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# Finding Common Ground *in a Landscape of* Deer and People

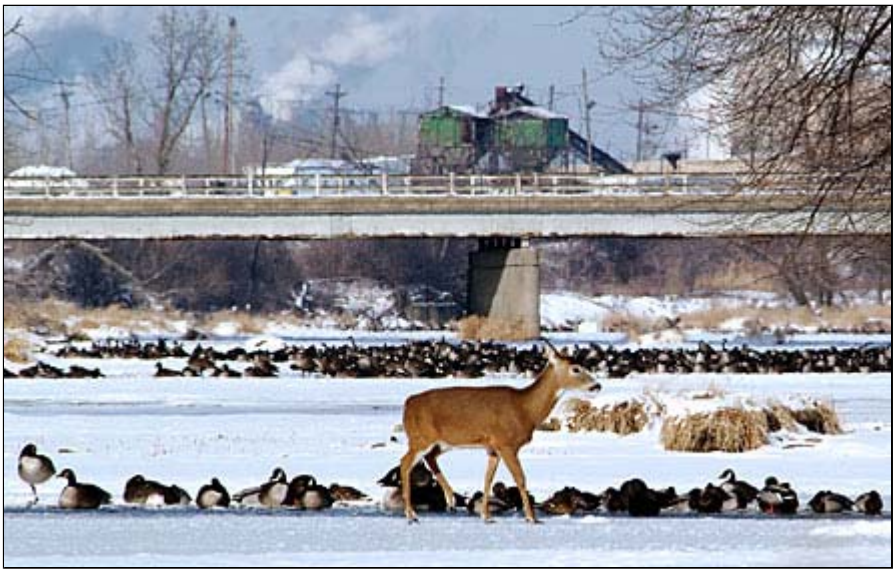

*Photo at right by Dave Jagodzinski.*

**See also "Seeking a Friendly Consensus"**

## *Balancing the well-being of people, animals, and the rest of nature*

**By William S. Lynn**

For well over a decade, the Chicago region has struggled with the issue of growing deer populations. Each spring, we hear the reports of land managers, volunteers, photographers, and hikers who have just returned from a journey to a favorite nature preserve only to discover that the wildflowers there have been grazed clean.

An overabundance of deer contributes to an unhealthy landscape and an unhealthy deer herd. Deer being deer, they nip the delectable flowers and leaves off most native plants and tree saplings, and a predictable chain of events follows. Young trees don't grow to replace the old ones. Beneficial insects disappear. Populations of songbirds and small mammals decline, having less cover and food. As the health of the landscape diminishes, deer themselves suffer increasing stress and illness. For the well-being of both the deer and the landscape, we humans have to control deer numbers. The question is, how do we choose to do it?

There is no easy answer to this question. We can choose lethal means, such as hunting and sharpshooting, or nonlethal means, such as contraception, fencing and netting, scare devices, and chemical repellents. The choice becomes complicated by our own ethical, social, and ecological values. Balancing and integrating these values in ways that are good for deer,

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*ground.*

people, and the landscape is not an easy task. And what works in one place may not be appropriate in another, so our efforts must be sensitive to site and situation. Humility and a consciousness of our own ways of thinking seem the appropriate responses in the face of such complexities.

*Photo by Illinois Department of Natural Resources.*

With respect to conservationists, many of us can fall into the trap of turning deer into scapegoats. We start blaming deer for a range of sins, as if they contained some element of evil. With deer as a scapegoat, it is easy for us to avoid our collective responsibility for creating this situation. Yes, overabundant deer seriously challenge our conservation goals. But should we blame deer for responding to newly created niches, for having too many fawns, for foraging without care of predation? Is it reasonable to say deer "cause" traffic accidents, when both they and people are victims of a transportation system ill adapted to wildlife? More broadly, were deer a historic threat to the biodiversity of the area's original wild lands? The answer is no on all counts. It is people who have eliminated most of the natural predators of deer, transformed the landscape into a quilt of fields, wood lots, gardens, and lawns, and sprawled ourselves across the region. Most conservationists believe that hunting by humans is the best way to save threatened ecosystems from death by deer. But by itself, hunting as we have known it does not fully address these underlying issues. More comprehensive solutions may include non-human predator restoration, better land use planning, and changes in our worldview.

