

Southold Deer Forum: September 26, 2013

Hello. Thank you for inviting me. I will speak briefly about forests and white-tailed deer overabundance.

I work for the U.S. Forest Service in their Forest Health Protection Program. I work throughout New York and New England, primarily on the deer issue. As you might expect, I'm here to advocate for healthy, sustainable forests. A healthy forest is a beautiful thing, providing not only aesthetic pleasure, but many other tangible benefits. Sadly, I spend much of my time in ecological disaster zones – forests devastated by too many deer. Somehow I've managed not to contract a tick-borne disease.

I work in many Massachusetts towns with growing deer populations. These towns are not yet in a crisis situation, but they will be in ten years or so. I beg them to be proactive in addressing their growing deer populations. To their credit, many of the towns have done so.

Those Massachusetts towns are where you were in 1995, or thereabouts. What would you give to go back in time, to 1995, knowing what you now know about deer? What advice would you give to those Massachusetts towns? Seize the opportunity now – be proactive – spare yourselves the agony that Southold is presently experiencing. Think way outside the box. *Insist* that state wildlife management agencies provide all that is needed to help solve the problem.

Across much of the East, forests are in big trouble. White-tailed deer have damaged tens of millions of acres of forest land. Consider that fewer than half of Pennsylvania's forests have enough young trees for those forests to replace themselves. Deer – way too many deer! In New York State, a study by The Nature Conservancy, using Forest Service data, showed that 30% of New York forests lack sufficient regenerative capabilities. Deer – way too many deer! I truly believe that this has become the single greatest conservation challenge of our time.

It is entirely a human-caused problem. As a culture, we allowed it to happen. As a culture, we can solve it. There is a simple technological solution. Reduce the density of the deer population. Positive values of white-tailed deer should outweigh their negative impacts, and not vice versa.

How do we get there? We are up against a very powerful force of Nature, a prolific prey species endowed with the acute senses and wits to evade predators. I am in awe of the white-tailed deer. I never cease to be amazed by them.

We are also up against ourselves – people who may not be sufficiently informed about the problem, or don't care, or don't have the stomach for the course of action needed to solve the problem.

Look, here's the harsh truth – either we do nothing and let the deer get smashed by cars, or we harvest these animals more aggressively and put them to good use feeding disadvantaged people. Every deer-vehicle collision is a tragic, tragic event. Fertility control efforts, by the way, in a town like Southold, would be not be a viable solution, in my opinion.

Like the rest of you, I'm hoping to learn as much as I can about the deer situation in Southold. You are not alone – there are thousands of communities struggling with this issue. If there is one book that I would recommend, it is Jim Sterba's *Nature Wars*, published in 2012. Have any of you read it? It describes how we, as a society, ended up in this pickle.

Another good source of information is: *Community-based Deer Management: A Practitioners' Guide*, published in 2004. It is available on the web. Daniel Decker is the lead author. Have any of you seen that guide? It helps bring order to what is often chaos.

“Eco-environmental gentrification” is a term that I coined to describe the root cause of much of the problem. We sought to gentrify Nature by removing unsavory characters, such as hunters and other large predators. Are we safer now that hunters have been excluded from so many forests? Far from it. The unintended consequence of eco-environmental gentrification is that it made things worse instead of better – it brought calamity to our forests, ticks to our property, and danger to our highways.

When we protect a conservation property we may think that our work is done. Establish some hiking trails, step back, and enjoy forever. Nature will simply “play nice”. How naïve we were! We have since learned that Nature makes its own rules. This is not Bambi's world! Real deer populations can double in two or three years in the absence of predation, and build up to the point where they wreak havoc.

On September 5th, the Town of Southold Deer Management Committee invited three of us to tour local forests. It was myself, Dr. Stephen Young (New York's State Botanist), and Mike Scheibel (from The Nature Conservancy). Our hosts were Jeff Standish, John Sep, and John Rasweiler.

It was our consensus professional opinion that Southold's forests have been devastated by overabundant deer. We agreed that the forests are doomed unless new trees can be recruited into the canopy. I brought copies of my report as a handout.

A forest is so much more than its trees – it is the entire interconnected web of interdependent life forms. Consider wildflowers and flowering shrubs that nourish pollinating insects – devastated! Consider the berries and other fruits produced by these plants, and their value to wildlife – largely gone! The detrimental effects of overabundant white-tailed deer cascade throughout the entire ecosystem, affecting myriad species.

Deer populations have to be reduced to a density of less than 20 per square mile for forests to regenerate properly. Your present deer density in Southold is estimated at 65 per square mile. Don't be fooled by all the trees you see at Tall Pines and elsewhere. Those trees will continue to live a long time, until the next big hurricane knocks them down. What grows back after such a hurricane will not resemble the forests we see today – the deer will see to that!

I am old enough to remember what these forests once looked like – how wonderful they once were. So many of these forests have become ecological slums, with crumbling infrastructures.

I meet so many wonderful people who are making a difference. It takes an entire community of people united in their resolve to correct this problem. Shelter Island has finally turned a corner. The forest at The Nature Conservancy's Mashomack Preserve is literally coming back to life! Traditional recreational hunting certainly helped, but it took the town's nuisance deer permit to ultimately bring down the deer population. Recent research has demonstrated that traditional recreational hunting, even with a very long season and unlimited tags, cannot reduce deer to desired densities in suburban or semi-suburban environments. Too many of the deer learn to hide in our back yards during the hunting season.

Where does our moral compass point? As a society, we feel an obligation to be good stewards of the land. Yes, we are guided by the land ethic so eloquently articulated by Aldo Leopold nearly 70 years ago:

"A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

Let us be uplifted by Leopold's words and carry the torch of conservation. Insight, empathy, action, and perseverance – these are the prerequisites to solving the deer problem. Let history look back at what we are doing today with gratitude, that we, as a society, recalibrated our sense of place in Nature. I'm confident that with a united sense of purpose and resolve we can get it done – restoring health and vitality to forests and people alike.

Thank you.

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