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Bulletin Sifton Bog Deer

Herd Health and Herd Numbers, Carrying Capacity, Lyme Disease

Deer Numbers: Since 2003, deer numbers have fluctuated, being as low as 26 in 2004 and as high as 52 in 2007. The most recent count deer numbered at 35.

Herd Condition: We have found no indication in the Management Plan or in other documents that the Sifton Bog deer are physically compromised through malnutrition and disease. Indeed, at the October AWAC Committee meeting where this issue was discussed, members of the Committee, including a veterinarian, commented on the health of the herd.

Despite evidence to the contrary, the Conservation Authority continues to state on its web site that “Overpopulation leads to poor overall health of the herd and increases the likelihood of disease. This can lead to a decrease in body weight (starvation) and death. Reductions in the size of the deer herd will improve the health of individual deer.”

(IBID http://www.thamesriver.on.ca/Wetlands_and_Natural_Areas/white-tailed_deer_mgmt_pg2.htm#IMPACTS%20OF%20DEER)

The fact that the herd is healthy must mean that there are no overpopulation issues. In fact, based on herd health the Conservation Authority has no justification to recommend a cull of these animals.

False claim of an overabundance of deer:

The Plan asserts an overabundance of deer, without any scientific justification as to how the classification was determined. In part, the claim seems to be driven by complaints from residents and concerns with deer/car collisions.

Carrying capacity:

As the Plan states, “The carrying capacity (the number of deer that an area of land can support over an extended period of time) of an area the size of Sifton Bog is estimated to be three adult deer: in other words, there are 20 times more deer than the landscape can support and maintain ecological integrity.” (pg 69, the Plan)

The problem with the Authority’s statement is that the carrying capacity of Sifton Bog appears to be approximately 50 deer who now live there. The Authority provides no evidence in the Plan that the

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health of the deer herd is compromised. Deer impact their environment and given that they are native, their impact should be considered normal.

There is no species of plant or animal endemic to, or dependent upon the Sifton Bog for survival as a species, and at any rate, the ecological nature of the bog are in an inevitable state of transition.

Problems with deer exclosures:

A new articles, authored by Jim Slinsky, host and producer of the "Sportsman's Connection", a nationally syndicated, outdoor-talk radio program raises questions about the efficacy of deer exclosures. In an article titled, "The truth and nothing but the truth about deer exclosures", he states

"We have all seen pictures of fenced areas carved into our mature forests with heavy deer browsing around the perimeter. As a matter of fact these provocative pictures are continuously used to condemn this magnificent and valuable animal. No other piece of evidence has been utilized as frequently to substantiate that we have a severe deer overpopulation problem. Unfortunately, in this case a picture is worth a thousand lies.

"Most states have long-established a maximum carrying capacity for deer by region, WMU or county depending on the habitat. This is the point at which deer do damage to the forest. For this discussion we'll use 40 deer per square mile. The management goal would then be set at 20 deer per square to insure forest regeneration and ample food for deer to be healthy. Goals are usually set at 50% of maximum carrying capacity, but 70% would work just as well.

"Getting back to fenced deer exclosures, you must be aware of a few facts before we do the math. First, the "professional" scientific community does not recognize deer exclosures as a valid method of measuring deer impacts. True science requires putting deer into "inclosures" at varying densities and measuring their impact. Exclosures create a "0" deer density baseline example.

"Secondly, fenced exclosures create an "oasis effect". Actually, they draw deer in higher than normal densities to an obvious food source. The growth within the fenced area is like putting a piece of candy just outside the reach of a child. The deer come continuously to see if they can grab a meal...

"What I am saying is I can make an argument for fraud. Those condemning pictures utilized by the anti-deer crowd are intended to persuade an uninformed public that we have a deer epidemic. Fenced deer exclosures are not science. They

are a deceptive political tool to rally the public around a deer reduction program over the objections of our sporting class...

