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Wanted: More Hunters

The U.S. whitetail population is out of control. Not only are deer starving by the thousands, they're laying waste to entire ecosystems. There is only one solution.

By Ted Williams

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No species in North America has been more grotesquely mismanaged than deer. The mismanagement--ongoing--began with a crusade by the early settlers against cougars and wolves, the main predators of deer. This behavior flabbergasted the Indians. After much arguing and theorizing, they decided it was a symptom of insanity.

By the early 20th century the Feds were leading the charge against predators, and they weren't content with just control--they wanted extinction. Whipping the public to a froth of anti-wolf, anti-cougar fervor was a young Forest Service bureaucrat who, in 1919, praised New Mexico for "leading the West in the campaign for eradication of predatory animals" and who urged states to "finish the eradication work." But later, when the bureaucrat, Aldo Leopold, extended his reading to what deer were writing on the land, he filed this report: "I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain, and seen the south-facing slopes wrinkle with a maze of new deer trails. I have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anaemic desuetude, and then to death. I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the height of a saddlehorn. Such a mountain looks as if someone had given God a new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all other exercise. In the end the starved bones of the hoped for deer herd, dead of its own too-much, bleach with the bones of the dead sage, or molder under the high-lined junipers."

That's what I saw in the early 1980s on the Crane Estate, 30 miles north of Boston, where roughly 400 white-tailed deer--340 more than carrying capacity--had denuded 2,000 acres. There wasn't a scrap of green to the height of a saddle horn. One of the last undeveloped barrier-beach complexes in the East had been shorn of native plants. Dunes were blowing away. The property, owned by the Trustees of Reservations, was supposed to be a wildlife refuge, yet the deer had eliminated wildlife that rear young and/or find cover in midlevel vegetation. Each winter most of the fawns died because they couldn't reach the browse line. In their weakened condition adults were being eaten from the outside in by dogs and from the inside out by parasites. Their skin stretched across their ribs like cloth on Conestoga wagons. Commenting on the disaster, The Boston Globe reported a "conversation" between Bambi and his skunk friend. "'Why are you sitting?' Flower asked. 'Fawns don't sit.'

"'I'm too weak to stand,' said Bambi. 'I think I'll just sit here for a few days until I fall over and die.' And he did."

The trustees had forbidden hunting here since they started acquiring land in 1945, but apart from cultural bias, there had been no reason for the ban. By the late 1970s the trustees realized that hunting was the only way to preserve wildlife, and they scheduled a public hunt for 1983, thereby energizing a national animal-rights outfit called Friends of Animals. The animal-rights movement doesn't like people who "manipulate" nature, but it doesn't like nature either. Asked what he'd do if granted absolute power over the world, a father of the movement, Cleveland Amory, declared: "All animals will not only not be shot, they will be protected--not only from people but as much as possible from each other. Prey will be separated from predator, and there will be no overpopulation, because all will be controlled by sterilization or implant."

In September 1984, after Boston magazine had asked me to write about the Crane controversy, I queried Friends of Animals about the humaneness of starvation as a management strategy. I was told that it's painless because Mahatma Gandhi, while fasting, claimed to have been comfortable enough. With that, Friends presented me with a pamphlet entitled "10 Easy Steps to Ban All Hunting!" in which I was instructed to, for example, deploy cow

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dung as a weapon against hunters. People who anoint themselves with skunk musk to hide their scent, then pull steaming entrails out of deer were supposed to flee from meadow muffins. That was an "easy" step.

Mobilized by Friends, the public festooned the Crane property with squashes, cabbages, beans, and beet greens, succeeding only in giving a few deer gastroenteritis (deer diarrhea). Two days before the hunt Friends flounced around with placards that read, "Save a Deer, Bag a Hunter," and group members vowed to throw themselves between the deer and the guns. The trustees canceled the hunt, then embraced Friends as one of their official advisers on deer management. At this point the area had the highest incidence of Lyme disease on the planet: Two-thirds of the people whose properties bordered the reservation were infected.

If Cleveland Amory sprang from the grave and took over the world, he could not control wild ungulates. Even if it were possible to trap and transfer deer without killing them, no one would take them. Nor is there workable birth control. While it's possible to sterilize lots of deer, it's not possible to sterilize enough to control even a small, isolated population. There is much flap in animal-rights publications about immunocontraception, an innovative method by which does are vaccinated against their own eggs. It works well on captives. But after studying nonlethal control of deer for 10 years, Larry Katz, head of the Department of Animal Science at Rutgers University's Cook College, called immunocontraception "impractical, counterproductive, and absolutely unworkable."

