

Officials consider deer hunting in Eagle Creek Park



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(Photo: Kelly Wilkinson/The Star)

Could camouflage-clad archers soon be perched in tree stands in Eagle Creek Park hunting white-tailed deer?

They very well could if city officials follow the recommendations of a Purdue University ecologist and state wildlife officials.

Michael Jenkins, a Purdue associate professor of forest ecology, recently released a study showing that 17 years of hunting in Indiana's state parks has helped restore the health of park vegetation damaged by deer populations.

Eagle Creek Park, where hunting has been discussed but never carried out, is another matter. The city's biggest park has 10 times as many deer as the state parks Jenkins and his team of researchers studied. And the voracious herbivores are changing the plant ecology by stripping the land of certain species, such as wildflowers, and leaving others such as garlic mustard and Japanese stilt grass.

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"There are some pretty obvious effects of overabundant deer down there," Jenkins said.

City officials agree with Jenkins' findings, and state wildlife officials recommend hunting as the cheapest and most effective method at culling a deer population.

And that almost certainly invites controversy.

While state parks routinely cull deer, including Fort Harrison State Park in Lawrence, animal lovers opposed hunting when the Eagle Creek deer problem was last discussed in 2012.

City officials in Bloomington have fought repeatedly over the issue. And at least one Indianapolis animals-rights group already is promising to oppose any hunting at Eagle Creek.

City staffers say they're not ready to take aim at a single solution. They're mulling options that could include hiring sharpshooters or using contraception. If hunting is ultimately chosen, said Scott Manning, a spokesman for the city's Office of Sustainability, the city will conduct "significant public outreach" for park goers and for those living nearby.

'The understory is almost nonexistent'

The city has had discussions about the problems at Eagle Creek Park for at least 10 years, said Manning, but talks have gone nowhere.

In September 2012, the Indy Parks & Recreation Board heard a presentation from the Eagle Creek Park Foundation Citizens Advisory Committee, including heated testimony from animal-lovers opposed to any hunting in the park. In May 2013, the city paid the Purdue ecologist \$3,900 to complete a vegetation study as part of its five-year review of habitat in the park.

In a research paper provided to the city in October, Jenkins wrote that a survey of plants in Eagle Creek's Spring Pond and Eagle's Crest nature preserves showed severe damage caused by deer.

Jenkins found that both nature preserves were dominated by plant species that deer don't like to eat. Plus, tree and plant species deer enjoy eating, such as wild flowers, were hard to find or chewed down to nubs.

"You can see some pretty widespread areas where the understory is almost nonexistent," Manning said, referring the layer of vegetation beneath the main canopy of a forest.

Manning said any plan would need to be approved by The Indy Parks & Recreation Board. The City-County Council also would need to make an exception to an ordinance that prohibits hunting in any city park.

"Trying to satisfy a few blood-thirsty people"

White-tailed deer numbers have exploded in recent decades, particularly in urban areas and parks, where the only real predators are vehicle bumpers.

State wildlife officials say hunting is always their preferred method to thin populations. After all, you don't have to pay hunters; some are even willing to pay a small fee in exchange for the chance at a freezer full of fresh venison.

Josh Griffin, the DNR's south private lands regional supervisor, said that more expensive methods proposed by animal-rights activists — including contraception drugs and sterilization — haven't been proven effective in free-ranging deer herds, though there are ongoing research projects on the East Coast that might some day prove differently.

If hunting is officially proposed at Eagle Creek, city officials are certain to deal with push back from park users, such as Larry Peavler who lives nearby and spends dozens of days at the park each year.

He said he's vehemently opposed to killing animals that draw thousands of visitors to the park each year.

"They're trying to satisfy a few blood-thirsty people," he said. "That's all they're trying to do."

At least one animal rights group also is opposed to the idea on its face.

Joel Kerr, executive director of the Indiana Animal Rights Alliance, said he's extremely skeptical of the DNR's motives.

"The DNR has a built-in bias and a compelling reason to side with the hunters because they make money on selling the licenses," Kerr wrote in an email. "I have still not seen any valid scientific evidence of overpopulation or biodiversity issues that can be directly attributed to the deer. Their real motives of simply wanting to hunt."

