

**Executive Summary of GFCA
Forest Health and Deer Management Survey
Conducted Spring 2014**

The GFCA Committee on Environment, Parks and Trails (EPT) determined in the fall of 2013 that it would, for the first time, survey the community on issues affecting local forests. The objective was to seek residents' views so that the GFCA could evaluate support for new initiatives to protect local woodlands and streams. Of particular interest to EPT are the community's views on deer, which are by many accounts playing a major role in the demise of new tree and plant growth in our forests. One of GFCA's missions is to preserve the semi-rural nature of Great Falls; EPT has observed that the next generation of our forests has in many places disappeared under pressure from deer herds, raising questions about the sustainability of our highly-prized natural environment.

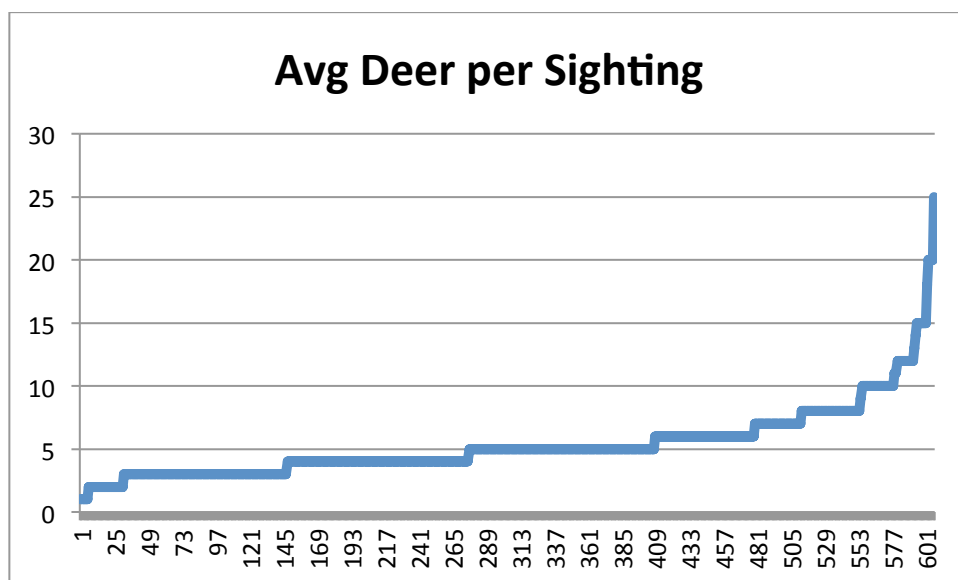
In addition to basic demographics, the survey was divided into five sections covering residents' experience with deer and forest health; results from each are described below. Graphs showing results of eight key survey questions are presented in the appendix.

Demographic Information

706 respondents completed the survey, with 77% of those living in Great Falls, 18% living and working in Great Falls and 2% only working here. The remaining 4% neither live nor work in Great Falls, so were not allowed to complete the survey – resulting in 681 final respondents. Residents were from all parts of Great Falls, with the largest number (38%) living south of Beach Mill Road and north of Georgetown Pike; 26% living south of Georgetown Pike, and 21% living north of Beach Mill Road. On average, respondents have lived in Great Falls for 21 years and are almost evenly divided among those who live in an HOA (51%) and those who don't (49%).

Experience with Deer

This section of the survey sought to understand the types of interactions residents have with deer in their daily activities. The results show that deer are frequently seen around the homes and roads of Great Falls: 45% report seeing deer multiple times a day and 73% report sightings at least daily. On average, residents say they see 5 to 6 deer per sighting. There is quite a large distribution on the high end indicating some areas experiencing larger herds.



Nearly three quarters of residents (74%) said that deer sightings have increased in recent years (44% reported strong increase), while only 6% reported a decline.

Nearly all respondents (95%) have seen evidence of deer feeding on their property. Over 85% have seen damage to landscape plants and shrubs; 60% specified that tree saplings and native plants had been affected. Three-fourth of respondents said they also experienced other types of deer damage, such as buck rubs (antler rubbing damage to trees), and deer feces. Over 80% of residents have taken action to protect their yard from deer damage. Residents have tried non-lethal means to control the damage; mainly use of anti-deer sprays and netting. Others report using area and perimeter fencing and dogs. Relatively few have tried hunting.

Accidents Involving Deer

Nearly half of respondents (44%) have had a vehicle accident involving a deer, but ,fortunately, serious injury was reported in only 3% of these accidents. Vehicle damage was more frequent, with over 86% experiencing damage; 60% reported over \$2,000 in damage. Nearly three fourths (72%) said they have had near-accidents with deer and 76% know someone who has had such an accident.

