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Task Force Process

Urban Deer
Management Plan

"Common knowledge too often serves as the bible of management decisions. Enhanced by anecdotes and accumulated lore, speculative ideas or hypotheses become transformed into dogma that is extremely resistant to change. There is, perhaps, no research endeavor that contains more common knowledge than the study of deer. All who have hunted deer, observed in their yard, or seen an animated film on the subject consider themselves experts. There is something about the species that allows everyone a clear insight into the mysteries of deer biology. In many cases, the ideas expressed reflect the perspective of the individual. When foresters, wildlife biologists, hunters and animal welfare activists discuss deer, one might be hard pressed to acknowledge that they are all talking about the same animal." William J. McShea, H. Brian Underwood, John H. Rappole, *The Science of Overabundance*, deer ecology and population management

The City of Grand Haven has been receiving concerns regarding whitetail deer for over 2 years. The complaints have ranged from deer grazing on landscaping to concern of deer attacks. On the other side of the issue, citizens regard them as beautiful creatures that enhance the value of our community by providing visual opportunities to observe the deer in their natural habitat.

In January of 2007, the City held a town hall meeting regarding the "Urban Deer" in our community. Of the approximate 100 citizens present, it was virtually a 50/50 split on the idea of implementing an urban deer management plan, or to leave them untouched in their natural state. In February, a helicopter air survey was taken of the Grand Haven / Ferrysburg area and counted 156 deer.

Through the spring and summer, staff worked with individuals from MSU, MSUE, Whitetails Unlimited, the Soil and Conservation District, and a representative from the Environmental and Natural Resources Committee. The group met to determine the best way to address the Urban Deer Management issue. In the end it was decided to form a citizen committee to develop an Urban Deer Management Plan using a six step approach.

Proposed Six Step Approach:

1. Awareness and Education: This portion was to featured 3 public sessions in early fall. The goal was to listen to concerns, encourage sharing of ideas, and educate participants on best management practices for managing deer in urban settings. The basic point made was that there is not a "silver bullet" that will solve the issue. It is vital to take an integrated approach that relies on several management practices. Any actions taken need to be evaluated in terms of capacity to address the situation without either making things worse or creating another set of problems that will need to be solved.

2. Task Force Planning: A diverse group of stakeholders from a cross-section of the public were selected and charged to work as a Task Force. The group was to study the issue and create a sound plan to address Urban Deer Management based on wildlife management principles.

3. Present Task Force Proposal to the Public: As the plan was coming together, the Task Force was asked to share their ideas once more with the public. Members of the task force presented the group's assessment, offered recommendations and invited comment. The public comment was used to review and finalize the Task Force's report.

4. Final Presentation of UDM plan to Local Decision Makers for Review and Adoption: The key to this phase was to strive for unilateral adoption of a coordinated, integrated plan of action that could be shared across jurisdictions.

5. Plan Implementation: Plan implementation was left in the hands of those with jurisdictional authority, elected officials with opportunities for public communication and able to implement the policy. Special emphasis is to be placed on empirical evidence to provide updates on the progress toward the outcomes identified in the plan.

6. Monitoring and Follow-up: This phase is an ongoing effort to look for ways to improve the Urban Deer Management plan based on local experience: The goal is to make it a "living plan" that can be revised over time to improve performance. The creation of an overall Wildlife Management Plan would be the next step.

In September, the City Council approved the six step approach and the Urban Deer Management Task Force was underway. In early fall, three public forums were held by the Task Force to collect input from the public. The first mission of the Task Force was to boil down all of the "Concerns" and "Approaches" that were generated from the three Public Input Sessions. The Task Force reviewed the comments and consolidated them into categories to specifically frame the issue. The five main categories of concerns included:

Domestication of Deer - artificial feeding, living in close proximity, adaptability – eating anything and everything available, overall change in land use, deer have superb conditions of everything they need - food, water, safety, shelter

Public Health Concerns - car/deer accidents – airplane/deer accidents; deer attacks; and community safety if gun/bow hunting was allowed. Lyme disease was also discussed. Lyme disease had occurred in Ottawa County and every county surrounding Ottawa since 2005. Populated areas around Lake Michigan seem especially prone.

