



# **Northeast Section of The Wildlife Society**

## **Position Statement**

### **Managing Chronically Overabundant Deer**

Most ungulate populations throughout the United States, including white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), declined through the 1800s and early 1900s. Unregulated shooting and habitat destruction were the primary causes of the demise of deer across much of their range during this time. However, deer populations recovered during the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the improvement of habitat, reforestation, near extirpation of predators, and creation and enforcement of game laws. In the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states, where not limited by severe winters, deer populations have generally thrived over the past several decades. Expansion of residential development has created areas of refuge where, due to ample forage from ornamental plantings and little or no hunting pressure, deer populations experience high productivity, low mortality, and commonly exceed social tolerance levels while also altering native plant communities and possibly impacting other wildlife populations.

Conflicts between deer and humans in developed areas have been common for several decades. Most often, management intervention is prompted when deer-vehicle collisions, concerns about tick-borne disease transmission, and damage to agricultural crops, gardens, and ornamental plantings exceed cultural tolerance levels. Increasingly, community leaders and residents are also valuing local biodiversity and recognizing the dramatic impact that chronically overabundant deer are having on natural areas.

Removal of deer from the population via regulated hunting or shooting is the most effective management option and is generally accepted in areas where a hunting culture exists. In developed areas, managing deer to resolve deer-human conflicts is often controversial and solutions are not easily achieved. Efforts in such areas often lead to intense and emotional debates. Policies addressing management of overabundant deer should be based in sound science, assessment of economic costs and benefits, and understanding of local community values. Approaches put forward should emanate from a defined decision-making process that includes opportunity for deliberative discussion of economic data, community goals and values, and a scientifically informed understanding of the potential of various approaches to achieve community goals. Deer removals conducted by experienced hunters or sharpshooters are accomplished with animal welfare in mind. Resulting venison that cannot be used beyond the needs of hunters should be donated to local charities in need.

Deer management action in developed communities must begin with the most basic question, “Is there a problem?” If a community cannot reach a consensus on whether a problem exists, there should be no expectation of agreement on management action. The values of the community should determine whether a problem exists. Scientific data collection may address problems related to deer impacts to the environment, but citizen values must decide whether deer-human conflicts are unacceptable. Because many state wildlife agencies are legally charged to maintain their State’s natural heritage and biological

diversity, and because chronically overabundant deer jeopardize that mission, agencies should ensure that communities are informed of the existing or potential impacts of deer on local biodiversity and are empowered to mitigate those impacts.

Once community-specific deer-related impacts are determined, objectives to evaluate changes in the problems must be identified. These objectives should be specific to each identified problem. For example, if the current level of deer-vehicle collisions is problematic, the objective would likely be to reduce deer-vehicle collisions; therefore, the number of deer-vehicle collisions must be monitored. Attempting to define management objectives based on the density or number of deer should be avoided. Annual estimation of deer population abundance is extremely difficult, results are often disputed, and valuable resources could be better used elsewhere. However, based on scientific methodology, a baseline deer population estimate or index of relative abundance and accompanying measure of precision can be used to help guide management approaches during the initial data collection phase.

Based on previous collective experiences, the following preliminary information and documentation are needed to achieve deer management goals in developed areas:

1. Identify positive and negative deer impacts
2. Define objectives to measure progress towards alleviating or eliminating negative impacts and continuing or enhancing positive impacts
3. Collect data on problematic deer impacts
4. Review management options
5. Invoke decision-making process – legal, social, logistical, and economic
6. Develop and implement a communication plan
7. Ensure state wildlife agency and local government agencies have the ability to authorize regulated harvest where special local hunts may be needed and enhance management authority where possible
8. Identify permitting requirements
9. Implement management actions
10. Monitor changes in deer impact levels
11. Review and modify management actions

Often when a deer management plan is instituted, the level of involvement and effort to achieve goals is grossly underestimated. Municipalities should be prepared to budget for additional measures beyond the scope of volunteers if significant reductions are warranted. Based on research and previous experience managing deer in suburban settings, progressive actions are needed to meet goals. It must be made clear that any management plan calling for direct population management or reduction is, of necessity, a long-

range plan, not a “one-time only” solution. An evaluation of difference deer management options developed by the Northeast Deer Technical Committee can be viewed [here](#).

The following list provides a progression of actions that communities may consider to address deleterious impacts from overabundant deer. Actions progress from those that are more general to those that are more specialized. Initial actions should continue even as a community progresses through the options, with care to avoid educating deer to the lethal threat as conditioned deer can be very difficult to manage.

1. Modify human behavior, which may include bans on deer feeding, changes in speed limits, or zoning considerations to limit or isolate deer habitat within community centers. Consider use of exclusion fences to protect high-value commercial or natural resource areas.
2. Address municipal projectile discharge ordinances and other local by-laws that may prevent regulated hunting by the public as otherwise authorized by state laws and regulations.
3. Identify lands within the community used by deer where management action may be targeted. The lands may include residential neighborhoods, parks and preserves, riparian areas, cemeteries, golf courses, industrial areas, or transportation corridors.
4. Implement controlled public hunts in defined areas within state-regulated hunting seasons and implement public safety limitations as needed.
5. Where needed, coordinate managed hunting using a participant selection process, safety and shooting proficiency test, and personal interviews, with preference to more skilled and cooperative hunters.
6. Facilitate access to private and public lands for managed hunts.
7. Train hunters in suburban deer hunting techniques.
8. Seek special provisions to make regulated hunting more effective, such as: use of crossbows, muzzle-suppressed firearms from elevated locations, use of bait, and increased antlerless permit allowance combined with incentives for additional permits for antlered deer.
9. Consider financial incentives to increase hunter effort such as equipment, butchering, or transportation cost reimbursement.
10. Employ professional sharpshooting where regulated hunting options have been insufficient to solve identified problems or are otherwise not feasible.

Later options are not intended to replace early options but rather options should be considered inclusively in sequential order. However, the specific management actions undertaken will be largely dictated by the current biological and social conditions in the affected community.

This position statement is consistent with The Wildlife Society's more general position statements that include: Conserving Biological Diversity; Environmental Quality through Resource Management; Baiting and Supplemental Feeding of Game Wildlife Species; Hunting; Animal Rights Philosophy and Wildlife Conservation; Conservation Education; Responsible Human Use of Wildlife; The Use of Science in Policy and Management Decisions; Urban Wildlife; Wildlife Damage Management; Invasive Plants and Animals; and, Wildlife Disease with mitigatable implications for humans.

*Approved by the Board of Northeast Section of The Wildlife Society on April 19, 2015 in Newport, Rhode Island and by Northeast Section of The Wildlife Society membership on April 1, 2016.*

For questions regarding this position statement and the work of The Northeast Section of The Wildlife Society, contact [northeasttws@gmail.com](mailto:northeasttws@gmail.com) .