore these scenarios and unjustly focus their attention on abolishing a humane form of controlling the excess white-tail population.

Other benefits of culling which are often overlooked include a resulting white-tail herd that fits the natural balance—a proportional ratio of male to female and young to old. The venison, which is a by-product of culling, can be used to augment public food pantries in low-income areas. This is generally why most culling is done by marksmen and not by lethal injection. Both the white-tail and the environment will be better served when opponents to the culling process overcome their emotion and understand that culling is indeed a cost-effective and, above all, humane effort to curb the deer population.

Hunting is almost as unpopular as culling. For example, the Fund for Animals publicly opposes sport-hunting for any purpose, deriding attempts to portray recreational hunting as a legitimate deer-control tool. Increasingly, hunting is seen as a socially unacceptable activity, especially by younger suburbanites who have never been exposed to recreational hunting. On opening day of deer season in Madison, Wisconsin, for instance, animal-rights activists and university students strap mannequins in blaze-orange hunting gear to their car fenders and drive in a honking procession around the state capitol. This annual activity is a serious effort to dissuade recreational hunting.

Sadly, these anti-hunting activists are just one more example of man's disconnection with nature. Their misguided attempts to ban hunting in reality do disservice both to the white-tail and the environment in general. We need to encourage deer-hunting as a means of responsibly reducing deer population and go one step further by allowing hunters to bag does as well as bucks. Shooting both sexes during the fall rutting season will not endanger offspring as opponents predict, simply because yearlings born the previous spring are already weaned and capable of survival without their mothers. White-tail have no natural predators left, except man; by shooting both sexes, hunters are simulating the natural order. Is putting a bullet in the head of a deer that has been hit by a car more humane than shooting it for sport? Recreational hunting is one very necessary management technique, which, carried out responsibly, is capable of curbing the white-tail population in a very humane way. It should be tolerated, even encouraged, for the sake of the environment and deer.

In the final analysis, we have some difficult, unpleasant choices to make. As citizens, we need to better accommodate deer and other wildlife that share space with our expanding human population. We need to deal more responsibly and less emotionally with the excess population of deer as well as other wildlife. Above all, we need to educate ourselves to the true needs of our natural environment. As taxpayers, we need to set aside more open space for wildlife habitat and, once that is done, support it with our tax dollars. If we are able to make the right choices now, both our generation and future generations will benefit from a more wholesome natural environment in which to live. If, on the other hand, we ignore this very real problem, both our quality of life and our environment will suffer. The choice is ours to make. Let's make the right one.

Harrowsmith Country Life: specialty magazine which devotes itself, in part, to environmental concerns.

Age range: adult

Political outlook: liberal to moderate

Economic/Educational: middle to upper-middle categories.

Sources

Rory Putnam. "The Natural History of Deer"

"Deer On Your Door Step." *New York Times Magazine*, 28 April, 1991.

Two articles concerning Ryerson Conservation Area. *Daily Herald*, Fall 1991.

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