Ecological Damage - wildflower loss, woody vegetation loss, dune erosion, wildlife health, lack of natural regeneration (tree, flower, etc) When the question was raised about poor land use and urban sprawl causing the problem, Nik Kalejs, our Wildlife Biologist with the MDNR stated that sprawl was a significant contribution and valid argument for rural areas, however it has not impacted Grand Haven. Grand Haven has local populations of deer with very small home ranges.

Public / Private Landscape Challenges - Homes, Parks, Cemetery - economic loss/cost; loss of plants; frustration; lack of info on what CAN be done with plantings, etc

Social Perceptions - split in community over what action should be taken, lack of public education, economics of any proposed program - who will pay and how much?, perceptions of the community from the outside, bad press may make potential visitors that we are a bad town, must have a multijurisdictional approach - who is willing to participate?, different impacts in different neighborhoods)

From these categories, four methods were identified to manage the urban deer.

1. Public Education

Recommended Public Education efforts regarding deer repellants, alternative landscape techniques, substitute plantings, lyme disease, elimination of deer feeding, and decrease deer tolerance of humans (i.e. scare tactics) were top in the list to help reduce the deer conflicts. (NOTE: MSUE completed a new brochure from this initiative on deer resistant plants). These efforts included posting information on the City website as well as providing online and cable presentations regarding Urban Deer Management. It was felt that monthly news updates should be placed in the paper to keep the information in front of the public. The Task Force also advised the City to post frequent accident sites with deer crossing signs and encourage the use of silk flowers in the cemetery. In the initial education of the public, many individuals learned the harm that feeding deer cause (rather than the expected good intention). When being fed, deer increase the risk of disease due to the close contact.

2. Habitat Exclusion of Deer

It was agreed that education, alone, would not take care of the problem. A mouse was given as an example. You can eliminate the food source (stop feeding) and patch all the holes in the wall (fence, etc) however eventually you may have to put out traps to eliminate the mice (integrated approach).

Possible Habitat Exclusions included building exclusion areas to demonstrate the deer browse effect on the habitat. Exclusion areas are fenced in areas where deer cannot access. The purpose of this is to understand the difference in the effects of browsing. Other possibilities were trial gardens in areas known for severe browsing to truly test what a deer will eat. Another concept looked into was changing the fencing ordinance to allow 6' to 8' fences in back yards. When this was further researched, it was found that fencing just pushed the deer into another yard or trail, so was not pursued.

3. Increased Tolerance

It was felt that Social Tolerance would best be dealt with through public education and clear communication. It was noted that perceptions would need to be changed to increase the social tolerance on both sides of the issue. In many cases the concern has created a neighborhood vs. neighborhood, affected vs. not affected sentiment.

4. Herd Reduction

Throughout the Task Force meetings, the contentious issue was herd reduction as a viable option, and how it was scientifically justified. Members could not justify a herd reduction simply due to landscape damage complaints. It was suggested that gardeners had been dealing with this issue for years, and that it was not a new or increasing problem. Others on the Task Force felt that the City should be concerned and ecologically aware of how its natural environment is being impacted and this is what the herd reduction decisions should be based.

The Task Force members agreed that if it was proven through professional determinations that there were ecological issues, they would support the idea of culling as a part of the integrated Urban Deer Management plan. Additionally, the Task Force agreed that a culling option could be handled safely within the city, and the acceptance of a culling option is a responsible wildlife management tool, not a negative influence.

During the course of several meetings, both Sara Schafer and Bill Martinez professionally observed and stated that deer were impacting the natural areas more than any pollution issue. These professional observations, however, were disputed by several Task Force members as they felt that reliable empirical data concerning ecological damage to sand dunes, or other habitats caused solely by Whitetail deer would be difficult to validate.

Possible actions that the Task Force agreed could trigger a herd reduction included increased trends in car/deer accidents; increased trends in valid deer damage complaints; increased trends in deer population estimates; local case(s) of Lyme disease; plant regeneration test plots vs. deer exclusion test plots (bio-diversity, long-term ecosystem health); local disease outbreaks in deer population/health of herd/reduction in size of deer; deer being too domesticated (hanging-out, loitering); and counting the number of deer droppings to see if they increase. What was not agreed on were the measurements of these effects to determine if a cull was warranted.