

USP and the Deer Wars - Ten Years Later  
By Dr. N. Charles Bolgiano (2007)

Editor's Note: Much has changed over the last decade. Although many of us were not involved in the beginning, our current battle in the Pennsylvania Deer Wars started about 10 years ago. Today, we have all new PGC Commissioners, changes in the leadership of state government, and a host of new USP members who may not be aware of how or why our current debate in deer management began and the impacts on our current management decisions. To remind us where we have been, I asked Charlie to provide his historical insight into past deer management issues. After reading his thoughts, you will have a different perspective of deer management. And before you ask, the answer is yes - we have already passed this information along to all interested parties.

### Introduction

I welcome the opportunity to reconstruct the PGC's deer management issues. I chose the word "reconstruct" as much of the story did not emerge until years later and many aspects still remain hidden from public scrutiny. Every citizen of Pennsylvania should be stunned by the intentional withholding of critical information regarding our multi-billion dollar hunting tradition.

Incorrect, misleading, or withheld information (often intentional) within the PGC remains widespread. The most incredible case in point was that neither the citizens of Pennsylvania nor the PGC commissioners knew Maximum Sustained Yield (MSY) had been the deer management philosophy since the early 1980s; or that each management unit had been assigned a PGC goal based on only 50 percent of the allowable deer density that could impact forest regeneration. Likewise, none were aware the deer living in non-forested areas (the best deer habitat) were not included in the PGC goal, but were accounted for by allowing the estimated deer density measured in deer per forested square mile (dpfsm) to exceed the PGC goal, sometimes by factors of four.

In retrospect, I remain convinced that if the PGC had been truthful with the citizens of Pennsylvania that the current crisis in deer management would never have occurred.

### Setting the Scene

During the 1980s and 1990s, the PGC successfully employed the deer management philosophy referred to as Maximum Sustained Yield (MSY). The principle of MSY limits the deer population to optimize reproduction. The optimum (or maximum) number of fawns for one year provides the maximum number of antlered bucks for following years. Like most wildlife managers, the PGC assumed MSY would be about 50 percent of the carrying capacity.

The implementation of MSY was an overwhelming success in wildlife management, deer harvests nearly doubled during the 1980s and then stabilized in the 1990s as both the antlered and antlerless harvests benefited from the dramatic increases in fawn production with deer densities at one-half the carrying capacity - a counterintuitive outcome. Higher deer harvests are required to offset higher reproduction to maintain a stable deer population.

MSY also provided balanced female-to-male ratios and healthy deer populations. The pre-season population had three females to every two males - one legal antlered buck and one fawn buck. In other words at the start of the season, Pennsylvania hunters observed one antlered buck per four antlerless deer. The deer herd was very healthy with fawn reproduction rates (fawns having fawns) of 30 percent or greater in 44 of 67 county management units, and adult female reproduction of 1.5 fawns per female or greater in 48 of 67 county management units.

In fact under MSY, Pennsylvania sportsmen were providing the citizens of Pennsylvania a valuable ecological service by controlling huntable white-tailed deer populations at only 50 percent of carrying capacity while at the same time setting record deer harvests. A WIN-WIN situation!

### The Confession and the Deer Management Working Group

Despite the overwhelming success, the two PGC employees responsible for the implementation of MSY did not tell anyone (for nearly 20 years) that huntable white-tailed deer populations were being maintained at only 50 percent of carrying capacity.

With the preceding lack of knowledge, an effort emerged in the mid-1990s to increase antlerless allocations to reduce deer densities to the PGC goal. Given that deer densities were already at 50 percent of carrying capacity and that Pennsylvania hunters had not previously observed any negative impact on deer health or adverse effects to forest regeneration, the reduction effort was aggressively resisted.

In conjunction with efforts to reduce deer densities in the mid-1990s, the PGC requested a license increase. As a condition of receiving any license increase, the PGC at the urging of the Pennsylvania legislature suspended further reduction. As expected, the suspension lasted only one year until the license increase was approved.

After what the PGC perceived as the misguided influence by the state legislature in a wildlife management issue, the PGC formed the Deer Management Working Group (DMWG) where the concerns of "other stakeholders" could be considered. These "other stakeholders" outnumbered hunters by over four to one.

I served as the USP representative in the Deer Management Working Group during the group's existence (1997 to 1999). As expected, the atmosphere was generally hostile to the USP position that (other than populations that were currently not accessible to hunters) the overall deer management philosophy had been biologically sound. True to form, a vocal minority blamed our white-tailed deer for nearly every forest related problem for the last 70 years. Their logic was rather simple:

- (1) the statewide over-winter deer density = 34 dpfsm = 900,000 deer
- (2) the PGC goal (maximum carrying capacity) = 21 dpfsm = 557,000 deer

(3) therefore, Pennsylvania forests were carrying over one-third of a million deer above the carrying capacity - - and Pennsylvania hunters were unreasonable for insisting on maintaining deer populations above the carrying capacity.

NOTE: As discussed in other articles, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) forest certification and demand for additional deer reduction was based on the same flawed logic.

Even after one of the PGC employees responsible for the implementation of MSY confessed that the PGC goal was based on only 50 percent of the allowable deer density that could impact forest regeneration, the vocal minority continued to insist the deer were still the problem. The worst offender was Cal DuBrock, the PGC's Wildlife Management Director since 1991 (and present), who personally briefs the PGC commissioners on all deer management issues and made the following statements at the Audubon conference in September 1999 (after the employee's MSY confession):

(1) "Commission goals, established in 1979, are set at the maximum number of deer that the forest can support over winter without adversely affecting tree regeneration."

(2) "We need to try and balance deer populations to satisfy diverse interests: hunters who want as high a density as possible, preferably at or above 'biological carrying capacity,' ..."

Another major problem occurred when the two PGC employees accounted for the deer living in non-forested areas by allowing the estimated deer density measured in deer per forested square mile (dpfsm) to exceed the PGC goal. As expected, the vocal minority (who refused to acknowledge MSY) deliberately compared the inflated dpfsm densities with scientific enclosure studies to falsely claim actual deer densities were in excess of levels that would cause adverse effects to forest regeneration.

Shortly after the confession, the Deer Management Working Group was disbanded and Gary Alt was appointed Deer Project Manager. Recommendations from the DMWG based on the acknowledgment of MSY were presented to the PGC Commissioners, but mostly ignored. Two of the most important recommendations were to increase the number of management units beyond 67 and to establish Citizen Task Forces (CTFs).

As a respected broadcaster says, "And now you know the rest of the story."

In summary, the PGC has obviously lost its way by misleading the citizens of Pennsylvania and by withholding information critical for responsible scientific deer management - which is the simple reason for our lawsuit.

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