LIVING WITH DEER

Suburban communities face an abundance of a good thing

When eight-year-old Ann Johnson visited her grandmother in Boulder, Colo., she was overjoyed to find deer feeding at her window. “Look, Grandma, one’s for sale!” she exclaimed, spying a numbered tag on the buck’s ear. The Boulder deer were not for sale, of course, but part of a study by biologists of deer-related problems in the community. Such problems have become increasingly common in recent years, not only in Boulder, but also throughout much of suburban America, as deer have become more numerous and more visible.

Deer in America have been increasing in number since the turn of the century, when perhaps fewer than 500,000 of an original population of 40 to 50 million deer survived widespread slaughter for commercial or sport-meat and hides. Today, the deer population overall has recovered to about 23 million (although there are some endangered species like the Florida key deer) and continues to grow. At the same time, our human population, swelling to 250 million, continues to transform the American landscape. Land development for housing, industry, airports, shopping centers, and highways eliminates habitat for deer. Deer are often crowded into smaller and fewer habitat patches—to the consternation of farmers, orchardists, homeowners—and quite probably—other deer.

Ironically, while habitat for deer decreases, the quality of what is left often improves; people in many suburban areas tend to create a landscape mosaic of woodlots, brushy areas, meadows, lawns, and gardens—just what deer prefer.

Almost everyone who has deer as neighbors has some concerns about them. Deer may be involved in collisions with automobiles, with serious consequences for human safety and property. Deer can damage crops and ornamental plants. They have been implicated as a carrier of Lyme disease.

In today’s world, living in many suburban areas has become synonymous with living with deer. Their graceful beauty and peace-loving nature are as much a part of suburban life as the robin’s song or the raccoon’s self-important mischievousness. Public-opinion surveys generally reflect an appreciation of deer, even where the animals are very abundant. A survey of Westchester County, N.Y., residents showed that 85 percent “enjoyed” the deer, while 8 percent didn’t, and 7 percent had no particular feelings one way or another. However, a majority of those queried were also concerned about deer/people problems.

Concern over the interaction between deer and the human communities in which they live invariably turns into a heated debate if hunting is proposed. Some insist “it’s the only way” to resolve deer/human conflicts in suburbia, to which others respond, “No way!” New hunts have aroused public protests in places as diverse as the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado and Tyler State Park in Pennsylvania.

Concern over the interaction between deer and humans...
When populations irrupt, the number of deaths will increase until herd numbers come back into balance with available resources.

Does an abundance of deer have a negative impact on the local environment? There is no doubt that deer can change the landscape, with smaller mammals, high winds, forest succession, and other natural factors. But whether or not the change is undesirable depends on one's viewpoint.

When deer consume much of the plants with food available to them, some argue that the vegetation is damaged. Others contend that this may not be prop­erly called damage since all deer are only eating their natural food in their natural habitat. Deer eventually provide abundant food for fowls, eagles, vultures, raccoons, and man who loves delicious venison.

Given the degree to which natural resources are already being altered by tree cutting, roads, urban development, and pollutants, changes brought about by deer need not be undesirable, indeed.

Living with deer poses concerns for many. Deer where people live may exceed carrying capacity for a given area. Some game managers mistakenly assume that deer herds that reach this point must be reduced to free up overpopulated, overall carrying capacity. Yet, deer do well in such high density herds, and most live longer than where hunting is not allowed.

There are circumstances when a deer herd may exceed carrying capacity for a time. Biologists term this a population irruption. Biologists term this a population irruption. Some people describe it as "overpopulation," and that generally doesn't seem minor, indeed.

When people have heard about the effects of deer on the ecology of parks and other natural areas. Overpopulation and damage to natural vegetation are commonly cited by game managers as reasons to institute or expand the recreational hunting of deer.

Deer herds do not grow indefinitely. They reach a point where, over time, the number of animals that are born and die over time, that can be supported by the natural resources available.

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However, while living with deer can be challenging, some solutions work all the time. Other solutions usually apply in specific circumstances. None of these solutions works all the time. There is no cure-all. Some solutions are effective only in specific circumstances.

People, in the end, will have to accept the fact that, unless they exterminate every deer in the area, there is no way to eradicate every consequence of their existence.

While living with deer can be challenging, it is also enviable from the point of view of those who live where little wildlife of any kind remains.

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