

## The downside of hunting deer

### Stop hunting deer and help the forest heal itself

3:49 PM, Dec. 7, 2011

Written by Lorraine Ash / Staff Writer

Don't hunt deer. That's the view of Susan Russell of Fair Haven, wildlife policy specialist for the League of Humane Voters of New Jersey.

"Let the woods re-grow," she said. "Where you have mature forests, you have few deer."

To help restore the native forest vegetation deer have eaten away, she would first gather fertility and deer movement data in wildlife management areas, and other lands, to study the impact of current practices.

But hunting, she says, actually helps increase the deer herd.

In "The Science of Overabundance," an anthology about deer ecology, Professor Allen T. Rutberg of Tufts University writes, "Just because deer are being killed doesn't mean that deer populations are being controlled."

The nonprofit group, In Defense of Animals, claims that after a hunt, surviving animals have less competition for food, resulting in healthier lives and higher reproductive rates.

In addition to opposing hunting, many animal advocates are against logging. It makes no sense to them to create forest clearings, known as early successional habitat, and then hunt deer to stop them from eating the regrowth in the clearings.

"Deer thrive in the kind of habitat where you have cover, like woods, and then you have early succession," Russell said. "If we do have too many deer and we say they're an ecological threat, why are we promoting deer breeding habitat?"

To create the clearings is to farm deer, according to Russell.

### 'Playing God'

It's a perfect scenario to bring about what she calls an artificial overabundance of deer because of humans manipulating habitat and hunting so much that they've disturbed the sex and age ratios of the herd.

“This is playing God in Yellowstone, on steroids,” Russell said. “Everybody’s playing God and everybody’s blaming this species whose natural characteristics have been skewed beyond recognition.”

Leslie Sauer, author of “The Once and Future Forest,” agrees with that point. Many deer in New Jersey never live to maturity.

Does and bucks can live at least 20 years, according to Carole Stanko, deer biologist with the state Division of Fish and Wildlife. But the majority of deer harvested in New Jersey are a year-and-a-half old.

**“The New Jersey deer herd is not comprised of a variety of ages with young bucks and big alpha bucks and young does and older, wiser does,” said Sauer, who sits on the Natural Heritage Committee of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition. “The herd is instead a bit more like a chicken flock on a farm — overwhelmingly juveniles, mostly females. Everyone procreates and dies young. It’s not very natural.”**

**The bottom line, Sauer said, is that right now neither the forest or the deer are healthy.**

The only way hunting and clearing make sense to Russell is if the motives behind all the activity are to ensure plenty of deer for hunters, support the weapons industry, and make money selling hunting licenses and permits.

Both Russell and Barbara Metzler of Mendham Township, a member of the Animal Protection League of New Jersey, say their no-hunting viewpoint too often is not represented on wildlife commissions and even on the New Jersey Fish and Game Council.

By law, the 11-member council, created in 1945, is required to comprise three farmers, six sportsmen, and the chairperson of the Endangered and Nongame Species Advisory Committee.

“Those 10 people right there represent grassroots conservationists,” said Dave Chanda, director of the state Division of Fish and Wildlife.

The eleventh member, appointed by the governor, is a private citizen knowledgeable in land use and conservation practices.

“A lot of these organizations constantly challenge the composition of the council,” Chanda said. “Quite frankly, they’ve challenged it in the courts four times, most recently in 2004, and the structure, authority and ability of the council to do its job has withstood all those challenges.”

In New Jersey, the \$13.4 million annually raised by hunting licenses and permits is spent on fish and wildlife management in the state, according to Chanda. The state can’t put that money toward any other endeavor.

“If we did, we’d be in violation,” he said, “and we’d forfeit close to \$7 million in federal money

that is supposed to be used for wildlife management.”

The \$20 million is much needed, according to Chanda, since the state Division of Fish and Wildlife receives only \$1 million from state coffers.

He believes forests, including early successional habitat, will fare well when deer numbers are reduced to 20 per square mile.

But Metzler, a retired schoolteacher, insists all deer have an inherent right to live. She calls them beautiful and “thrilling to see.”

### **Deer thrive in suburbia**

Most everyone agrees nature needs help restoring the native forest vegetation that has been lost to deer overbrowsing.

Russell favors pulling invasive plants competing with native plants, and mitigating the suburban edge.

Metzler says too much effort is spent on considering the behavior of deer in the forest and not enough on other factors, such as acid rain.

She cited the work of William Sharpe, professor emeritus of forest hydrology at Penn State, who agrees that deer numbers should be controlled but also holds it’ll take much more than that to fix forests. In his work, Sharpe notes acidic soil affects the regeneration of some trees, such as red oaks and sugar maples.

“Liming is necessary to improve soils and grow new trees,” Metzler said.

A statement released by the United States Forest Service Research Laboratory called for more study on liming.

**“Nature is not going to control the deer population by itself because the mechanisms for controlling deer have been eliminated by suburbia,” Sauer said. “The forest alone does not support the huge deer population. Suburbia and agriculture do, too.”**

**“Suburbia represents an endless supply of food,” she added, “and you cannot provide endless food and expect the population to decrease.”**

Jockey Hollow at Morristown National Historical Park is an example of a forest that is surrounded by suburban landscape and that has not been hunted or logged for many years, according to Emile DeVito, manager of science and stewardship for the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

“At Jockey Hollow, there are no natives left,” DeVito said. “It’s the end result of 35 years of degradation.”

Ecologists agree that suburban edge is as appealing to deer as any early successional habitat, and that the sprawl of residential and corporate lawns attracts deer with food even in wintertime.

A polarizing topic

But Phillip Brodhecker, who sits on the New Jersey Fish and Game Council, lives with another reality of overabundant deer — crop damage. Brodhecker Farm in Newton, which grows 500 acres of corn, loses between \$30,000 and \$70,000 a year due to deer browsing, he said.

Some years deer eat the plants as they come out of the ground, according to Brodhecker. Other years, the corn will grow through the summer before deer start foraging on it and stripping the leaves and ears.

“So many people who are upset about the hunt don’t see those losses and don’t have that impact in their life and their financial viability,” Brodhecker said. “I love the bears and the deer as much as anyone. It wouldn’t be the same without them, but we need to manage a population that everyone can live with.”

The challenge is to keep an ecological balance, Chanda said, adding that everybody has a different idea of what that balance should be.

**Sauer called deer a very polarizing topic.**

**“It’s time for everyone to realize,” she said, “that the people who like deer, the people who like forests and the people who like all of nature are all the same people, and they need to work together.”**

*Lorraine Ash: 973-428-6660; [lash@njpressmedia.com](mailto:lash@njpressmedia.com) This is the final story in a three-part series examining the trouble with deer in New Jersey.*

Copyright © 2011 [www.dailyrecord.com](http://www.dailyrecord.com)