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MANAGEMENT OF SUBURBAN DEER: AN EMERGING CONTROVERSY

by Daniel J. Decker*

During the last 10 years the presence of deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) in suburban areas has become an increasing concern from the standpoint of damage and nuisance problems. It is unclear whether (a) overall deer numbers in suburban environments have increased (possibly because of residential development in "natural" settings and creation of food sources represented by residents' ornamental plantings and vegetable gardens), (b) more development in suburban areas has forced deer into adjacent remaining patches of suitable habitat, resulting in increased deer densities in certain localities, or (c) some combination of both. Regardless of the factors perpetrating the situation, deer have become a problem--sometimes less real than perceived--in many suburban areas of the central and eastern U.S. This brief paper will present views of suburban residents who have experienced deer damage problems and a perspective on why suburban deer management may be a growing controversy, and a management dilemma.

Recent investigations in New York help define the nature and extent of the deer damage and nuisance problem, from the suburban resident's standpoint. A study in Islip found that a deer herd of ~30 animals associated with the Seatuck National Wildlife Refuge inflicted about $28,000 of damage to residential plantings in 1984. Residents spent about $12,000 per year on control measures. Despite the economic burden these deer placed on residents, they still considered plant damage to be of little concern and enjoyed having deer in their neighborhood. However, residents were very concerned about the potential for deer-car collisions and the role of deer in the transmission of Lyme disease to people. Although the connection is as yet not fully understood, the possible association of Lyme disease--deer tick--white-tailed deer was widely recognized (and publicized by the local media). Despite the range of concerns, most people (86%) enjoyed deer and few (28%) wanted the population to decrease.

A study conducted this year (1987) in northern Westchester County, where deer have been present throughout this century, estimated that deer inflicted about $5 to $10 million of damage to residential plantings in 1986. Residents spent about $1.2 to $1.8 million on control measures that year. As in Islip, these residents (85%) enjoyed deer and to some extent were tolerant of damage to residential plantings and gardens; but they, too, were concerned about the Lyme disease threat, as they perceived it. A majority believed the deer population in the county should be managed (40% wanted a decrease in deer numbers locally and another 42% did not want an increase), but only a small minority expressed support for a firearms hunt (bow hunting has been in effect since 1942).

So the situation is this--deer in suburban areas cause significant economic losses to residential landowners, present safety hazards to motorists, and are at least <u>perceived</u> by residents in some areas to be potential agents in the transmission of a seriously debilitating disease. Suburban residents generally enjoy deer, but do not want the population to increase; many want it to decrease. They recognize the need for and expect deer population management programs, but are not receptive to the conventional management method of recreational deer hunting using firearms. Thus, the potential management dilemma is starting to take shape. But where's the controversy?

The controversy gets underway when wildlife managers decide that the conventional method of deer hunting with firearms should be applied anyway. A few newspaper articles and public hearings later and the controversy is in full swing. The issue is not over management of deer per se, but over

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method. The pertinent question of us in the wildlife profession is "Should we stick to our proven, traditional management practices and propose only recreational hunting as a control mechanism, even against overwhelming public opposition, or should we consider more costly, unconventional approaches in situations where they may be feasible, at the risk of establishing a nonhunting precedent for management?" What is the professionally "right" thing to do? Are we responsive wildlife managers or hunting perpetuators? Is it our role to prescribe method or to present options, including costs, and determine public acceptability, including paying the bill? If we decide to prescribe, what's our responsibility for educating for public understanding and acceptance? And when do we cross the line from education to indoctrination? Furthermore, when public misperception (e.g., role of deer in disease transmission) is widespread, should we decrease deer numbers, educate to increase tolerance of deer, or both? These and other persistent questions may come to a head in the context of suburban deer management.