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English 10

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The Decline of the Deer

It was a crisp cool morning; you could see your breath freeze as it exited your lungs. There was a light cloud cover that gave the ground an eerie feeling. The familiar sounds of your boots going crunch, crunch reached your ears. It was a perfect day to go deer hunting. Then you hear another footstep, one that does not belong to you. Your heart starts to beat faster, your breath quickens and you bring your gun up to your shoulder. You peer down the sights and see your trophy.... If we don’t take more interest in our natural wonders, they could all disappear one day. Clearcutting, predators and climate change are the leading contributors to the decline of the deer population in New Brunswick. We have to act now!

Over the last few years, the deer population in New Brunswick has taken a steep decline. Climate change has had an outstanding impact on our deer herds. New Brunswick’s provincial deer biologist, Rob Cumberland, states that hunters can conclude that this deer season will not surpass any previous records in bagged deer due to the fact that the winter last year was not survivable (Huras). Cumberland also predicts that the number of deer shot in this upcoming season will drop by the hundreds. There have already been four different hunting zones closed for the 2009 deer season, due to the lack of prey for the hunters. Furthermore, in 12 other hunting zones there were no doe tags issued to the hunters in an effort to bring the

deer population back. “Hunters registered a total of 7,753 deer bagged in New Brunswick last year. That number will be around the 6,500 mark this year, according to Cumberland” (Huras). Consequently that is a decrease of about 1,253 deer shot in New Brunswick from last year.

Additionally, snowfall amounts have recently mounted resulting in a significant fall of the deer population. Violent storms for a long period of time make living conditions harsh and unforgiving for our wildlife, specifically the deer because they are not strong enough to fight the deep snow (Huras). In 2005, New Brunswick received 148 centimetres of snow throughout the winter (*National Climate Data and Information*). The next year the province had 153 cm of snow on the ground. These numbers increased greatly in 2008 when New Brunswick received 390 cm. This number went off the charts in 2007 with a total of 427 cm of snow (*National Climate Data and Information*). Then the Department of Natural Resources noticed an amazing decrease in the deer population due to the increased snowfall amounts.

At the same time, global warming was fast becoming a worldwide issue. Clear cutting and deforestation are leading factors in the destruction of our natural world. But global warming is not the only problem that clear cutting is creating. When we cut down hectares upon hectares of forest, our deer are suffering. Studies show that after an area has been logged, the food supply for the deer swell beyond the original quantity and nutrition. But this improvement in feed is only temporary, lasting at the most two to three years. But with the short growing season in New Brunswick, these plants do not have enough time to develop completely (Department of Forest Resources). These food supplies are all good during the dry and warm months of the year, but once winter arrives these food supplies quickly cover with snow, making them useless to the deer. Where a rich boreal forest once stood is now replaced with an open area, where the deer are forced to move because of a shortage of protection from the elements.

According to the Department of Natural Resources 60,000 hectares of crown land is cut per year (“Crown Lands at a Glance”). New Brunswick is currently home to 3, 306,549 hectares of crown land. Approximately two per cent of this land is harvested each year. So at this rate, considering that it takes 30 to 40 years for a clearcut to rebuild and mature, that means that 60-80% of our forests are new growth every year. This leaves the deer with 20-40% of mature forests to survive and escape winter.

Clearcutting affects aspects of nature that are greater than we are. It not only affects the surface of an ecosystem, it does greater damage than we are ready to believe. “Clearcutting harms wildlife, water quality and biodiversity” (Department of Forest Resources). We have to take into consideration the greater picture before we demolish our forests. There are alternatives to clearcutting, such as thinning and select cutting. Thinning is when the forestry workers cut roads or lines through the forest. These roads are approximately 25-50 meters from each other. The reason for this particular type of deforestation is to allow sunlight to reach the earth beneath the canopy of trees. This has a minimal effect on the ecosystem and you can produce close to the same amount of logs by this method (Department of Forest Resources).

Select cutting is when the loggers leave some trees standing after they are finished cutting. This still leaves a speed bump in the ecosystem but does not produce the same damage as clearcutting (Department of Forest Resources). Our deer need these

natural forests for protection, feed and a place to rest. When humans cut down a softwood thicket, they hurt the deer in a number of ways. One is the protection from a severe storm. Another is a backup food source, and lastly a place to hide from predators and even mates in some cases. Why are we so selfish that we destroy and hurt other species when the reasons behind this destruction are not needed? Surely we can survive on less paper, wood and other products that are made through the trees that give us life. Deer do not need our protection; they need the resources that we are taking from them.

Beside the human destruction of resources, the deer must fear their natural predators as well, the coyotes. Normally these deadly beasts run in packs, which only add to the antagonising fear that traps the deer when they are near a coyote. Predator control is usually activated to help the fawn population. In some cases where the deer is scarce, the coyotes prevent the population from increasing and may also be causing the decline of the deer herds. This scenario is often referred to as a “predator pit” (Koerth). The deer simply cannot increase due to the population of predators.

Most studies show that coyotes cannot possibly have a lasting and great impact on deer herds. These documents read that coyotes weigh between 20-25 pounds and cannot normally catch a deer on bare ground, concluding that coyotes have no impact on deer herds. These biologists cannot believe that an animal so small can kill a fully mature deer (Koerth). This may

be true for the more southern ranges for white-tailed deer, but what about the northeastern parts of New Brunswick and Quebec. The eastern coyote can weigh around 55 pounds and higher. This coyote is a crossbreed between a coyote and a timber wolf. These huge beasts can certainly kill a deer, but when winter arrives with freezing cold temperatures and deep snow, these coyotes can have a long lasting and immediate impact on the deer population (Schmidt). Researchers came to a startling conclusion that the eastern coyote preys on mature and healthy bucks and does. Because of the rough environment in Northeastern New Brunswick, it is hard to maintain coyote populations, “And due to the rough terrain, remote location of some of the yards and harsh weather conditions, the only really dependable coyote control tool is the snare” says Bob Noonan, trapping expert and field editor for the trapper and predator caller magazine (Schmidt).

According to Noonan a good example of predator control is what happened in the Gaspe Peninsula in Quebec, just north of the Maine border. In 1986, the Peninsula had a deer population of about 15,000 whitetails and a low coyote density. But after a couple of harsh winters, and intense clear cutting, the coyote population grew and destroyed the deer. In 1991, approximately 500 deer remained on the peninsula. The government then banned deer hunting, put strict laws on logging and created a trapping program to eliminate the coyotes. Eighty trappers were trained and assigned to the peninsula. This worked and in three years the trappers caught 1,500 coyotes and the deer increased to 2,000 whitetails again. This improvement was only temporary though, as the sharing program was rebutted and the coyote

population grew again. There now remains a trapping program on the peninsula today, which helps to keep the deer population growing (Schmidt).

If this technique works, then why are we just allowing the coyotes to eliminate the deer? Quebec has roughly the same habitat and weather conditions as New Brunswick, so why

hasn’t our government done anything to help our deer? It is not the hunters that are causing the problem, it is the coyotes.

It is hard enough to live with the constant fear of being killed by predators, so why are we making life even more difficult for the deer? Climate change is a natural occurrence but we are pushing it too far with global warming. Clearcutting can and should be stopped. If we don’t take more interest in our wildlife, future generations may not have the opportunity to view these magnificent animals as we do.

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