Most of my friends in the animal community agree that deer populations are out of balance, but object to killing deer. I honor their commitment to living a life of compassion for all living creatures. Individual animals deserve moral standing in our worldview and actions. Yet at the same time, I also find honor in the skilled act of hunting. I've known many hunters with a deep love and informed respect for wild animals and the rest of nature.

I routinely praise my cat, Delilah, for her hunting prowess at catching mice. I see in her skilled predation a small feline's part of nature's drama. As a member of the pro-animal movement myself, can I not see the same in the careful and caring hunter - even a human one - who contributes to the overall health of the landscape? I do, and I think other animal advocates should as well.

Nature should inform our understanding of earthly life. Predation is part of the natural world, an evolutionary process that is necessary to natural ecosystems and generates diverse populations of plants and animals. Predation is a "sad-good," a fact of life for which we should be biologically grateful, if morally mindful. Hunting by humans can be an instance of this sad-good. Having compassion for deer requires that we care about the well-being of individual animals. Yet, we cannot fully exercise this compassion if we do not understand how deer are harmed by their own overpopulation and overbrowsing. And our compassion falls short when it ignores the multitude of life forms — including those not so charismatic and humanlike as deer — that disappear when deer denude a preserve.

Regrettably, both conservationists and animal advocates often dismiss each other's concerns and insights. We can lapse into using stereotypes: "irrational" animal advocates in opposition to "compassionless" conservationists. This stereotyping has created ill will between these communities. In truth, both communities need each other's insights on how to restore biodiversity in an ethically sound and scientifically informed way. We need a collaboration among both conservationists and animal advocates who will step forward and stake out a creative, honorable, and practical middle ground.

As I said, there are no easy answers, especially where there appears to be a clash of values. But I can offer several maxims. Maxims are meant to be applied to our

everyday experience, to help clarify our thinking and decision-making. These maxims are only an ethical point of departure. Try applying them to situations involving wildlife around you. See how they inform what you think and feel.

**Stake out the "creative middle ground."** Being proactive is better than being reactive, and that is nowhere more true than in framing the issues of a policy dispute. Articulating the questions, concepts, issues, actors, and actions involved can make the difference between public policy that succeeds or fails. So by "creative middle ground" I do not mean the middle-of-the-road, split-the-difference, least-common-denominator compromise that does not really resolve issues. Such compromises may be acceptable in the short term, but they leave few happy and shift the conflict to another day.

What I do mean is something akin to Aristotle's "middle way." Think of this not as the weak form of compromise noted above, but as finding the best route between obstacles in one's path, be they mountains or wetlands or arguing interest groups. Staking out the creative middle ground regarding deer would involve a merging of distinct points-of-view from conservationists and animal advocates, a demonstrable respect for their diverse insights and concerns, and the creation of a deeper and broader understanding of what it means to live in a world that is home to many life forms besides humans.

**Deer and their landscapes deserve our care and respect.** This is a common value held by both groups, but viewed on different levels. Animal advocates are concerned about deer being reduced to functional units of ecosystems, a resource to be managed according to human desires. Animals, including deer and coyotes, are living, feeling, and thinking beings. They are fellow residents of a common landscape that includes human beings. This is what people mean when they say deer have moral value or inherent worth. Conservationists must not forget that they are "managing" real, sentient beings. In the same vein, conservationists are concerned that natural landscapes not be reduced to scenic backdrops for individual deer. Landscapes are complex ecological systems with a broader, "holistic" good we should care about as well. They are made up of thousands of other species, including individual plants, bugs, birds, and other animals. By leaving deer alone, we are allowing large-scale death and displacement of non-deer wildlife. Deer advocates also must consider the inherent worth of each of these, as well as the ethical responsibility to human society of preserving a vibrant, healthy wild place for our children.

Restoring biodiversity means restoring predators. Deer populations need to be aligned with the landscape's ability to support them. How we do this will necessarily vary depending on whether the location is an urban park, a suburban housing development, a forest preserve, or agricultural land. Hunting is one means of achieving this alignment. Humans have been a predator in Chicago Wilderness for thousands of years, and we were as much a part of the ecology here as the non-human predators. But coyotes, cougars, and wolves have shared this role with us. These predators are superior to human predators in some ways. They are better adapted to the nuances of natural predator-prey relations and cycles. They also balance out the number of smaller predators who themselves take a toll on bird and small mammal populations.