Has the public learned anything from the Crane fiasco and thousands of replays in urban and suburban parks and reservations across America? Maybe, but not much. Facing severe damage by an exploding deer herd, Town & Country, Missouri (its real name), surveyed 4,000 households in October 1998. Among the questions: "The city hired a consultant, Dr. Anthony DeNicola, who . . . recommended control. . . . Would you endorse lethal methods?" Fifty-five percent said no.

How about animal-rights groups? Have they learned anything? I put the question to DeNicola. "No," he said. "They never change." When deer start busting ecosystems in places where public hunting wouldn't be safe, DeNicola is the one you call. He runs White Buffalo Inc., a nonprofit wildlife management and research organization dedicated to conserving native species through population control. After he figures carrying capacity, much of his work is done with suppressed .223 rifles. He and his crew shoot deer in the head, killing them instantly. The venison is donated to the needy.

Whenever deer irrupt in suburban and urban settings, residents (not just animal-rights zealots) rail against lethal control, demanding immunocontraception and trap-and-transfer. Frequently, they suggest introducing wolves and cougars. After endless testimony and countless hearings, the community solves the problem by inviting in sport hunters or hiring White Buffalo, but not before native ecosystems have been trashed.

Protesters have threatened DeNicola, called him "murderer" and "Taliban," contaminated White Buffalo's bait sites with ammonia and human feces. He has been sued five times, never successfully. Before White Buffalo began culling deer in Princeton, New Jersey, in February 2001, the town's deer-automobile collisions were up to 337 a year, the highest DeNicola has seen in any municipality. Deer were crashing through picture windows and landing in laps, thrashing and gushing blood. Game wardens were patrolling by helicopter to keep people from feeding deer. Animal-rights advocates delayed the cull with lawsuits. They demanded immunocontraception and trap-and-transfer. They drew deer away from DeNicola's bait sites by putting out corn (when he found the illegal bait pile, he set up there, killing 12 more animals). They offered each of 24 landowners \$2,000 to kick DeNicola off their property. (None accepted.) They punctured his truck tires. They paraded with placards. They held candlelight vigils for the departed ungulates. DeNicola, who views such antics as normal working conditions, rates the Princeton project "highly successful."

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It's hard to imagine contraception ever working in big woods, but it may one day be practical where deer are hemmed in by development--places any sportsman would avoid like a case of Lyme disease. Perfecting a workable delivery system is going to be tough, though. I caught a glimpse of just how tough on December 11, 2001, when one of DeNicola's products--a deer biologist with the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station--showed me around his research site in the Lake Gaillard watershed, 10 miles east of New Haven. The biologist was Scott Williams--26, dark, solid, 6 feet 8 inches. Late in his academic career Williams had gotten serious about his studies and matriculated at Yale, where he did the fieldwork for his master's under DeNicola--this to the astonishment and delight of his father (me). He and project leader Uma Ramakrishnan are testing a method of sterilizing bucks. Williams shoots deer with a tranquilizer gun, getting good hits on 90 percent of the ones he fires at. Does are fitted with radio and GPS collars. Bucks, which can't wear collars because their necks swell in the rut, are ear-tagged, and a scarring agent is injected into the epididymis (the sperm-producing body next to each testicle). In the animal-rights community, wishful thinking has a way of being expressed as reality; after Ramakrishnan gave a lecture on her study she was appalled to read in the animal-rights literature that she "opposed" lethal control.

While Williams and I were waiting for Ramakrishnan, we patrolled the lakeside road in his truck. Williams keenly understands the dangers of mismanagement. Two years earlier, while he was driving back from monitoring grossly overpopulated deer at Mumford Cove, Connecticut, one leaped in front of this vehicle, doing \$4,500 worth of damage. In the southern part of the Lake Gaillard watershed, where we started out, there were now about 100 deer per square mile; in this kind of habitat you start seeing damage at about 15. In a 10-year experiment, the U.S. Forest Service found that at more than 20 deer per square mile you lose your eastern wood pewees, indigo buntings, least flycatchers, yellow-billed cuckoos, and cerulean warblers (on Audubon's WatchList: <http://www.audubon.org/bird/watch/index.html>). At 38 deer per square mile you lose eastern phoebes and even robins. Ground nesters like ovenbirds, grouse, woodcock, whippoorwills, and wild turkeys can nest in ferns, which deer scorn, but these birds, too, are vastly reduced, because they need thick cover.

