

## AFIELD

### New Report Stirs Controversy

Mark Nale

First the forests were filled with disgruntled deer hunters, then the leader of the Pennsylvania Game Commission's Deer Management Section — Gary Alt — resigned December 31, and just 11 days ago a lengthy scientific report was issued by the Deer Management Forum. What will happen next?

The report, entitled "Managing White-tailed Deer in Forested Habitat from an Ecosystem Perspective," was the result of a three-year effort by a team of well-respected biologists. The study was sponsored by Audubon Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Habitat Alliance. [Note: According to some detractors, we should be wary of these two groups, for they favor a healthy environment for birds, trees, deer and people — truly subversive goals. And yes, my tongue is stuck firmly in my cheek, at least about the "subversive goals" part!]

Judging from the amount of controversy that the report has generated, one would think that it must represent a communist plot, Satanic doctrine or, at the very least, the work of Osama bin Laden. After reading the executive summary and much of the 340-page report, I've found none of the above. Nor do I find a plot by the National Audubon Society or the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to take over the Game Commission, as some claim.

What I did find was good, sound science and an accurate, but sad, depiction of the effects of politics on deer management in Pennsylvania. The report contains a fair and thorough documentation of how the forests of Pennsylvania have declined. It also points a finger at the most likely cause, as well as outlining a scientific process to solve the forest regeneration dilemma.

According to the report, the long-time existence of too-high deer densities has interfered with the healthy regeneration of forests. Throughout much of the state, the normal replacement of trees following a natural or man-made disturbance is not happening unless the area is fenced to exclude deer. In addition, the tree species composition has been negatively altered, the woody understory layer has dramatically decreased or changed and many species, including deer, have been negatively impacted.

The report delineates the scientific process called adaptive resource management, or ARM, as an approach that has the most potential to solve our deer/forest problems.

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ARM outlines its science-based way of “learning by doing.” First, outline all of the resource management goals that can be agreed upon by most stakeholders (hunters, farmers, DCNR, etc.). Second, investigate all scientific theories (high deer densities, acid precipitation, logging, the lack of forest fires) that have the potential to affect the agreed-upon goals. Third, select the best theory or group of theories and outline the options to remedy the situation. Fourth, make measurable predictions and collect field data to evaluate the effectiveness of each option. Finally, update the resource management plan based on the results of the field data.

It all makes perfect sense to me, and I see no communist plot. It is just good science, flavored with an accurate recounting of our past management failures. The report’s policy section is very critical of the PGC and its role in those failures.

I was ready to write this column earlier this week, but the sheer number of negative voices caused me to pause. *Maybe I’m wrong*, I thought. (Yes, I hear the cheering from the Unified Sportsmen.) So I called Duane Diefenbach, Assistant Unit Leader of the Pennsylvania Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Unit stationed at Penn State.

Diefenbach was a member of the Audubon panel of biological experts that was supposed to co-author the report, but he resigned in protest in November of 2001. Surely, I thought, if this report is flawed, here is a biologist that might support its detractors.

Wrong! According to Diefenbach, “... the scientific content of the report is outstanding and should be given due consideration by all parties interested in the best management of deer and our natural resources.”

What Diefenbach didn’t like was the policy chapter’s findings and recommendations. He wrote in a prepared statement, “... much of the content of the policy chapter is counterproductive to furthering the goal of implementing an ecosystem-based approach to deer management in Pennsylvania...” When asked for an explanation of his dissatisfaction, Diefenbach said, “I don’t think that all of the criticism of the Game Commission was helpful to furthering the cause of ecosystem-based management.”

Diefenbach explained how ARM is bringing all of the diverse stakeholders together to intelligently deal with waterfowl shortages. He feels that the same approach could work for Pennsylvania deer management.

“... Deer management in Pennsylvania is at an historic transition point.”  
— from the report of the Deer Management Forum, p. 185.

Then I called Ben Moyer, long-time hunter and former editor of *Pennsylvania Sportsmen* magazine. Moyer was an official reviewer of the report.

“I do believe that the diversity of our forests has become impoverished and this is what we are leaving for our children,” Moyer said. Moyer also supports the “science” in the report. “This entire process is very healthy,” he said. “You call in experts and advance new ideas.” What could be wrong with that?

I read the report with a careful eye and didn't see a report that insists on the combination of the Game Commission with DCNR. Moyer, who read the entire document several times, concurs. What I did read was — *IF* the PGC (through sport hunting) can't bring the deer herd into balance and keep it balanced with its habitat, *THEN* alternate funding must be found for the agency or a new structure (possibly including combining agencies) should be implemented.

During the past several weeks, I've listened to the complainers and did my best to air their views on this page. I'm sure that the disgruntled hunters are all good, well-meaning people who want what they think is best for the deer. Their voices needed to be heard, or they could justly claim censorship. However, enough is enough.

Our founding fathers knew that a successful democracy was dependent on an educated and informed citizenship. If we hunters want to control the Game Commission as a democracy, then we must become educated and informed. The ARM process outlined in the report could scientifically evaluate all theories and find a solution.

Having healthy diverse forests should be the goal of every Pennsylvania deer hunter. If you don't recognize that, then you can't see the forest for the deer and I am truly concerned about the future of hunting in Pennsylvania. You should be, too.

According to page 185 of the report, which some are insisting is controversial, "... deer management in Pennsylvania is at an historic transition point." I couldn't agree more. Beginning with today's Game Commission meeting, the next two years will tell the tale. Will we digress to "business as usual," with overpopulated deer destroying their own habitat, or will we as hunters recognize the problem and remain a part of the solution?

I, too, want hunters to control hunting but, although I hope for the best, I also fear the worst. If the PGC fails to "*provide healthy habitat for all wildlife, retain a thriving and balanced deer population and maintain the state's rich deer hunting tradition*" (quoted from the PGC website), then we just might see what Alt feared: deer management placed in the hands of others. I hope that this is not the case.

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