It is often observed that motor vehicles are the only predators left to routinely kill deer and the survey shows that nearly 30% of deer involved in car collisions died on the spot and another 34% were seriously injured but ran away from the accident scene. Only 8% of respondents said the deer were unhurt; 30% did not know the fate of deer involved in their accident.

Impact of Deer on Forest Health

Residents seem fairly well informed about the impact of deer on forest health: almost 80% said they are aware that deer are having an impact on forest health through their consumption of young trees. Over 70% were aware that deer eat understory plants and shrubs, destroying habitat of some animals (such as songbirds). About 60% reported observing a reduction of the forest understory: 47% reported “significant loss” while only 25% had observed no loss.

Experience with Lyme Disease

One-third (33%) of residents have had one or more family members who have experienced Lyme disease; a third of these residents were not treated at an early stage and a third are still experiencing long-term chronic impact from the disease. Nearly 60% of those who were infected were treated at an early stage, which is an important step in combating the progression of the disease and reducing the risk of long-term impact.

Outlook on Deer Management

One of the most important findings from the survey is that Great Falls residents want to ensure that our forests remain an integral part of our environment into the future and believe control of the deer population to be an important objective. A large majority of respondents (81%) said that management of the deer population could improve the health of local woodlands by ensuring future tree growth (63% strongly agree, 19% agree). Only 7% of respondents disagreed. In a similar vein, 82% support “an objective of reducing the deer population in the Great Falls area”; 10% do not support that goal and 7% are undecided. While Fairfax County and the Commonwealth of Virginia have been involved in deer management programs for many years, respondents (62%) do not feel that these efforts to control deer in the parks has been effective outside of the parks. Moreover, 78% say that more should be done to reduce deer populations outside the boundaries of local parks; 12% disagree and 10% are unsure.

Options to Control Deer Populations

The survey sought residents’ views on types of programs to reduce the deer population. This section showed that there is widespread support for a range of steps that will curb deer populations outside the local parks. In order of their level of support they are:

- Enforce current laws against feeding wild deer (for: 73%; opposed: 11%)
- Trained and licensed archery hunters culling deer on private property (for: 62%; opposed: 24%)
- Support of non-lethal methods – not necessarily to exclude lethal methods (for: 59%; opposed: 16%)
- Monitor deer activity on private property (for: 55%; opposed 16%)
- Trained and licensed firearm marksmen culling deer on private property (for: 50%; opposed: 24%) and
- Hunter training programs for local residents (for: 40%; opposed 37%).

There is strong support for lethal methods to control the deer population:

- 358 people (59%) expressed support for non-lethal methods. Of these, only 25% (15 points of the 59% or 91 people) were opposed to lethal methods. The other 75% (45 points of the 59% or 267 people) expressed support or openness to lethal methods.
- Sentiment for lethal methods outnumbered opposition. For example, those supporting bow hunting were 62% of respondents (380 people) while those opposed were 24% (148 people). Strong support for lethal methods outnumbered strong opposition by roughly 4:1.

An interesting category in the poll showed residents open to all these programs if they are “sensible”, leaving leeway in shaping future responses to deer population growth.

Observations

Based on the survey, the following observations can be made that may influence further actions in Great Falls:

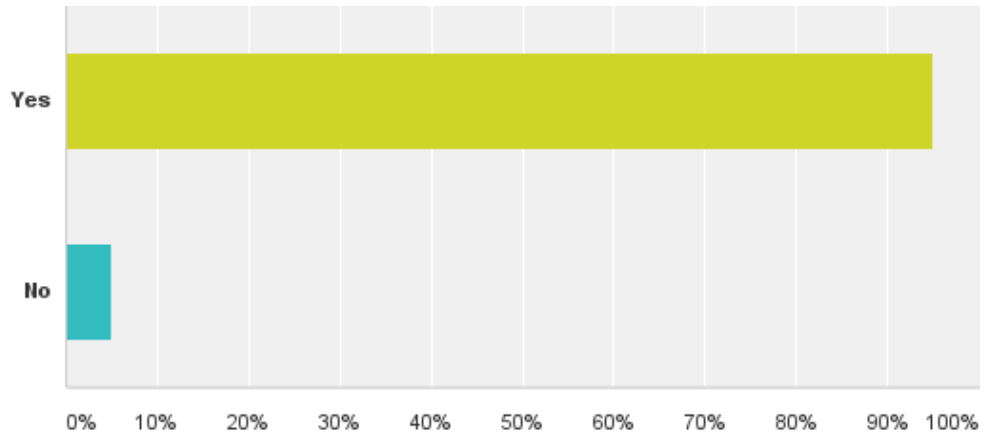
- The prevalence of deer/human interaction and related damage is high:
 - 95% experience deer feeding in their yards
 - 75% experience yard damage from deer other than feeding
 - 80% have acted to reduce deer damage in their yard, investing in fences, sprays and other measures
 - 44% have had a vehicular deer accident, with 86% of these involving damage to the vehicle and 28% involving human injury (mostly minor, fortunately).
 - 72% have had one or more “near accidents” involving deer
 - 33% of respondents have had at least 1 case of Lyme disease in their family, with 30% of these experiencing long-term chronic impacts.
- 83% support reducing the deer population
- 82% believe that deer population management could improve the health of local forests
- 78% say that more should be done to reduce the deer population on private property.

