

I would like to tell the story of the bait and shoot approach as it has transpired in another community, where I once lived (until I moved to Ithaca, NY in 2004) and where my parents still reside.

The town that I speak of is Amherst, NY, a suburb of Buffalo, roughly three hours from Ithaca, and it, too has had a longstanding controversy regarding the presence of deer in its midst. In 2001, “at considerable taxpayer expense,”<sup>1</sup> the Amherst Town Board contracted with a Michigan-based consulting firm to devise a plan to minimize deer-vehicle accidents. This firm, White Water Associates, studied and analyzed the situation for more than one year, until it finally released its recommendation: a “carefully monitored three-year trial of non-lethal measures before resorting to killing...[the] deer.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite this objective, unbiased expert opinion, most of the Amherst Town Board members were vehemently in favor of a bait and shoot program. At all of the Town Board meetings that I attended from 2002-2004, the community members in attendance and the Board Supervisor were overwhelmingly in favor of using non-lethal methods, and so the rest of the Board agreed that it would explore these alternatives for one year, starting on January 21, 2003.

However, the committee authorized to work on non-lethal methods didn't “begin work until late... [that] fall,”<sup>3</sup> and the non-lethal methods were not given a chance. As of January 2004, the Town Board “authorized shooting deer in designated baiting zones.”<sup>4</sup> It was just after this that the chairperson of the Amherst Deer Management Committee, Iris F. Skoog, along with another member, Peter Warn (who had been chairperson for five previous years), resigned in protest of the implementation of the bait and shoot program. As Skoog explained in her resignation letter, “To me, it is obvious that our committee has existed primarily to pay lip service to non-lethal methods.”<sup>5</sup>

And so began the bait and shoot program in Amherst, until the following year, in February 2005, at which time, “Amherst Police suspended the town's controversial bait and shoot deer management program after an errant shot by a police officer passed through a bedroom window of an East Amherst home and lodged in a wall.”<sup>6</sup> A father and his son sat just downstairs from that window, and one or both of them could have easily been injured, or worse, by this needless “accident.” A full investigation was made, but despite the imminent danger of bullets being shot at close range to homes and residents, even by “sharpshooters,” the program resumed.

Three years later, with a total of 1,191 deer killed through the bait and shoot program, an article appeared on March 19, 2008 in the local town newspaper, the Amherst Bee, stating that, “deer-

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<sup>1</sup> The Buffalo News Inc., August 15, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The Buffalo News Inc., January 27, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> The Buffalo News Inc., February 6, 2005.

vehicle accidents remain a problem in town.”<sup>7</sup> It describes how a Town Council Member and the Police Chief now wanted to look into “installing laser fences, sensors or other equipment,”<sup>8</sup> aiming to decrease the number of this type of accident. Such equipment had been reported on in a CBS News feature in January 2008 and had been shown to lower such accidents in the towns that had tried them.

Despite the Police Chief’s recommendation to explore non-lethal methods of reducing deer-vehicle collisions, on December 1, 2008 a Council Member brought forth a resolution that “reactivates the town’s long-dormant Deer Management Committee.”<sup>9</sup> The new idea, proposed in order to control Amherst’s “persistent deer problem,”<sup>10</sup> was to farm deer like cattle by fencing in the deer, “where they could be managed like other domestic herds grown for their meat.”<sup>11</sup> This solution was taken from the way that New Zealand dealt with their deer population. Unfortunately for the proponents of this suggestion, NY State’s Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) rejected it “by stating that it is illegal to trap and raise wild white-tailed deer”<sup>12</sup> because they are placed in the public trust and owned by the residents of New York State. This means, said Tim Spierto of the DEC, that “it would be against New York State’s environmental conservation law to allow the deer to be possessed by any private party.”<sup>13</sup>

So, five years after the bait and shoot program was initiated, with more than one thousand deer killed, years of meetings, vast sums of money spent, and a near brush with a tragic accident, the town government of Amherst still has a bitterly divided community, still has failed to develop a successful strategy for reducing deer-vehicle collisions, and still has failed to implement cost-effective non-lethal methods with a proven track record of success.

What does this story tell us? Plenty.

