

Woods wreckers

A report released last week gives more ammunition to belief that there are too many deer chewing up state's forests. Hunters are firing back at group's recommendations.

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In the touchy, long-running debate over managing white-tailed deer, Melody Zullinger of the Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs gets an earful from both sides.

On the one hand are hunters, some of whom complain that the herds are vanishing after several seasons of increased bag limits.

On the other are scientists who insist that exploding deer populations are still wrecking Penn's Woods.

Zullinger heard from the scientists first last week. And then it was their detractors' turn as the controversy heated up anew.

A 340-page report released Wednesday during a press conference at the Pennsylvania Farm Show reinforced the view that forest habitat statewide is deteriorating, said environmental consultant and former Audubon Society scientist Dr. Jan Beyea.

Hungry deer are gobbling up sprouts, shoots and seedlings, ecologists say. Wildflowers and native tree species such as oaks are failing to regenerate, and songbirds and other species that live in the once-rich undergrowth are declining.

While some point to such other factors as invasive insect pests and acid rain, Beyea said, "The scientific consensus is that deer are the major cause" of forest habitat destruction that may take decades to fix.

Three years

The deer management report was three years in the making and is based in large part on research by Dr. Stephen Horsley, a plant physiologist with the U.S. Forest Service. It was edited by Dr. Roger E. Latham, a conservation biologist, and compiled by Horsley, Latham and eight other members of a "deer management forum" of prominent ecologists, botanists, biologists and conservationists.

Pennsylvania Audubon Society and the Pennsylvania Habitat Alliance convened the forum, which proposed the following nuts-and-bolts approach to ecosystem-based deer management: First, set broadly acceptable forest protection goals.

Second, field test various management tools designed to remedy habitat degradation. See what works best and get a better handle on the problem.

According to the scientists, this “adaptive resource management” plan is flexible to allow for competing biological theories about the cause of degradation.

“Learning by doing” is what Beyea calls it. According to the deer management forum, the approach has been used successfully to set waterfowl hunting quotas.

Experimental enclosures in the woods would allow deer managers to determine optimum population densities for the animals, said Bryon P. Shissler, a consulting biologist and avid hunter who helped write the report.

As always, Shissler, who grew up in Conestoga, added, it will ultimately fall on hunters to keep the animals in check. “We can’t do this without hunters.”

Nor can it be done, the forum asserted, without junking what it calls the state’s “single-species” approach to gamelands management.

Among other policy recommendations, the forum suggested that:

The largely hunter-funded Pennsylvania Game Commission develop alternative funding sources in concert with the governor and lawmakers.

Harrisburg, in turn, should appoint an independent board to oversee the commission and also review the commissioner selection method to ensure that candidates represent all citizens.

The commission should also hire more scientifically trained staff, such as wildlife biologists, and ensure forest sustainability by developing an ecologically based inventory of its forests, according to the forum.

Tender ground

Such ideas fell on politically tender ground last week.

Dr. Gary Alt, author of the commission’s controversial program to drastically cut the deer herd by shooting more does, among other strategies, retired Dec. 31, saying he could no longer be effective.

Ironically, the forum dedicated its report to Dr. Latham’s late father, Roger M. Latham, who forum scientists say also stepped down under fire.

As chief of research at the game commission in the 1950s, the elder Latham was one of the first biologists to publicize the deer overpopulation issue.

At Wednesday’s press conference, Blaine Puller of the Collins Pine Co. in Kane said he was happy to hear of a new strategy to combat the problem.

“Mother Nature’s been severely altered” by deer so that many tree species no longer reseed themselves, said Puller, who runs a small logging operation.

“Diversity is the best thing for the forests. One bug or one disease won’t wipe you out.” Steve L. Mohr of Bainbridge was the only one of seven game commissioners to resist Alt’s program from the start.

Mohr said the new report offered no surprises. “Those folks blame deer for every problem we have in the forests of Pennsylvania.”

Attempts to rein in his agency reflect the “ulterior motive” of interests eager to control the timber and other resources on 1.4 million acres of gamelands, Mohr charged.

“I think there’s going to be a ... downright political battle over that report,” he said.

The latest deer harvest numbers won’t be available until spring. But in the meantime, said commissioner Roxane Palone, support for Alt’s plan remains strong. “I think we’re going to stay the course and keep his recommendations,” Palone said. She said the commission has long since acted on several deer management forum recommendations.

“We have already hired some new habitat and mammal biologists and regional biologists,” she said.

Additionally, she said, the commission is pursuing alternative funding sources through Wildlife for Everyone, a nonprofit foundation she and three other commissioners started a few months ago.

The foundation raises money for game commission research, education, habitat improvement and other uses.

Palone, trained as a biologist and forester, said the deer forum “got out of the scope of (its) expertise” in addressing policy and administration matters. But she had high praise for the science aspects.

“The idea of adaptive resource management has merit,” she said. So does the notion of restoring the balance between deer and their habitat.

White-tails have decimated rhododendron and hemlock at her rural Greene County home, she said, and they don’t eat those foods unless they can’t get anything else.

“I do feel for people who want to hunt and get a deer,” said Palone, who also hunts. But white-tails are part of a complex landscape and so is PGC. “We’re not the deer commission, we’re the game commission.”

Zullinger, of the Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen’s Clubs, also agreed in large part with the deer forum’s scientific message.

But not its method.

The federation is one of dozens of groups under the Pennsylvania Habitat Alliance umbrella, she related in an e-mail.

The federation has supported the game commission's deer management plan for the past three years, she said, but it did not sanction the new deer management report or its policy recommendations.

"They basically were taking a whack at the game commission and the sportsmen," said Zullinger, who added that tinkering with control of the agency invites influence by anti-hunters.

The federation was set to discuss the deer management report Saturday during a board meeting, Zullinger said. Still, she noted, to its authors' credit, "the scientific part was well written and well researched."

And while hunters have complained that white-tails have disappeared from Union County, for example, the animals remain populous in some other areas.

Zullinger killed two deer this season in Perry County, she said. "I know the deer are still out there."

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