



Mule Deer
Working Group

Fact Sheet

URBAN MULE DEER ISSUES Fact Sheet #9

OVERVIEW

Increased urbanization has reduced, fragmented, and in some cases, eliminated critical mule deer habitat. These overall changes in mule deer habitat affect deer populations, generally leading to declines. However, in many cases, mule deer have adapted to life in urban areas, leading to conflicts with humans. Urban areas include heavily-developed urban centers along with outlying suburban and exurban areas. Mule deer population can increase rapidly in these areas as deer take advantage of the abundant forage and water sources provided by humans as well as protection from hunting and other types of predation. Habituation to humans in close settings allows mule deer to exist at densities above what is generally seen in the wild. How urban mule deer impact people is often dependent on human tolerance levels, which can vary by community.



NEGATIVE IMPACTS

Mule deer are browsers: preferring leaves, stems, and buds of woody plants, as well as forbs (weeds). Like many other wildlife species, mule deer are opportunistic and in some cases will eat and damage ornamental plants, hedges, vegetables, flowers, and lawns. Bucks can damage shrubs and saplings by rubbing the bark with their antlers. This damage to personal and commercial-grown vegetation is not well-tolerated and can make people view mule deer as a nuisance.

Urban areas rarely allow hunting. Deer repeatedly exposed to humans without negative consequences will eventually become habituated or show little fear of humans. Habituated mule deer may become aggressive and pose a danger to human residents. There are reports of mule deer bluff-charging people, chasing joggers, attacking postal workers, and killing small pets. Large mule deer numbers in urban areas can also lead to more deer on roads and increase the potential for deer-vehicle collisions. Mule deer populations attract predators to urban areas, creating a possible hazard for local residents and pets. The urban environment can have a negative impact on deer as well. Busy streets, railways, fences, parking garages, and bridges are hazards for urban deer. There are many reports of deer-vehicle collisions, fatal jumps from parking garages and bridges, and entanglement in fences. The potential for disease transmission is also greater due to the high densities of deer in urban areas.

MANAGING URBAN MULE DEER ISSUES

Prohibiting Supplemental Feeding

Supplemental feeding of mule deer in urban areas can greatly increase fawn production and may affect overall deer survival. Residents of urban areas often feed mule deer by hand or through a feeder because they enjoy having the deer in close proximity or feel that the deer need the supplement to survive. Inadvertent feeding also occurs such as through bird or squirrel feeders. Working with local governments to enact regulations prohibiting supplemental feeding is an important step in managing an urban deer problem. Prohibiting feeding also reduces the attractants that draw deer into the urban areas to begin with. Individuals should also consider placing bird or squirrel feeders out of reach to eliminate use by deer.

Chemical Repellents and Scare Devices

Several techniques are available to deter urban deer. Deterrents are modestly effective when deer densities are relatively low and often lose effectiveness as deer abundance and problems grow. A variety of chemical deer repellents are commercially available. Repellents rarely work and require constant application, especially after rain or snow. Scare devices can sometimes be effective at deterring urban deer. Some scare devices are commercially available, but contact state wildlife officials for the use of noise-making scare devices such as Zon-guns (propane cannons), crackershells, and M-80s. Be sure to consult local laws before using pyrotechnic devices.

Deer-resistant plants and fencing

Certain ornamental plants are unpalatable to deer and are less likely to be browsed. Using these plants in landscaping instead of more-desirable browse species can reduce deer conflicts. To determine which plants are deer-resistant and adapted to the local area contact a local nursery or state wildlife official. A variety of reference books and internet resources are also available on the subject.

Fencing deer out is the most effective and permanent method. A wide variety of fence designs will keep problem deer out. Fences should be at least 8 feet tall with no gaps greater than 8 inches. Electric fencing also works to deter deer on a more temporary basis, such as winter browsing. A hybrid approach of installing two strands of electric wire on top of an existing fence can also be an effective approach. Surrounding individual plants with wire cages can prevent browsing. Also, wire mesh or pipe placed directly around tree trunks will reduce damage by bucks rubbing their antlers.



Hunting

Wildlife agencies are successfully using regulated hunting in urban areas to address urban deer issues. Carefully regulated archery hunts in restricted hunting areas can be particularly effective and efficient. Some agencies have used professional shooters to kill deer with the meat donated to charitable groups. Hunting in and around urban areas requires close coordination with local governments and citizens, but where possible, it is a cost-effective solution.

Relocation and contraception

Some wildlife agencies are capturing and relocating urban deer to more remote, suitable habitat on a limited basis. This approach is labor- and cost-intensive, with uncertain effectiveness. Moving deer is dependent on the availability of release sites, which have to be carefully evaluated to ensure that the habitat can support more deer. Given these constraints, moving deer is unlikely to be a common solution for widespread urban deer issues in the West. Contraception is often proposed as a method to reduce overabundant deer populations, but it is not currently feasible in free-ranging deer populations.

PUBLIC OPINION AND EDUCATION

Public input is the most important aspect of managing urban deer. There are a wide range of opinions regarding deer in urban areas. Some enjoy seeing deer in their backyards and tolerate the damage, while others see urban deer as a hazard and nuisance. Prudent consideration of all factors involved and proper public education is critically important when managing urban mule deer.



Photo: Coburn Peterson

More information on mule deer can be found at www.muledeerworkinggroup.com

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