

OPINION | PHILIP W. JOHNSTON AND LAURA HAGEN

Stop the Blue Hills deer hunts

By Philip W. Johnston and Laura Hagen November 30, 2016, 1:02 p.m.



A hunter loaded one of two female deer he killed into his pickup truck during last year's Blue Hills deer hunt. ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/GLOBE FREELANCE

The peaceful sanctuary that is the Blue Hills Reservation has served as a refuge for urban and suburban dwellers alike for generations. But last year, area residents were shocked to learn that the state's Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) and Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (DFW) were instituting a deer hunt there.

Despite strong opposition from hikers, abutters, animal-protection and public-safety advocates, and even some hunters, DCR, after a process that scrimped on transparency

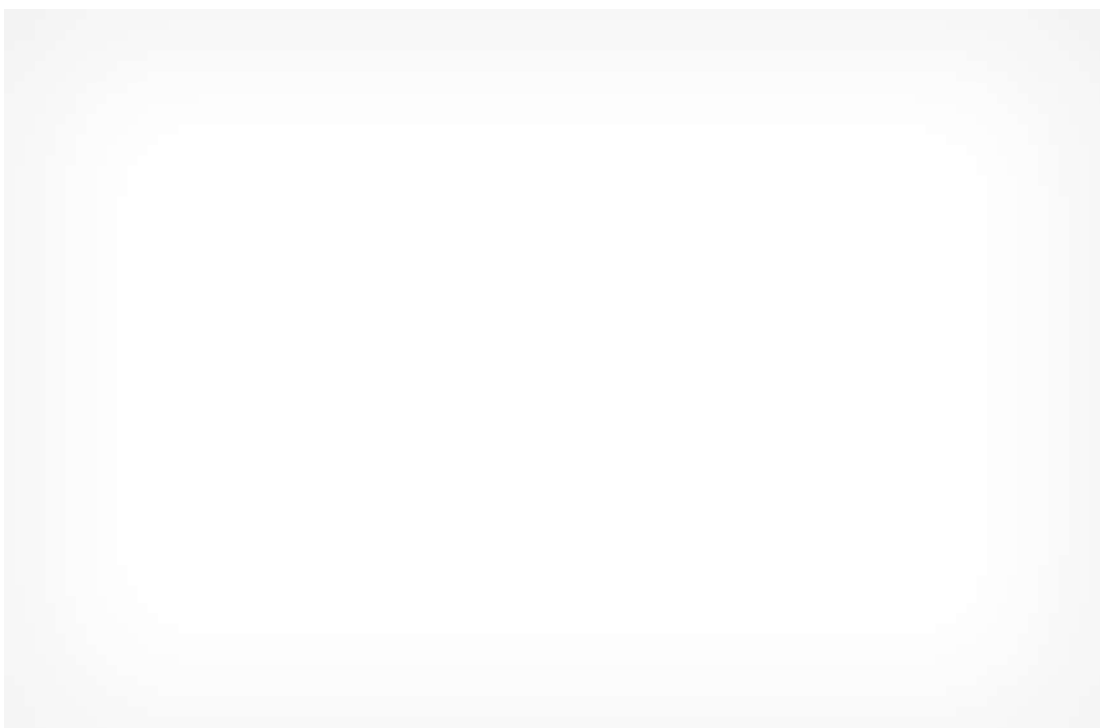
and public input, pushed stubbornly ahead with its plan.

The hunt was based on an outdated population survey from 2013, disregarding the state's own guidelines, which recommend that surveys be performed at least biennially to show population trends. Thus, DCR began the hunt with no current deer count. Nor will it conduct another until 2017.

DCR claimed deer were so abundant that up to 600 could be killed during the four-day hunt. What a surprise, then, [when only 64 deer were felled](#). DCR still proclaimed the hunt a great success, but the huge disparity between projected and actual kills left many wondering if the deer-overpopulation claim was — and is — completely false.

And the cost to taxpayers? At approximately \$2,500 per deer, call it exorbitant. DCR and other state agencies reported spending approximately \$153,000 on the four-day hunt, with records showing abutting municipalities spent at least \$11,000 more. That means the per-deer cost of the hunt was more than double that of non-lethal alternatives, which DCR had deemed too expensive.

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Still, despite the failure of the 2015 hunt, DCR held another hunt this week and has a second planned for next week. Once again taxpayers will be left holding the bag for a small special-interest group.

Last year's hunt was predicated on the widespread but inaccurate notion that deer are responsible for Lyme disease. No major health organization, including the CDC, recommends culling deer to prevent Lyme. That's because human risk of exposure to Lyme disease correlates with the abundance of immature (rodent) hosts and their food resources, not deer numbers. Tamara Awerbuch, Ph.D, one of the foremost Lyme disease researchers, found "no linear correlation between killing deer and the tick population."

Apprised of Awerbuch's and other researchers' studies, DCR was forced to backtrack. This year deer are instead being branded the culprit for all vegetation and biodiversity concerns in the Blue Hills. Like other forested northeastern landscapes, the Blue Hills are subject to any number of influences that have created the conditions evident today. Harsh winters (like that of 2015), pollution, drought, climate change, insect damage, invasive plant species, parasitic organisms, landscape fragmentation and trail overuse by humans and dogs are just some of the many causes of deforestation. But instead of considering these factors, DCR based its ecological assessments on one sole vegetation-monitoring area: a mere 30 by 30 foot plot, which was used to render a judgment for more than 11 miles of forest. That was clearly insufficient for a true measure of impacts. Still, the easiest answer for DCR and DFW was obviously this: Let's have a hunt and kill the deer.

This year's hunt, Nov. 29 to 30 and Dec. 6 to 7, is worse than last year's, employing cruel and ineffective methodologies like bow and arrow hunting, which has a crippling rate of almost 50 percent, meaning that about half the struck deer don't die quickly, but rather flee in an injured state. Part of the bow and arrow hunting "sport" includes following a blood trail from those deer; at Blue Hills, that reality could leave hunters to choose between pursuing wounded deer onto private property or letting them endure a slow, agonizing death. The proximity of several major highways adds this frightening

agonizing death. The proximity of several major highways adds this frightening possibility: Wounded deer running onto heavily traveled roads.

DCR and DFW's lack of a current survey, dismissal of non-lethal alternatives, and disdain for real transparency are, sadly, not surprising. Avid hunters oversee both agencies developing and executing this hunt.

But this poorly premised hunt shouldn't be tolerated. An independent, unbiased survey of the actual Blue Hills deer population should be initiated before the hunt resumes. And if there is indeed a problem, the state should explore humane efforts at population control. The current "policy" is merely a sportsmen-pleasing deer kill hunting for a scientific rationalization.

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