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Don't Blame the Deer

By **Matthew Scully** April 21, 2008 6:01 pm

In the Washington area, we are always hearing about the deer problem faced by suburban communities. The main complaint is the danger they pose to traffic. I wrote a piece on the subject in *The Washington Post* and received a flurry of letters from people angry at my seeming indifference to human safety, one woman telling me about her friends' daughter who had died in a deer-related car accident. Among the lesser complaints is that the deer are known to avail themselves of shrubbery adorning people's finely kept gardens, remorselessly nibbling away at the petunias and azaleas.

It is a serious and complicated situation, and I don't claim to have all the answers. The first question a reasonable person asks is why are deer suddenly darting into highways, like the one I saw writhing on an icy Route 267 in northern Virginia a few years ago. It's not as if they are irresistibly drawn to busy roads and terrifying cars and lights. If you were a deer, you would stay as far clear of highways and busy roads as you could, and that's exactly what deer do when left the alternative. That deer I saw had simply been looking for food, water and other deer, having been frightened off from somewhere else by trucks and dynamite and bulldozers. Or, as in the case of a friend of mine who collided with a deer further out near Leesburg, Virginia, the deer spring into busy unfenced roads in flight from hunters. Indeed, a study in Pennsylvania found that car insurance claims for deer-related accidents increase fivefold during hunting season.

The second question is, who are the chief complainers? The developers and

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a forest. I live on developed property. I live in civilization, and I am glad of it. But when you take and develop land you have to confront the simple fact that it causes the deer to scatter. You, the developer and renter or buyer, are therefore the morally responsible parties, just as you would be if the project left falling-rock hazards near busy roads.

The developers don't want to pay for fences, road-light systems alerting the deer to approaching cars, or vaccines to prevent fertilization (administered by treated feed or darts), all of which would serve the purpose quite well, and indeed are working already in places where they have been tried such as Gaithersburg, Maryland. Their line is "fences don't work," as if northern Virginia's bionic deer can scale any height — a claim easily enough refuted by noting how fences somehow seem to work when the aim is to make money by keeping the deer captive. Fences at hunting ranches seem to be doing the trick.

Local political authorities don't want to foot the bill for fences, road reflector systems, and a more rigorous enforcement of speed limits, nor to antagonize the developers who contribute generously to their campaigns. It seems cheaper to all parties concerned to just kill the deer. And why not make it fun, too, for the sportsmen, who inevitably have begun promoting "the suburban deer bowhunt." As it turns out even these managed hunts are problematic. The more deer they kill, the more space and food is left to the other deer, yielding over time more deer than before. The females reproduce in greater numbers, a phenomenon known as compensatory reproduction and observed in human populations, too, during wartime. To solve the problem with hunting alone, they'd have to wipe the creatures out by the thousands. Here, as reported by The Post, is how this question of dominion is being resolved:

"The first of eight managed hunts — designed to help winnow a deer population estimated at 25,000 — got Fairfax County's animal-control effort off to a slow start yesterday. ... 'It was a very nice day in the woods,' said Don Gantz, 53, of Fairfax, who bagged two deer — the only ones he saw. Gantz ... said he was about to give up at noon when two does cautiously came up to him, heads down. He shot both — a 108-pound pregnant doe and a 67-pound doe."

So there is our menace. Two does with their heads bowed. Approaching

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(selected by lottery) could find only ten of them. A few weeks later Fairfax County hired sharpshooters for the job, sending them in at night to avoid public notice. This time they could find just 107 deer in six days' worth of slaughter.

Wouldn't it be a lot easier, at least on one's conscience, to put up the roadside fences and lighting systems? We're talking about developments usually making the owners millions of dollars in sales or rental profits. Northern Virginia is the picture of modern prosperity, and few are prospering more than real estate developers and their clients. They can't spare a little of that wealth to protect the deer whose forest homes they have appropriated, make a little room in all their big designs and master plans for creatures who, before the development, weren't causing harm to anyone?

As for the homeowners, are azaleas really worth that scene described above? Are there really people so touchy about their gardens and flowers that, seeing a doe with her fawns feasting in the backyard, they feel compelled to call in the sharpshooters? And where will they be when the job is done? Indeed all these "managed hunts" are now done in secret? What does that tell you?

The solution is always the gun, or poison, or traps, and the divine mandate always money. Geese getting on your nerves? Wipe 'em out. Want a stuffed bear for the living room? Go forth then to bait and slay the beast — and don't forget the keg. Wildlife hindering new development? Bring dominion to field and forest, exterminate the creatures, and raise up thy new strip mall.

Even when the complaints are legitimate, as with lethal driving hazards to people, there is an utter refusal to accept human culpability, as if the deer were to blame and not the developers. It is as if the whole natural world existed for no other reason than to please the appetites of man, however ignoble, irrational and reckless. Anything that is there is there to be taken. If it's in the way, level it. If it dares distract or inconvenience, run it off. If it adds to costs, kill it.

It is a vision that looks upon our fellow creatures to find only an infinite array of pests, threats, resources, obstacles, targets, livestock, roadkill, racks, and "wall-hangers." Nowhere in this vision is there any room for animals with their own purpose in the world apart from the designs of man. Never is a deer just a deer,

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Matthew Scully is the author of “Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy.”

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