Next Steps

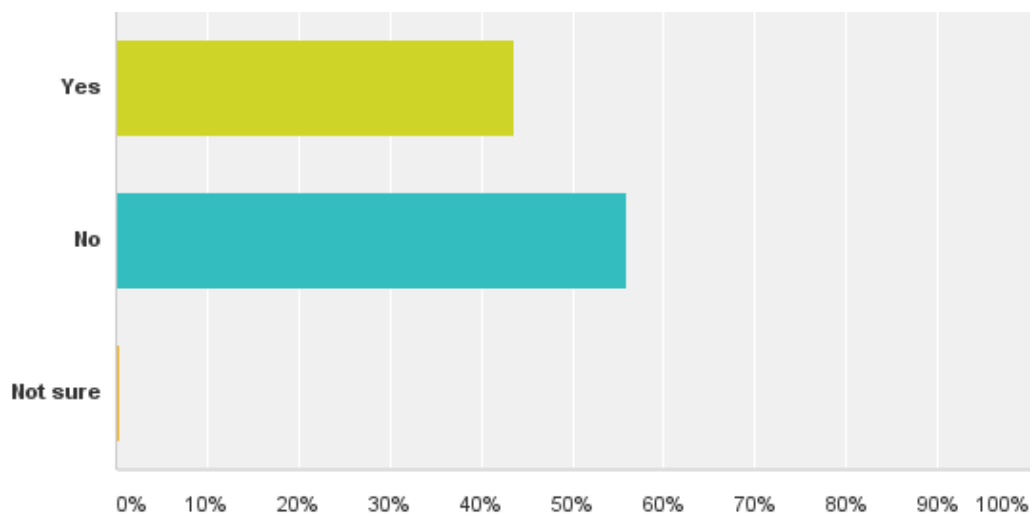
In the next year, GFCA will continue to discuss deer issues in community meetings so that residents are fully educated and there may be established a range of “sensible” programs with community-wide support that lead to a reduction in the deer population and a resurgence in forest health.

Appendix

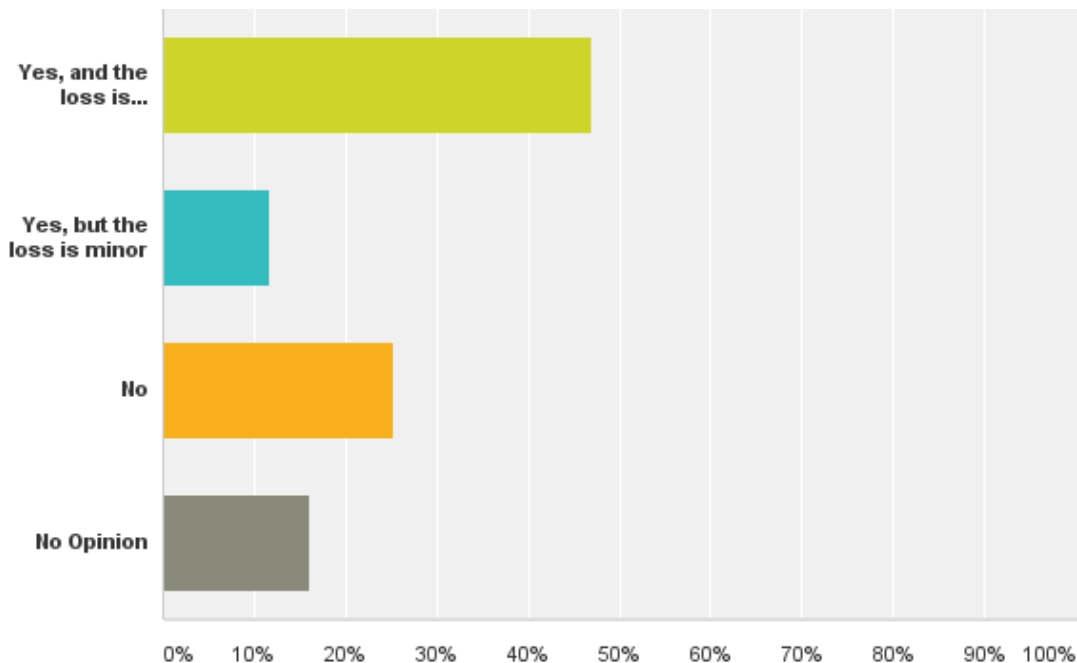
Q9: Have you seen, or seen evidence of, deer feeding on your property in the past year?



