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If Only Hunters Could Sell Venison

Could loosening rules on deer meat help combat a suburban scourge?

By Jim Sterba
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What explains the fact that we have a glut of white-tailed deer in this country, yet an estimated 85% of the venison sold in restaurants and at meat counters is imported from farms in New Zealand?

The Kiwis tout the high quality of their meat. But the main reason is that, unlike hunters in other countries, Americans are not allowed to sell their own wild game meat. The "wild game" on our restaurant menus isn't wild—it's farm-raised, or else the chef is breaking laws that ban such sales. The laws were passed as part of a campaign in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to end the devastation of wild populations by commercial hunters.

Byron Eggenschwiler

But times have changed. On Oct. 7, scientists at the Wildlife Society's annual meeting in Milwaukee broached the idea—heretical to many—of allowing the limited sale of wild venison again as an incentive to reduce deer numbers and damage.

The white-tailed deer population of the U.S. is now estimated at somewhere between 30 million and 45 million. Proponents of allowing wild venison sales say the six million whitetails that licensed hunters will kill this season aren't nearly enough to contain, let alone to reduce, this population.

Inducements to increase the harvest—such as allowing more kills per hunter, setting up donation programs for the hungry and lengthening hunting seasons—have not worked well. This is especially true in our suburbs and growing exurbs, where deer increasingly concentrate. Hunting with guns is widely prohibited in these areas, and hunting with bows and arrows hasn't proven effective.

The new incentive would involve targeting overabundant whitetails in specific places—neighborhoods, parks, greenbelts, townships—for tightly controlled culls by specially qualified shooters. Hired sharpshooters already perform this task in many places, at taxpayer expense. The

difference is that, instead of being donated to food pantries or sent to landfills, the venison and byproducts could be sold, perhaps as a locavore delicacy, to recoup some costs.

The costs of deer damage in the U.S. continue to mount—from collisions with motor vehicles, overgrazing in forests, habitat loss for smaller animals, and damage to crops, gardens and landscaping—as does concern about Lyme disease. In August, three ecologists with the Nature Conservancy, the habitat-protection group, asserted in an online article that, over the short to medium term, deer are now more destructive to forests than climate change.

"Sadly, I spend much of my time in ecological disaster zones—forests devastated by too many deer," says Thomas J. Rawinski, a U.S. Forest Service scientist in Durham, N.H. "I truly believe that this has become the single greatest conservation challenge of our time."

The Wildlife Society, a conservation group made up of nearly 10,000 scientists, wildlife managers and academics, put the idea of selling wild venison on its national convention agenda after a previous effort to bring it up at another national forum was squelched. Organizers of the four-hour panel on wild venison sales were so apprehensive that they hired a professional facilitator to maintain decorum—which was unnecessary, as it turned out. Most of the 70 people in the room were open to the idea, with reservations, said several attendees.

By the end of the 19th century, the populations of many wild species in the U.S. had collapsed as a result of unregulated hunting: Professionals had killed any wild animals and birds they could sell for food, feathers, fur and other byproducts. That included deer, whose numbers fell from an estimated 30 million when Columbus arrived to 350,000 by 1900. Jurisdictions across the country responded by banning venison sales.

At the same time, conservationists adopted the so-called "North American model" of wildlife conservation. Wildlife would belong to all people to enjoy under rules enforced by governments—mainly state wildlife agencies—specifying when they could hunt or trap and what kind and how many creatures they could kill.

It worked—too well. Deer hunting became the foundation of a multi-billion-dollar industry, or what author Al Cambronne, in his book "Deerland," calls "the deer-industrial complex." Deer hunters account for about 80% of the $34 billion spent annually on equipment, licenses, travel and other sport hunting expenses. But in many places, the scourge posed by the growing deer population has spurred revisionist thinking.

Allowing the sale of wild venison strikes many wildlife managers and deer-hunting groups as a return to the dark old days. "I find it repulsive to even consider the idea of demoting game wildlife species to the status of domestic livestock to be exploited, sold or bartered for personal gain," wrote James E. Miller, a retired deer expert from Mississippi State University, in a statement for the Wildlife Society panel.

The idea gained some traction two years ago when the Wildlife Society Bulletin, a peer-reviewed scientific quarterly, published an article titled: "Regulated Commercial Harvest to Manage

Overabundant White-Tailed Deer: An Idea to Consider?" Its authors were seven government and academic wildlife ecologists.

They noted that the vaunted North American model already has loopholes. Trapping and selling wild fur-bearers is allowed. Catching and selling both freshwater and saltwater fish is, too. Cutting and selling trees for lumber in publicly owned forests has been sanctioned.

David Drake, a University of Wisconsin wildlife ecologist who introduced the panel, emphasized that commercial harvest wouldn't replace any current management tools but "would simply add another tool to our toolbox." It would not push out sport hunting or even take place in the same areas.

The next step, he said, is to seek a state government's approval for a pilot project to test the idea's effectiveness. A state wildlife agency might issue a commercial deer harvesters license, allowing a qualified group to cull a predetermined number of deer in a specific location and to sell the harvest, perhaps at local farmers markets.

Meanwhile, restaurants will continue to use meat from New Zealand, which first exported frozen venison to the U.S. in 1975. Now marketed as Cervena, half of it arrives fresh. The animals are mainly domesticated hybrids of red stag, a cousin of elk. Grass-fed on large farms, they are slaughtered before they are 3 years old.

The U.S. has an estimated 7,800 deer farms. Some sell venison and bottled deer urine, which hunters use as an attractant. Most concentrate on selective breeding to produce bucks with big antlers for high-priced hunts on fenced preserves—a practice decried as "junk hunting" by traditionalists, who insist on a "fair chase."

—Mr. Sterba is the author of "Nature Wars: The Incredible Story of How Wildlife Comebacks Turned Backyards Into Battlegrounds," available in paperback next month.