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Editorial | Herd Control: It's time hunters change their habits

Irate hunters couldn't intimidate the Pennsylvania Game Commission. The panel this week refused to kill deer seasons designed to reduce the state's herd. It knows increased hunting remains the best hope for decimated woodlands to recover from voracious munching.

Ironically, hunters want shorter seasons and fewer licenses. They're shortsighted.

White-tailed deer are threatening the entire woodland ecosystem by eating everything palatable under five feet high. Forests are losing the seeds and seedlings to regenerate. Birds and mammals lack cover to nest and burrow. The quality of watersheds has diminished.

In addition, deer cause millions of dollars in crop damage and thousands of traffic accidents every year.

A three-year study of deer overpopulation, released this month by Audubon Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Habitat Alliance, concluded that hunting is the only feasible method of regulating deer.

Five years ago, commission biologist Gary Alt began to reverse years of protective management, which had swelled the herd to at least 1.6 million. A "sacred doe" tradition, in which hunters killed primarily bucks, had resulted in serious gender imbalance. Alt changed the doe rifle season from three days to two weeks and instituted antler restrictions to encourage hunters to shoot does, not bucks. He also started a "deer management assistance program" to allow additional hunting where deer density was high.

Many hunters were willing to give Alt's ideas a try, but a few vocal sportsmen's groups opposed him. Alt resigned in December, citing political pressure to reverse his policies.

The commission, however, upheld Alt's rules Tuesday and even lengthened the hunting season in Southeastern Pennsylvania, an area packed with deer. (For safety reasons, however, many parts of southeastern counties are off-limits to hunting, and other deer controls may be needed.)

The commission's decision won't be final until April, when members will decide how many "antlerless" tags to issue. Undoubtedly, hunters, who say they aren't seeing

enough deer from their cabins and tree stands, will apply more pressure. Hunting has become too challenging, they contend.

But a recent Pennsylvania State University study found that hunters rarely stray more than a third of a mile from the road. Almost no hunters in the 2001-02 study ventured onto steeper slopes. It's time hunters changed their habits.

"The days of seeing 40 to 50 deer walk by your stand are gone," one hunter said Wednesday. For habitat to recover, that's the way it should be.

The game commission, which has two open seats, is moving in the right direction. Gov. Rendell must keep that momentum going by appointing new commissioners who support keeping deer in balance with the ecosystem.