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PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION: AN IMPORTANT WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT OPPORTUNITY

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PANEL DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Suburban wildlife management issues are generating heated debate between citizen organizations, elected public officials, and state wildlife management agencies. Decisions are being made by town and county officials which directly impact or supersede state authority for managing resident wildlife. As an example, I will focus this discussion on the white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), management controversy at Durand Eastman Park, in the greater Rochester metropolitan area, New York.

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) opened Deer Management Unit (DMU) 96 to archery hunting in 1976. In 1978, the Town of Irondequoit banned discharge of bow and firearms because of perceived public safety concerns. Durand Eastman Park is situated within the Town of Irondequoit, on lands owned by the City of Rochester, yet is managed by Monroe County Parks Department. Monroe County regulations also prohibit hunting on park lands managed by the county. Consequently, although Durand Eastman Park lies within DMU 96 and is potentially open to hunting under state regulations, town and county laws supersede state jurisdiction making deer management by sport harvest impossible. Also, there is currently strong public opposition to hunting in the park, and it is unlikely these local laws will be modified to allow hunting in the future.

Overlapping governmental jurisdictions complicated deer management decisions for Durand Eastman Park. Culling deer with off-duty police officers required approval and legislative action by the Irondequoit Town Council and Monroe County Legislature, and ultimately a permit from DEC. An interagency working group comprised of county, town, and state agency staff, organized the action plan for reducing the deer herd in the park. This interdisciplinary team was necessary to successfully implement the culling effort, and a similar approach will likely be needed to resolve other controversial wildlife management issues facing many municipalities.

Politicians who enact firearms and hunting restrictions may not understand the long-term implications of these local regulations on our wildlife resources. As professional wildlife

managers, we have the unique opportunity for providing inservice education for elected officials to ensure they make informed decisions. Wildlife professionals should provide not only a range of potential management alternatives, but also reliable predictions of possible outcomes if a specific course of action is taken. Natural resource managers can facilitate policy education by bringing together a diversity of community and government stakeholders to provide input into the decision-making process. Public involvement approaches for resolving controversial issues can improve the image of the wildlife profession, and allow communities to build ownership in local management programs.

Elected officials react to public opinion, and a vocal, well-organized minority group can often influence local legislation. Biologists have the obligation to work in the political arena to make certain that scientific data are presented in an understandable format, and that the ecological implications of specific alternatives are understood by politicians and citizens in the community. The deer situation was so politicized in the Rochester area, that when it came time for the Monroe County Legislature to consider action concerning the deer-culling effort in Durand Eastman Park, the votes were cast along party lines and the plan was narrowly approved. Unfortunately, it seemed deer ecology had little bearing on the final decision, and proposed research to evaluate the effects of selective culling and other options has been stalled by the political process.

Biologists or managers who deal with suburban wildlife issues must work in both the ecological and social dimensions. Receiving approval for controversial management alternatives will require elected officials who are well-informed, and truly understand the impacts of legislative actions on both wildlife and people in the community. In some cases it will be impossible to please all interest groups, and difficult decisions must be made. Wildlife professionals are in the position to provide leadership in policy education concerning the management of our natural resources. Although most wildlife agency staff have been educated in applied ecology and are comfortable managing animal populations or habitats, additional effort is needed to incorporate a wide range of public values towards wildlife into the decision-making process.