We saw browse lines around cedars and yews. A grove of white pines had been denuded for the first five feet, a sign of true desperation. At every turn deer froze, then bounced away. In much of the watershed there was no understory save moldering ferns and such invading exotics as barberry, wineberry, and winged euonymus, which deer don't like because they didn't evolve with them. Now ecological restoration, if ever it happens, will require not only controlling deer but killing aliens. Woods like this look "lovely" and "parklike" to most people. The public tends to accept large landscapes as they exist in the here and now, not noticing missing parts. Researching his classic series on hunting ("Bitter Harvest," Audubon, May 1979 through March 1980), John Mitchell stopped to interview a deer hunter sitting beside a clearcut in Michigan. Mitchell asked the guy what he thought about the forest practices that had produced it. "What clearcut?" asked the hunter.



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As white-tailed deer become as common in suburban America as minivans and SUVs, the problems they cause mount. In Pennsylvania alone, 40,000 deer get hit by cars each year.

"There's No. 22," said Williams. No. 22 is an eight-point buck that he and Ramakrishnan had recently sterilized. Now they were looking to biopsy his epididymis. I rolled down the window. "Put your hand over your left ear," ordered Williams. At the explosion the buck flinched, and the \$200, 50-caliber, radio-transmitting dart tranquilized a sugar maple.

"How come all the deer look so good?" I asked Ramakrishnan when we met her near one of the bait sites. She said that they had glutted themselves on a huge acorn crop. The acorns had so distracted the deer that they wouldn't come to the bait for most of the fall--a major setback for the study. Despite the damaged range, the does are in such good condition from the acorns that most will drop twins, speeding the irruption and further blighting the ecosystem.

At 3:45 P.M., Ramakrishnan and I drove Williams to his bait site, because the automatic feeder was set to spew corn at 4:00. Williams climbed to his tree stand, and Ramakrishnan and I left. It was dark when Ramakrishnan's cell phone finally rang. Williams had darted No. 22. It looked like a good hit, he said. Ramakrishnan prepared the scalpel and the sutures, but when Williams unfurled the radio receiver and started tracking the dart's signal, he found it on the ground, barb bent and covered with deer hair. It had bounced off a bone, a small price to pay for not having your scrotum cut open. Despite what hunters read in the hook-and-bullet press, they're not about to be replaced by syringe-wielding biologists.

America's deer crisis isn't confined to human population centers. In all 50 states it extends to wildland (sometimes vast tracts) where deer--including elk, moose, caribou, blacktails, whitetails, mule deer, and such aliens as axis deer--are managed more by superstition than science. First we killed too many whitetails, then too few. They've increased from an estimated 500,000 in 1900 to an estimated 33 million today, and they now occur in all 48 contiguous states. There is even concern that the explosion will cause the extinction of mule deer because whitetail bucks breed mule deer does, producing sterile males.

Most state game and fish agencies are funded largely by fishing and hunting licenses and taxes on sporting equipment, so they tend to cater to the appetites of sportsmen instead of their long-term best interests. You would get the same curricula in schools where the kids signed the teachers' paychecks.

No state had managed its deer more abominably than Pennsylvania, but now it's leading the way. Backed by the Pennsylvania Habitat Alliance-- a coalition of conservation, sportsmen's, and land trust groups put together by Pennsylvania Audubon and its partners--the state game commission is allowing and urging hunters to shoot more deer, especially does. If the herd is reduced to carrying capacity, deer will be bigger and healthier. Ruined range that can't support deer now will be able to do so, and there will be far more habitat for other wildlife, including other game species. "The commission has finally seen the light," comments Pennsylvania Audubon's director, Cindy Dunn. "This is precedent-setting. We think Pennsylvania can become a national model, where the hunter's role changes from resource taker to provider of an environmental and ecological service."

In Pennsylvania, where towns cancel school on opening day of deer season, animal-rights groups dare not show their faces. Here the hunters accomplish the groups' mission for them by promoting the "sacred doe syndrome," the notion that "Dammit, does make bucks" and "I never shot a doe, my pappy never shot a doe, and his pappy never shot a doe." Bucks are nice trophies, but you can't control deer by shooting them; they're polygamous.

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Before the tireless, charismatic Gary Alt took charge of Pennsylvania's deer program in 1999, every biologist who tried to control the herd got canned. Deer were tearing up the woods as early as 1917, when the game commission director, Joseph Kalbfus, "thank[ed] God" that he would not be around in a decade because "someone is going to have hell to pay." In the September 1950 Pennsylvania Game News, commission deer biologist Roger Latham wrote about a man who was presented by a good fairy with a pile of gold and a cloth bag. The fairy warned him not to take too much because the bag would rip, and he'd have nothing. But, blinded by greed, he kept piling in the gold until the seams gave way and he "was left holding the bag." "Were the deer hunters satisfied when the deer population was doubled from 1913 to 1915," demanded Latham, "doubled again by 1921, again by 1924, again in 1927, and again and again until at its peak the herd was estimated to have increased five hundred fold? Has not the game commission warned for the past 20 years that the bag contained more gold than it could safely hold?" He inquired if deer should be managed by "well-trained wildlife men or . . . the whims, fancies, and selfish desires of the deer hunters themselves." Choosing whims, fancies, and selfish desires, the hunters had him fired.