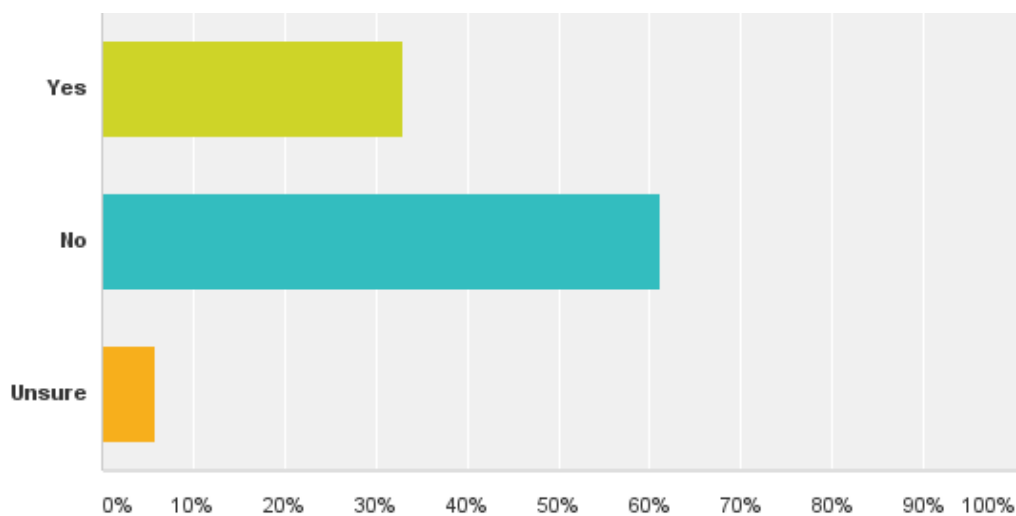
Q13: Have you had a vehicular accident with a deer? (i.e. a deer collision whether or not serious)



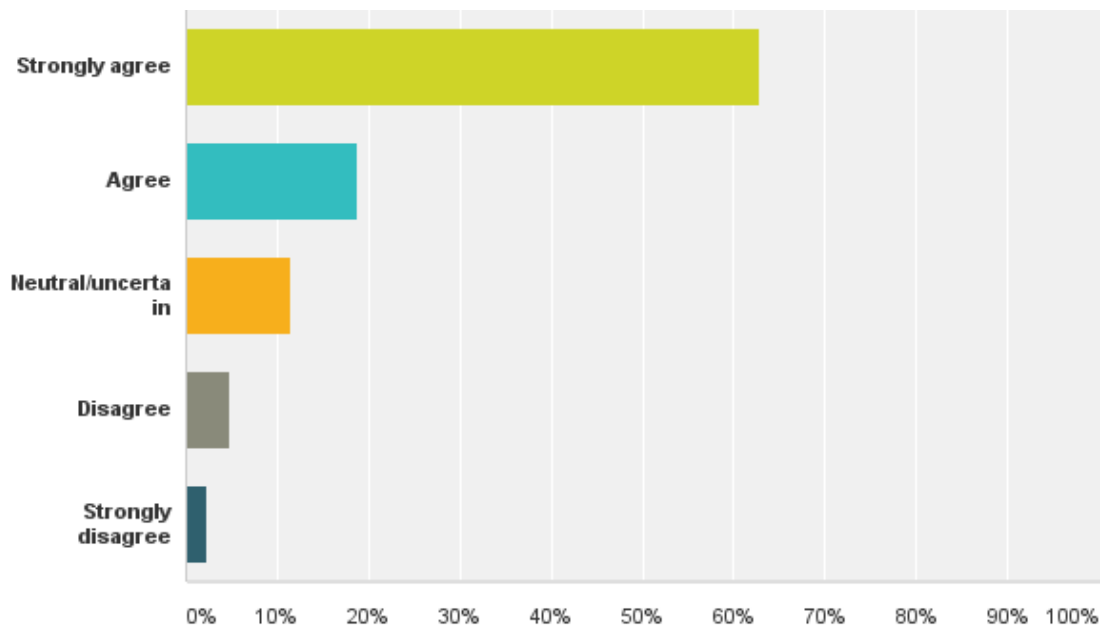
Q19: The understory is the segment of the forest below the large tree canopy – small trees, shrubs and undergrowth. Have you observed loss of woodlands understory?