Kerr said he's instantly skeptical of studies such as Jenkins' that don't actually count the number of deer but conclude they're overpopulated.

Similar arguments have erupted in Bloomington, where residents and city officials have butted heads over deer for years. Some have complained deer are so overpopulated in town that they're causing too many car accidents and destroying backyard landscaping. A vocal cadre of animal-rights activists contend the complaints are unwarranted and the deer need to be left alone.

The Bloomington City Council commissioned a deer taskforce to figure out what to do. Griffin, who sat on the taskforce, said it examined "every possible solution," including reintroduction of predators, euthanasia, contraception, trap and relocation, sharp shooting, hunting, chemical repellants and deer fences.

Griffin said the taskforce in 2012 settled on hiring sharpshooters to cull deer in Griffy Lake Nature Preserve, a popular 1,192-acre park on the outskirts of town. It also proposed archery hunts, deer euthanasia and trapping and removal in certain areas.

Two years later, the Bloomington City Council has only pushed ahead with one option: Hiring a sharpshooter to kill deer in the nature preserve.

In an example of just how politically contentious killing deer can be, this spring, Mayor Mark Krusan, an animal-rights advocate, vetoed the council's vote on sharpshooting, but the council overturned it.

Local media outlets reported it was the first time in at least 13 years that the council had overturned a mayor's veto. Meanwhile, city officials are still working out the details of when the sharpshooters will start taking aim.

Griffin said deer can inflame passions in a way few species can, and Bloomington, a liberal college town, had more than its share of people adamantly opposed to killing their beloved deer.

"People likened them to being treated like the native Americans," Griffin said. "People compared them to soldiers; people drew a lot of conclusions that

weren't exactly intuitive, but you could tell they were passionate about their beliefs."

A call for balance

Whatever the city decides is best for Eagle Creek Park, Jenkins, the Purdue ecologist, said his research speaks for itself.

Prior to Indiana allowing deer hunting in state parks in the 1990s, white-tailed deer populations in parks had so swollen that many species of native wildflowers such as trillium and lilies had largely disappeared. Oak and ash tree seedlings had given way to trees such as paw paw, which deer don't like to eat.

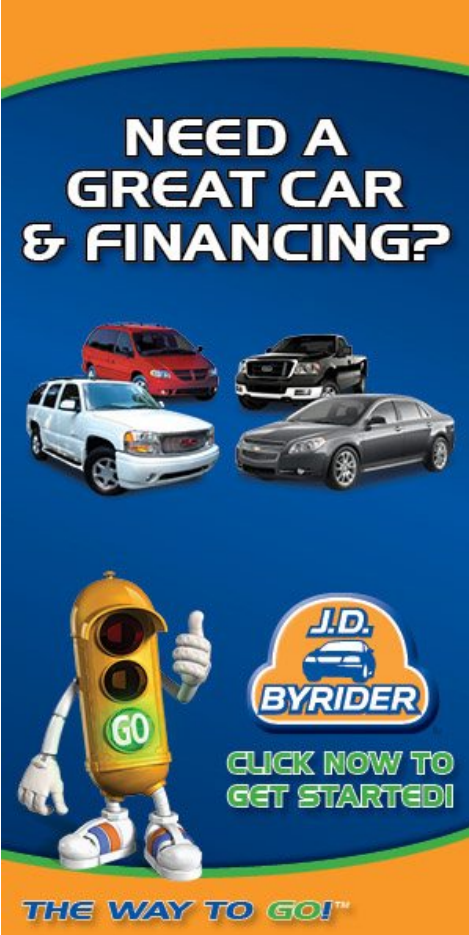
Jenkins said that part of the challenge of persuading urban forest users and anti-hunters that over-abundant deer are harming a park is because to an untrained-eye, a forest overbrowsed by deer looks manicured and stereotypically park-like.

Plus, deer also eat plant species that humans find unpleasant such as briars and poison ivy. But Jenkin said native wild flowers can be tough to find in these uncluttered, deer-groomed forests.

"I like deer, but I also wildflowers," Jenkins said. "I think our parks can have both."

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