- There are tried and true non-lethal methods recommended by professional ecologists that **work**.
- Another committee, this time from Cayuga Heights, NY seems to be pushing just as hard as Amherst for the “easiest” answer—bait and shoot—despite the many objections of a growing number of people in the community.
- Bait and shoot is dangerous. Not every bullet **ends up where it was aimed—we saw that firsthand in Amherst**.
- This is a national problem as evidenced by it being covered by CBS News, in a story that highlighted the effectiveness of non-lethal methods.
- The membership of the Amherst Deer Management Committees has continuously waxed and waned while bait and shoot continues, but the solutions have gotten further afield—as far as attempting to transplant deer farming from

<sup>7</sup> Amherst Bee, March 19, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> The Buffalo News Inc., December 2, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> The Buffalo News Inc., January 5, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

New Zealand—when noncontroversial and effective nonlethal methods are available here and now.

- As of this past year, Amherst still has a problem and now deer-vehicle accidents are **increasing**, despite the bait and shoot program having persisted for so many years.

I believe the story of the Town of Amherst, where the January 14, 2009 headline in the Amherst Bee was, “Number of deer/vehicle accidents increase for first time since 2003,”<sup>14</sup> serves as a cautionary tale for the village of Cayuga Heights.

I spoke to Skoog and Warn, both past chairpersons of the Amherst Deer Management Committee, and they each had information that could aid Cayuga Heights. Skoog pointed out that, although in both 1998, when Amherst spent \$25,000 on a local study, and 2001, when White Water Associates was paid \$50,000, many good non-lethal suggestions were advanced, Amherst did nothing to follow up on them.

Some of these suggestions included: blinking warning lights to be used during the more dangerous times of the year (fall and winter); lowering speed limits in areas where deer were known to congregate; actively patrolling and issuing speeding tickets where necessary; clearing vegetation and foliage from the sides of the road in needed areas, in order to provide motorists with a better view of on-coming deer; contraception for does; better fluorescent signage informing residents of where the danger zones were; distributing information for drivers to be on the look-out for more than one deer at a time, as they often travel in groups; and warning reflectors.

This last suggestion was studied at length by Warn, who found that the Strieter-Lite reflectors **did**, in fact, significantly lower the number of deer-vehicle collisions when properly maintained. He even found them in use on the NY State Thruway in at least three different areas, where the State Police continue to maintain them, despite the fact that no data has been released about them. Warn feels that it is imperative to study the problem scientifically—conduct analyses of deer-vehicle accidents, map out where they are taking place, and then relate them to vehicle speed, time of day, and season—and then use the data collected as a base point from where to start.

Skoog also said that the Town of Amherst residents have no knowledge as to when and where bait and shoot is going to be taking place, exactly as is planned by Cayuga Heights, and this led to at least one near-miss that the Amherst townspeople know of; however, it was not enough to stop the program from continuing. Cayuga Heights is much smaller in area, and the undeveloped areas which could be used to carry out a bait and shoot operation are several times smaller than those available in Amherst, where, even with the much larger wooded areas to work, a sharpshooter’s bullet still entered a home. Given Cayuga Heights’ high population density and lack of large wooded areas, it is hard to imagine how a shooting program could be considered acceptably safe, especially if residents will not even be told when and where the shooting will be done.

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<sup>14</sup> Amherst Bee, January 14, 2009.

As the story of the Town of Amherst illustrates, the bait and shoot solution is not one that works. That town is still struggling to come to a resolution to the problem as it looks back at more than ten years of mistakes: taxpayer-funded studies costing at least one hundred thousand dollars whose recommendations were then ignored; the acrimony and often raised voices of council members and townsfolk alike and the ill-will that lives on because of it; the promises to make efforts toward non-lethal solutions only to have the local legislators renege on them and turn back once more to the bait and shoot program; the danger of never knowing when or where the next bullet from a sharpshooter's gun might strike; and finally, the sheer futility of a town government bent on using the bait and shoot program that, instead, only sees its deer-vehicle collision numbers start to rise again, a full **five years** after initiating the program, while well-tested and utilized non-lethal methods sit gathering dust in the corner.

Will we sit idly by while the Cayuga Heights' trustees make the same mistakes?

Gabrielle Vehar  
Ithaca, NY