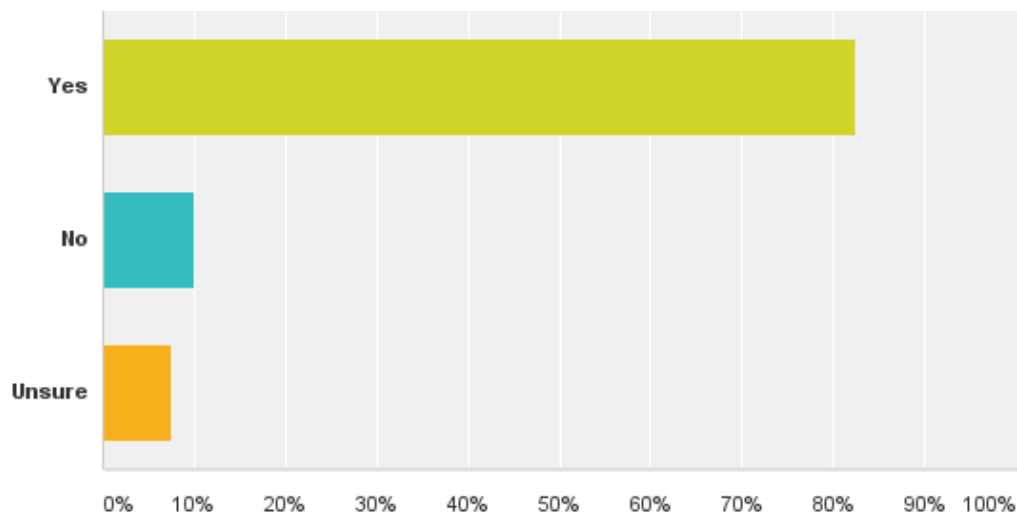
Q20: Have you or someone in your family had Lyme disease?



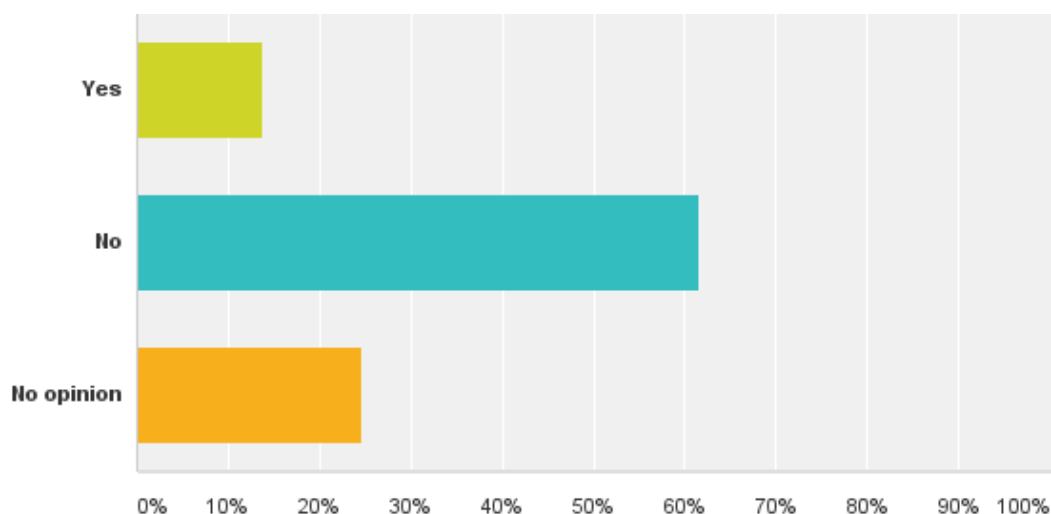
Q23: Do you think that deer population management could improve the health of our woodlands by ensuring future tree and plant growth?



Q25: Would you support an objective of reducing the deer population in the Great Falls area?



Q26: Fairfax County and the Northern Virginia Regional Parks Authority both allow deer hunting in their parks each year. In your opinion, has this program been effective in controlling deer in our area?



Q27: Do you think more should be done to reduce the deer population outside the boundaries of our local parks?