"I believe a crime has been committed. This is no different than the cop that fabricates evidence to get a conviction. We have been lied to and our deer have been framed, prosecuted and condemned to death."

<http://www.steubencourier.com:80/news/2009/0125/outdoors/046.html>

Larger deer numbers may increase ecological diversity:

A new study by the Ohio State University suggests that larger deer numbers may in fact increase ecological diversity as opposed reducing it as has been suggested in the past.

"A recent study by researchers at Ohio State University and National Park Service found that higher deer activity is modifying forest ecosystems in unexpected ways. Out of several species of snakes, salamanders, and invertebrates studied, a greater diversity of animals were found in areas with deer populations than were in areas with no deer activity.

"The study, which comes at a time when many states have begun to selectively control deer populations, challenges previous research that has suggested deer populations can negatively impact forest ecosystems through eating plants that many smaller animals may depend on.

"Instead, researchers found that high numbers of deer may in fact be attracting a greater number of species. This may be because their waste creates a more nutrient-rich soil and as a result, areas with deer draw higher numbers of insects and other invertebrates. These insects then attract larger predators which thrive on insect lava such as salamanders, and the salamanders in turn attract even larger predators such as snakes." (<http://researchnews.osu.edu/archive/deer.htm> -Oct 20, 2008)

Katherine Greenwald, co-author of the study makes the following observation:

"We need to be aware of what's happening in these forest ecosystems. Culling deer may cascade into affecting plants, salamanders, and other creatures in ways we can't even imagine. So before we start removing deer we should study what's really happening in these areas because there are a whole host of other issues that go along with culling,"
(IBID)

Lyme Disease: In the July 10, 2001 Sifton Bog White-tailed Deer Issue Steering Committee Meeting Notes the issue of Lyme disease is addressed. In the section titled, "Questions and Answers on deer in Sifton Bog and Human Health" a representative from the Middlesex-London Health Unit answered questions

about Lyme disease and the deer in Sifton Bog. The following questions were asked and answered, "Is Lyme disease a concern in Sifton Bog? Ticks carrying Lyme disease are rare in Ontario except in Long Point, Point Pelee and Rondeau Parks. There have been only 12 people with Lyme disease reported in Middlesex-London area since 1988 and all but one were demonstrated to have been infected outside this area. Between November 1988 and December 1998, 274 cases of Lyme disease were reported in Ontario; 46% of those were felt to have been acquired in Ontario." And, "Will an increase in the number of deer in an area increase the risk of Lyme disease being found in this area? The Lyme disease bacteria and the ticks that transmit them would have to be in the area as well as a mammal host such as deer for Lyme disease to become a problem in and around the bog. Deer are just one part of the equation. In Middlesex-London, Lyme disease is not currently a concern."

Conservation Authority "take" on Lyme disease: Despite such a clear statement by the Middlesex London Health Unit that Lyme disease is not "currently a concern", the Conservation Authority fails to make this clear on its own web site.

In fact, the Authority states the following, *"There is a concern that a large deer population would increase human exposure to diseases such as Lyme disease, encephalitis and parasites. Lyme disease is caused by a spirochete (Borrelia burgdorferi) that uses the deer tick (Ixodes dammini) as its vector and is a threat to human health. A dense deer population in close contact with humans may facilitate the spread of Lyme disease among residents and their pets if ticks and the disease are common."* (Steering Committee Meeting Notes, July 10, 2001, pg 3 to 4
http://www.thamesriver.on.ca/Wetlands_and_Natural_Areas/whitetailed_deer_mgmt_pg2.htm#IMPACTS%20OF%20DEER)

This statement almost entirely contradicts the statements from the Health Department. The only caveat by the Authority is contained in the statement, *"However, more information about the probability of transmission of Lyme disease is needed to place the risk in the proper context."* (IBID)

We checked the Health Department's web site to see if there was new information about Lyme disease in the London area since 2001 but the information seems unchanged.