

Collision course

BENJAMIN CENTER PONDERES ETHICS OF DEER OVERPOPULATION MANAGEMENT



JOHN HAYES

Last Thursday, the Benjamin Center for Public Policy and Mohonk Preserve presented a panel discussion on deer management and the ethics of hunting.

by Frances Marion Platt

AS DAY LENGTH grows shorter and twilight longer, it's the time of year when Hudson Valley motorists become hyper-aware of the abundance of white-tailed deer who share our ecosystem. Many would say "overabundance" -- especially in suburbs like Westchester and Rockland Counties and the Albany area, which the New York State Department has specifically targeted for reduction of deer populations. But public opinion is sharply divided on how best to manage interspecies conflict, including automobile collisions that cost New Yorkers about \$265 million per year and another \$59 million in crop damage.

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Last week the Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives at SUNY New Paltz, in collaboration with the Mohonk Preserve, hosted a panel discussion at the College Terrace on the subject of “Deer Management and the Ethics of Hunting,” at which the ethical questions raised by recent proposals to expand population management techniques were examined. The discussion was a follow-up to the Benjamin Center’s release last fall of a brief by Brent Miller, a SUNY New Paltz graduate who is now the Northeastern States director for the Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation, titled “The Hunt for Balance: Management Techniques and Policy Recommendations for Dealing with Overabundant Deer in the Hudson Valley of New York State.”

While acknowledging that “there are important, often passionate current social and political controversies surrounding hunting in today’s political discourse,” Miller’s essay concluded that “hunting remains the most effective and efficient method for controlling free-ranging deer populations.” Citing a wide variety of studies, his brief rejected the options of contraception or sterilization of wild deer as far too costly (estimated at \$500 to \$1,000 to administer birth control to each doe, \$5,000 for a vasectomy on a buck) and argued that areas with significant human populations could not support the reintroduction of large native predators such as timber wolves.

Besides examining the impacts of “overabundance” of deer, “The Hunt for Balance” also touched on the economic and social benefits of hunting, noting that conservation funding in New York State is largely generated by the collection of hunting permit fees and touting efforts by volunteer groups like the Venison Donation Coalition to donate deer meat to food banks throughout the state. Miller recommended expanding the archery and crossbow hunting seasons; making the crossbow discharge distance in New York consistent with the upright bow

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(R-L): Pastor John Stetson, Devan Bugbee, Dr. Dave Rosenberger (head of properties and maintenance).



Children enjoying the newly redesigned playground.

by reducing it from 250 to 150 feet from an occupied dwelling; and conducting a “science-based public education campaign” to incentivize homeowners in heavily deer-impacted suburban areas to allow hunters onto their land.

The three panelists, all affiliated with SUNY New Paltz, were college president Donald Christian, professor emerita of Biology Carol Rietsma and Department of Philosophy chair David Elstein. Dr. Christian began his remarks by pointing out that he had “trained as a wildlife biologist” who had “taught hunter education in two states before moving here.” While admitting that he is a hunter who skins, butchers and processes his own venison, Christian said, “Hunting or killing an animal is not something that I take lightly.” He quoted the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset’s 1944 essay “Meditations on Hunting,” who wrote, “Every good hunter is uneasy in the depths of his conscience when faced with the death he is about to inflict on the enchanting animal.”

Christian cited Yale “biophilic design” proponent Stephen Kellert’s breakdown of hunters into three types, in terms of motivation and habits: utilitarian, dominionistic and naturalistic, and argued that most deer hunters do not fall into the stereotypical macho trophy-seeker or “dominionistic” category.

The playground at the New Paltz Church of the Nazarene is redesigned

DEVAN BUGBEE HAS completed his Eagle Scout requirements for Boy Scout Troop 70 in Highland. His service project was a redesign and renovation of the playground at the New Paltz Church of the Nazarene. On Sunday morning, October 1, the church held a dedication service at the playground, giving thanks for God’s design in connecting Bugbee’s search for a service project with the church’s desire to renovate the playground. The playground is already back in use.


However, he acknowledged that the resistance of a portion of the sport-hunting population to taking does instead of bucks contributes significantly to the deer overpopulation problem. He urged that all non-vegetarians “own our own indirect ecological footprints” by realizing that consumption of meat from the supermarket is no more ethically defensible than hunting for purposes of feeding one’s family.

Carol Rietsma, who also serves on the Mohonk Preserve board of directors, said that she had “no desire to ever be a hunter” despite having grown up in a hunting family. Her presentation focused on her studies of the impacts of deer browsing on the

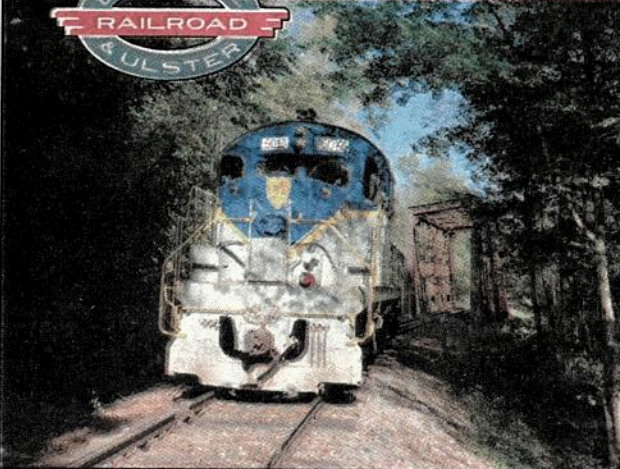
chestnut oak forests that dominate the Shawangunk Ridge. Her data clearly indicated that whitetail deer favor chestnut oak saplings and seedlings, leading to ecosystem imbalances that make forests more vulnerable to fire damage as well as reducing biodiversity.

David Elstein offered a “philosophical perspective,” citing the objections of animal rights advocates to activities that cause pain to individual animals but arguing that “Animal pain is not the only bad.” He said that much of the “deer problem” is attributable to humans clearing too much land in suburban areas and creating an abundance of deer-friendly “edge habitat,” noting, “When deer are flourishing, probably other parts of the natural world don’t.”

Much of the question-and-answer session that followed focused on the need to educate the next generation of potential hunters from an “ecological perspective” that reframes hunting as a practical manifestation of “citizen science.” Matthew Friday, graduate coordinator at SUNY New Paltz, recommended that policymakers consider “how to reach out to the locavore community...Frame it not as a problem, but a resource.” ++



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