I'm not suggesting that wolves should be wandering Wacker Drive in downtown Chicago. Yet, if we are serious about conservation, we have to learn to live with the predators that are native to this region. Doing so requires us to look well ahead to envision a time when decades of land-use planning and environmental education have prepared both the natural and cultural landscape for the presence of appropriate predators.

**Coyotes — the largest non-human predator in Chicago Wilderness — have little impact on overpopulations of adult deer. They mostly eat voles and rabbits (and deer killed by automobiles).** *Photo by Alan G. Nelson/Root Resources.*

Managing wildlife is primarily about people. Wildlife management is really about managing our own relationship to the natural world. Managing a population of deer has less to do with empirical data, quantitative models, or field techniques than it does with the deeply rooted ethical conflicts over whether and how to coexist with wildlife and natural landscapes. A sustained dialogue over the ethics and politics of our relationship to deer will do as much or more for restoration than lawsuits or legislation.

An indispensable element of this worldview is encouraging responsible ecological citizenship — a sense that we are residents of a landscape, sharing our community with human and non-human others to whom we have different responsibilities. As city and suburban dwellers, we appreciate the beauty and solace of natural landscapes. Yet we should not expect deer to avoid our azaleas, or coyotes to avoid denning in our back yards. Nor should we develop land carelessly. We should exercise a reasonable tolerance for other creatures, and landscape in animal-friendly ways. And while we will undoubtedly seek our own happiness, we should balance this with the needs of a more than human world. Taken a step further, we might even consider whether happiness couldn't include watching coyotes raise pups in the back yard.

Finally, conservation has its roots in ethics. Conservation employs science and community participation in order to re-establish a "right relationship" with animals and the rest of nature. Finding the right relationship is not easy. It is hard work rehabilitating a landscape that requires clearing, burning, planting, seeding — even killing. It is hard work mobilizing the political power to protect and connect the urban wildlands of the Chicago region.


**Are deer solely a resource to be managed according to human desires? That's what worries many animal advocates. This deer, with ear tags and radio collar, will give biologists data about deer movement and distribution. How do we make sure we are respecting these members of our community?** *Photo by Carol Freeman.*

It is equally difficult to think through the moral questions of our responsibility to the landscape and its residents, human and non-human. And sometimes this involves making tough choices. Do we use sharpshooters to thin a herd by taking the lives of other mammals, or do we allow other dynamics such as car collisions, hunger, and illness to take a similar toll? Do we advocate for a new ethics and practice of hunting, one that develops a profound concern for animal welfare and ecological integrity? Can we consider that hunting may be a way of respecting life? Do we allow coyotes to live among us, knowing that some pets will be preyed upon, and their human guardians deeply grieved?

Again, there are no simple answers. Each of our individual and collective choices will have an impact on the well-being of the human and non-human community. How we evaluate that impact is as much a matter of ethics as it is science or politics. Aldo Leopold once said, "There are some who can live without wild things and some who cannot." Leopold was someone who could not. He was not stating this solely as a matter of personal preference, but in recognition of his common citizenship and moral responsibilities to what he termed the "land community," a moral community embracing people, animals, and places.

Keeping Leopold's comment in mind, it is time for responsible members of the animal and conservation communities to begin mapping a creative middle ground. Given our mutual commitment to the well-being of the natural world, these communities should be natural allies. We will not always agree, but the benefits of an alliance are obvious. By bridging the gap between these two human communities, we will be better able to contribute to the well-being of the larger community of life, including deer. The struggle over deer is an opportunity for mutual learning and solidarity. We should not miss it.

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**See also:**

- Deer Dilemma: Too Much of a Good Thing? (CW, Fall 2003)
- Studying Deer Balance (CW, Fall 2003)
- Deer and the Ecosystem (Panel discussion from CW, Winter 2000)
- Lincolnshire Referendum: Forest, deer, and democracy (CW, Fall 2000)
- Deer on a Leash (Editor's Note, CW Fall 2003)
- Deer Control Working in Indiana (CW News, Summer 2002)
- Highland Park Wrestles with Need for Deer Control (CW News, Summer 2001)
- Bambi, Beavers, and Bob (Editor's Note, CW Winter 2000)
- Three Clues (Deer impact in a photo, CW Winter 2000)
- Oh Dear (CW, Winter 1998)
- Residents Preserve Right to Protect Ecosystems (CW News, Summer 2004)

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