

Great Falls group favors deer hunting to spare forests, motorists

by **BRIAN TROMPETER**, Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, January 22, 2015 6:30 am

Christine Sullivan had high hopes for landscaping when she moved to a 2-acre property in Great Falls several years ago, but hungry deer gobbled up all her plantings except for ones with thorns or prickly flowers.

“I saw deer every day and saw their droppings on the lawn all over,” she said. “I threw my hands up and said, ‘Somebody’s got to help me!’”

Sullivan turned to the non-profit group Green Fire, which supports the use of archers to pare back the deer population.

Sullivan let archers associated with Green Fire hunt on her property last September and they harvested six does, which equates to about 18 deer if one assumes the killed animals would have birthed 12 fawns in the coming year. All harvested deer were donated to Hungry for the Hungry, a food charity.

Deer have ravaged the region’s forest understory, harming tree growth and allowing invasive plant species – which deer tend to detest – to flourish, said retired environmental scientist Jerry Peters, Green Fire’s founder and director.

Green Fire encourages systematic archery hunting on private properties throughout Great Falls. Harvests in isolated areas do not prevent deer from finding shelter elsewhere, Peters said.

The organization favors methods implemented successfully at Fairfax County parks. County officials have conducted deer-management efforts in county parks since 1998, a year after a Great Falls librarian was killed in a vehicle-deer collision.

Fairfax County police with rifles have hunted deer in some parks. Following unsuccessful archery hunts in 2002 and 2003, officials had better luck with a pilot archery-hunting program begun in 2009. In fiscal



Deer Controversy in McLean

Whitetail deer, such as these photographed on Skyline Drive in early September 2012, were hunted by archers at Scotts Run Nature Preserve in McLean under the Fairfax County Deer Management Program. (Photo by Brian Trompeter)

year 2014, archers harvested 848 deer at 27 parks and failed to retrieve just 31 other deer that they shot, according to the county's Web site.

Safety – for hunters and residents – is paramount. Hunters who have shown proficiency with their crossbows or compound bows anchor themselves securely in tree stands and shoot their arrows and bolts at deer on the ground, thus minimizing the chance the projectiles will travel farther and strike unintended objects.

Hunters shoot at deer no more than 30 yards away and retrieve all arrows or bolts fired, to prevent injury to others later. Using lighted nocks (i.e., the notched rear part of the arrow or bolt into which the bowstring is placed) makes the latter task easier.

Hunting advocates showed an eight-minute-long, edited version of “Lords of Nature,” a program showing how Yellowstone National Park's ecosystem benefited when wolves were reintroduced. The wolves culled the park's overabundant elk population, which allowed aspen and willow trees to grow and helped other animal species thrive.

But the only predator for deer in Fairfax County is cars, said Bill Canis, vice president of the Great Falls Citizens Association (GFCA), which has been raising public awareness of the issue.

“We need a different kind of predator: the hunter,” Canis said.

Hunting supporters cited results from a spring 2014 GFCA community survey, in which 95 percent of the 681 respondents had seen evidence that deer had nibbled plants on their properties and 73 percent had espied deer daily.

“When you have an overpopulation of deer, they're obviously going to eat,” Great Falls resident and archer Matt Allison. “The forest can't sustain that. It impacts the entire ecosystem.”

Forty-four percent of survey takers reported having vehicle accidents involving deer, but luckily only 3 percent of those cases were severe, Canis said.

In addition to denuding forests and menacing traffic, deer also harbor ticks that carry Lyme disease, hunting supporters said. One-third of survey takers said at least one family member had experienced the disease, which can cause chronic health problems if not treated early.

Hunting supporters were pleasantly surprised when 75 percent of survey takers favored – or said they would be open to – lethal methods to control the deer population. Fifty-nine percent of survey respondents favored using non-lethal methods, but that figure also includes residents who support hunting as well, Canis said.

Anti-hunting activists sometimes have protested such methods in years past, but their opposition is not as

strong now, Peters said.

“The people who are opposed to hunting are getting quieter and quieter,” he said. “They’ve seen the facts. They’re not as active and noisy as they used to be.”

Not all groups have ceased their opposition, however.

“Bow hunting is one of the most cruel attempts at wildlife control,” said Kristin Simon, cruelty casework manager for Norfolk-based People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). “So many deer are wounded and never found and are left to die slowly from their injuries.”

Lethal methods do not control wildlife population effectively because when animals are killed or removed from the environment, the food supply spikes and this prompts accelerated breeding among remaining animals, she said.

PETA instead recommends controlling deer by trimming back vegetation along roadways, planting native species instead of ornamental plants and never feeding wildlife.

“Wildlife populations will manage themselves without humans’ cruel meddling,” Simon said.