



Case Study 4

Deer Debate in Hilton Head, South Carolina

People often move to the wildland-urban interface to enjoy the peace and beauty of neighboring natural areas. Those same people may be surprised and upset by the annoyance, destruction, and danger that local wildlife present to their neighborhoods. Human-wildlife conflict can be challenging on an individual scale but when it begins to affect entire communities, it can become very complex.

One example of this complexity is the overabundance of deer in the community of Sea Pines Plantation on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Designated by the South Carolina legislature as a state wildlife sanctuary in 1971, Sea Pines Plantation is now scattered with homes, resorts, restaurants, and shops. Abundant white-tailed deer in Sea Pines, a wealthy 2,137-hectare residential/resort development in southern Hilton Head, have contributed to increasing numbers of deer-vehicle collisions, landscape plant damage, fears of Lyme disease, and other concerns. The number of deer-vehicle collisions increased from 18 in 1993 to 61 in 1999. Deer were sleeping on people's patios and walking through parking lots. The same people who moved to the community to be close to wildlife were upset by the problems the deer were creating. Ironically, those very residents helped create conditions that led to the herd's successful reproduction and their preference for the Sea Pines Plantation landscaping.

In May 1998, the University of Georgia (UGA) and the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) concluded a three-year research project on the Sea Pines deer herd and found that the population in the Sea Pines area was approximately four times larger than that of most undeveloped barrier islands. Researchers

suggested that lush landscape plants throughout the community were providing a plentiful buffet for the deer, keeping them in prime condition for rapid reproduction. Based on their findings, the researchers recommended the population be managed by a combination of experimental fertility control and sharpshooting. Without first reducing the herd by 100-150 deer, the logistics and cost (\$800 to \$1,100 per deer annually) of delivering contraceptives to stabilize the population were simply not feasible and even then, could take five to 10 years before the population declined. This conclusion was not exactly what local natural resource managers wanted to hear. Not only would administering the fertility control be extremely costly, the sharpshooting element was sure to trigger controversy.



Photo by: Lynda Lester, National Center for Atmospheric Research

Many Sea Pines Plantation residents were frustrated with deer grazing on their landscaping plants.

While the majority of Sea Pines residents expressed their approval of the management recommendations in a mail survey, local, state, and federal animal rights groups bitterly protested. They argued that killing the deer was unethical and that nature should be allowed to run its course. They insisted that people should

accept the deer as part of living in a natural area and adapt by driving slower and using deer-resistant landscape plants. The groups printed bumper stickers, wrote local and state politicians, and threatened to protest at the two nationally televised sporting tournaments held annually in Sea Pines. Community leaders held public meetings and education seminars to demonstrate to the public the complicated and difficult decisions facing them. Eventually, five local, state, and national animal rights organizations (the plaintiffs) filed a lawsuit against UGA, SCDNR, and the Sea Pines Community Services Association (the defendants). They won a temporary restraining order which prevented SCDNR from issuing scientific collecting permits to kill deer in the Sea Pines area.



Photo by: Carolyne Butler

The number of deer-vehicle collisions increased dramatically between 1993 and 1999 in Sea Pines Plantation.

Two lower-level courts ruled in favor of the defendants; the case was appealed and went to the South Carolina Supreme Court. In July 2001 the Supreme Court upheld the lower court's rulings. After three years and more than \$200,000 in litigation expenses, the Sea Pines Community Services Association implemented a deer-management program. Sharpshooters reduced the herd by 500 deer over the course of three years. Deer densities dropped from seven acres/deer to 40 acres/deer. Deer-vehicle collisions were reduced from over 60 per year to less than 10. A wildlife manager was hired for Sea Pines to manage the deer and other wildlife. Following the Court's ruling there has been little opposition to the program.

The Hilton Head deer controversy attracted national and international media attention, including coverage from National Public Radio, Fox News, *The Economist*, and NBC News. Several other coastal communities with deer population problems contacted the UGA researchers for guidance, hoping to avoid a similar controversy. The challenges experienced by these researchers, wildlife managers, and local government leaders illustrate the complexity of interface issues. As development continues to encroach on natural areas, human-wildlife conflicts are likely to increase. Natural resource professionals may be responsible for responding to these conflicts, either through management, research, or educational programs. Juggling public opinion, public safety, and natural resource objectives can be extremely challenging.

Sources

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