In the past two years Gary Alt has given 150 lectures. When he speaks, auditoriums overflow, and people watch video feeds from cafeterias and gyms. There is much shouting and cursing. Alt has become a master at cowing bullies. "Suicide," he called the job when it was offered to him; then he toured the woods and got mad. "It just drove me to my knees," he recalls. "I couldn't believe it. I'm not talking about little pockets but thousands and thousands of square miles that have been devastated. Raising more deer than the land can support has been the biggest mistake in the history of wildlife management."

But the problem isn't just too many deer; it's also the skewed sex ratio. "We shoot 80 to 90 percent of our bucks every year," says Alt. "For good natural selection the biggest, strongest bucks should dominate breeding. A buck is in its prime at four to eight years. Hell, they're not even alive. Less than one in 100 makes it till his fourth year." Beginning in 2000 you could shoot two does in Pennsylvania, and in 2001 doe season ran concurrently with buck season instead of being offered later as a consolation prize. In each of the past two seasons hunters killed about 300,000 does, a decent beginning.

With help from the Habitat Alliance, Alt has made fair progress in selling the need to kill more does. But it's a monumental challenge. The big concentrations of deer are in the deep woods, where few deer hunters venture; many hunters are convinced that the population is down, because they hunt near the roads. At Alt's lectures the Unified Sportsmen of Pennsylvania, which claims 60,000 members (with no supporting evidence), passes out such printed invective as, "Dr. Alt and the PA Game Commission have caved in to the environmental's [sic] community, who either oppose hunting, or don't want any deer." Spokesman and board member Charles Bolgiano blames Audubon, claiming, "Audubon is pushing this because it's their policy to promote flower and shrub growth."

But other hunters think that a little flower and shrub growth is not all that unreasonable a goal, and that it's okay for them to do a little hoofing. Deer hunter and outdoor writer Ben Moyer has enjoyed the wildflowers in the hollows along the West Virginia border since he was a child. Each year there have been fewer. Two springs ago he was admiring about a dozen large white trilliums where there had been hundreds when a herd of deer appeared and consumed every one. Jim Seitz, president of the Pennsylvania Deer Association (a member of the Habitat Alliance), complains about hunters who want to "jump out of the car, walk 50 yards into the woods, and shoot a deer."

Each year, Pennsylvania's 1.6 million deer destroy \$70 million worth of crops and \$75 million worth of trees. About 40,000 of them collide with motor vehicles annually, doing \$80 million worth of damage. This isn't just a wildlife-management issue. "If we can bring our deer herd under control, it will have enormous impact all across America," Alt told me. "But if deer hunters don't seize the initiative here and elsewhere, society will do it for them."

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"How?" I asked.

"In a democracy, the majority rules. Less than 10 percent of the public are hunters. We're getting less popular every year, and our average age is 49. On the large landscape I think society will do exactly what it's doing in urban-suburban areas--hire sharpshooters. They'll get refrigerator trucks and sell venison on the international market, pay for the whole damned thing."

Last August my friend Jenny got married at the Crane Estate on a day so fine I could see clouds of terns wheeling over striped bass and count every sail between the Merrimack River, 10 miles north, and Halibut Point, 10 miles east. In 1927 plumbing magnate Richard Crane built a 59-room mansion here; you can rent it for special occasions. Under a bright moon I slipped away from the reception and walked through the part of the estate the trustees have "left to nature" by enlisting the help of hunters. There wasn't a shred of evidence that it had ever been an ecological slum.

Lyme disease had convinced the neighbors that deer hunting wasn't cruel after all. So in 1985 the trustees were able to host their first public hunt. It has taken a few years, but now, with hunters assuming the role of wolves and cougars, the estate is a wildlife refuge in fact as well as name. Lyme disease is way down. The understory is lush and diverse. Dunes are secure. All manner of wildlife abounds. Deer, now healthy and strong, have been converted from pest to resource.

TED WILLIAMS's environmental advocacy was inspired by hunting and fishing.

What You Can Do

If your community has a deer problem, distribute this article. Then find out from your state wildlife agency how it controls deer damage in your forests. For information on managing deer in a way that promotes healthy ecosystems, log on to Pennsylvania Audubon's web site at <http://pa.audubon.org>.