

It's That Hunting Time of Year

By Jason Fisher and Adam Downing, Virginia Cooperative Extension

Hunters and hunting are viewed by some as barbaric, while others live for opening day. Is hunting simply a pastime leftover from the time when our ability to hunt and gather was necessary to survive? Or is it a tool to manage our natural resources?

Some History

Before answering this, let us consider the environment in which we live. Whether you live in town or in the most remote part of this beautiful commonwealth, humans have a great impact on the environment surrounding you. Humans have always modified our environment. In fact, well before Europeans arrived on these shores, Native Americans burned vast areas to facilitate travel and manage wildlife.

We are not the only creature to modify our surroundings. All animals, to one degree or another, have an impact on the environment. Beaver, for example, create ponds and wetlands. This brings about both opportunities and problems for other inhabitants.

White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*, also known as the Virginia deer) can also significantly alter the environment. In high population numbers, they degrade habitat quality, negatively affecting many plant and animal communities essential to forest health.

Some Facts

White-tailed deer is the most sought-after big game animal in North America. You may remember when it was rare to see this animal. I recall in the '70's and '80's a large fenced-in military property closed to hunting at the time that was the only place around where you could drive and see deer. These days, it's welcome news if you don't see a deer while driving at dusk. What happened?

Deer are what wildlife biologists call a generalist species. Generalist species thrive in a wide variety of habitats and, in general, can adapt to different habitats. Rabbits, foxes, squirrels, raccoons and mice are also generalist. Many generalists have learned to live close to humans... in habitats that we have modified with buildings, yards and exotic landscaping. Deer have done this so well that without any significant predators to keep population growth in check, some areas are considered

over-populated. Coyotes are on the increase and will take advantage of an opportunity to kill deer, but most biologists feel coyotes will not have a significant impact on deer populations in Virginia.

In parts of Virginia, deer populations are estimated to exceed 200 per square mile. This may sound exciting, but not if you know what biologists know... the target density of deer in most areas is around 20 per square mile. A factor of ten separates current deer populations from what is best for the whole ecosystem. Deer are herbivores and prefer to browse certain plants, especially woody plants. With high populations, they eat so much vegetation that the habitat is significantly altered, resulting in forests with few young oak trees growing, for example. In some places you can see the effect by simply driving by a forest: a literal browse line at about 5 feet high, below which the deer have eaten almost everything in the understory. This is not what a natural or healthy forest looks like.

So whether you are concerned about hitting a deer with your car or the ecological integrity of our forests, the question is: what to do?

A Good Answer

The short answer is: go hunting. While other options, including birth control, have been researched, the solution that makes the most sense economically, ecologically, and socially, is hunting.

Science-driven hunting is a positive approach to manage deer populations. Limiting the number of does that survive until the next mating season will reduce populations. Fewer does result in fewer fawns, thus reducing the overall deer population, and potentially restoring ecosystems damaged by over-browsing. For more on the science, search for Virginia's Quality Deer Management Program within the Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries.

Socially, things get a bit murkier. According to the United States Census Bureau's 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, there



A clear browse line at 5 feet is apparent on this National Forest property in Giles County. Notice the lack of understory vegetation. Photo by: Jennifer Gagnon, VT

were 432,000 hunters in Virginia in 2011, an increase from the 368,000 hunters in 1991. A major reason for this is that the number of female hunters has increased in recent years.

But approximately 80% of the U.S. population does not hunt; an additional 10% are opposed to hunting; and the remaining 10% make up our hunting population. So, what about the 80%? Why don't they hunt? Are people too busy? Is it a lack of access to property open to hunting? Or does the redneck perception of hunting deter would-be-interested hunters? The answer is yes, it is a combination of all these things.



Ethical hunters can pass down good practices to their children, thus creating the next generation of wildlife managers. Photo by: Jason Fisher, VCE.

Some of these issues are beyond the ability of the hunting population to address. But the general perception of hunters and hunting is something the hunting community can affect positively by exhibiting ethical behaviors. Hunters must follow the law and take measures to be safe. This saves lives and improves image. Basic hunting etiquette also improves image. Hunters should thank the property owners and offer them some game if the hunt was successful. If possible, they should alert adjoining landowners to their presence. And, hunters should pick up litter...even if it isn't theirs.

If the hunting community shows respect for the land, landowners, and wildlife, then the future of our hunting heritage will continue to be bright. People interested in learning how or where to hunt should start by contacting the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries' Hunter Education Program, or the local Conservation Police Officer.

Help Virginia's deer population to be healthy. Become an educated hunter and carry on a traditional pastime. A good hunter can also be called a wildlife manager. If you are unable or choose not to hunt,

support it as the tool it is for habitat management. Learn more at

www.dgif.virginia.gov/hunting.

Jason Fisher is the Central District Forestry & Natural Resources Agent; 434/476-2147; jasonf@vt.edu.

Adam Downing is the Northern District Forestry & Natural Resources Agent; 40/948-6881; adowning@vt.edu.