Save state forestland from deer

By Jeffrey D. Corbin, Commentary
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New York's forests generate billions of dollars in economic value each year, from timber to tourism. They also generate billions more by providing clean drinking water, preventing flooding and erosion, and removing carbon from the atmosphere. Finally, they host more than 1,000 species of plants and animals, some of which are found in our region and nowhere else.

Unfortunately, our forests are in a state of crisis. The explosive growth in the number of white-tailed deer in recent decades threatens trees' ability to regenerate and provide these economic, recreation and ecological benefits.

The forests of the future can be seen in the carpet of tree seedlings growing slowly in the understory shade of their parents. However, that carpet is a thin one through much of our state, thanks to hungry deer who consume nearly every tree seedling save the few species they find unpalatable. Where there should be many young trees ready to replace adults as they die, instead there is little of the species variation that should form the raw material for successful resilience in the face of climate change and other environmental stresses.

Today, deer overpopulation poses a greater threat to New York's forests than anything except bulldozers. There are more than 1 million deer in New York, an average of more than 30 deer per square mile of forest. In some areas, particularly in the southeast including Long Island, the Lower Hudson Valley and the southern Catskills, you can find more than twice that density. Yet, studies tell us that forest damage is evident above 20 deer per square mile.

Scientists with The Nature Conservancy have found that in nearly one-third of the state, deer have stunted tree regeneration so much that our forests may not be able to replace themselves. Deer also depress forest growth, reduce plant biodiversity and contribute to the decline of songbird populations and forest wildflowers.

In order to save our forests and all the benefits that they provide, the State Department of Environmental Conservation should sharply reduce deer densities. With few natural predators, hunting is the primary control on deer populations, and it should be a key component of strategies to reduce deer herds to appropriate levels. Hunters can maximize their effect by focusing on does, which drive deer population growth to a greater extent than the "trophy" bucks.

Recreational hunting alone, however, is not likely to solve the problem. Regulated, commercial hunting should be permitted in rural areas of the state. Such hunting could be encouraged by, for example, loosening restrictions on the sale of venison to the public.

Smaller deer populations make for a healthier forest. A healthier forest benefits all of the other components of the ecosystem — from the red-spotted newt to the cerulean warbler to the red trillium to the myriad of benefits that New York's forests provide to people.

And, a healthier forest benefits deer. Deer can so completely denude a forest that they run out of food. Deer have suffered spasms of starvation in the past, for example in the Alleghany Plateau of northwestern Pennsylvania in the 1930's. After witnessing this tragedy, along with the extreme damage the desperate herds did to the forest, no less a conservation icon than Aldo Leopold argued that managed culling was necessary to control deer populations.

A forest is more than a collection of the trees that make up its canopy. It is a community of plants and animals that interact in complex ways. Elevating any one species above the rest, as we have done with deer, is misguided and doomed to fail. Deer populations need to be managed properly — for the sake of our forests and the benefits they provides to people, and for sake of the health of deer populations themselves.

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