

CONSIDERING A DEER STERILIZATION PROGRAM

Prepared by CliftonDeer.org

Updated April 2018

INTRODUCTORY

- Several different methods of deer fertility control are being tested around the country at this time. For reasons explained in detail on our website, CliftonDeer.org chose sterilization by ovariectomy as the method most likely to succeed in our relatively open park setting.
- Any program dealing with the treatment of animals will almost certainly engage a wide range of attitudes, values and strong feelings that can support or hinder program development efforts. It's important that they be anticipated, considered respectfully, and managed carefully to prevent them from exhausting or derailing program development efforts.
- Spending money to sterilize deer, rather than hunting and eating them, calls for a paradigmatic shift in beliefs and assumptions for many if not most people. Even in urban communities, getting agreement on policy and financial support for sterilization practically involves changing a culture.
- Unless the initiative is led by a champion with the authority and/or political power to force the program into existence, including funding it, coalition building is likely to be essential to success. CliftonDeer.org built its broader support around an agreed need to protect the eco-system.
- It is not yet known whether sterilization alone can achieve and maintain desired deer population levels. In open settings, migration might offset attrition. Also, it's very difficult to capture and sterilize 100% of the does so very low population goals might be impossible to achieve. (Clifton's program has been permitted as a research project to test the efficacy of this approach to deer population control.)
- The safe capture and surgical sterilization of deer in the wild requires extraordinary expertise and experience. Dr. Anthony DeNicola and his company, White Buffalo, Inc., pioneered the "rapid ovariectomy" sterilization process, and was found by CliftonDeer.org to be the best, if not the only, provider with those qualifications.

MOTIVES MATTER

There are practical as well as ideological reasons to consider sterilization as an alternative to lethal population reduction methods. Different motives allow for different choices, each with different effects. For example:

- Population management goals alone might suggest some culling in conjunction with sterilization to reduce the herd size faster and to reduce number of deer needing treatment.
- A goal of preventing undue suffering may allow for some lethal methods. The American Veterinary Medical Association considers sharpshooting, when executed under certain conditions, to be humane euthanasia. Sharpshooting is fast, but not cheap, and is often viewed as inappropriate in dense urban settings.
- The no-kill goal that animates most sterilization proponents precludes lethal culling of any kind. While it might eventually prove to be as or more effective than culling at maintaining desired population levels in the long run, sterilization alone takes longer to reduce herd size and is more expensive at least in the short run.

SOURCE OF INITIATIVE AND LEADERSHIP

Advocacy for non-lethal alternatives typically arises from citizens and animal welfare groups when local authorities announce plans to begin lethal culling of overabundant herds. While protests, legal challenges and high profile opposition can slow and even temporarily stop culling, protest groups and methods typically are not well suited to the research, coalition building and programmatic infrastructure development needed to implement a sterilization program. Separation of the planners and planning function from the objectors and protest function is probably necessary.

Government Initiated: Most successful sterilization programs to date have been initiated and funded by some governmental authority--a mayor, city or community council or park board with legal jurisdiction and the financial and staff resources to implement it.

Private/Citizen Initiated: In Cincinnati, a core group of 3+ citizens spent 18 months studying and documenting the issues and alternatives, building community involvement and political support, obtaining the necessary approvals, and raising the funds. (Useful experience the individuals contributed to the task, in addition to a passionate respect for animals and plants, included law, research, mediation, credibility with public officials, and access to student volunteers in related disciplines at the University of Cincinnati.)

OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES

Attitudes: Sterilization programs can find vehement opposition from multiple sides. Some hunters hear protests against lethal culling as criticism of them, their values, and their traditions. Others object to spending money to sterilize deer and argue they should instead be slaughtered for food for the homeless. Some animal welfare advocates object to sterilization as physically and socially intrusive and inhumane. Others say deer were here before people and should be left alone. A few argue that deer are not causing ecological damage and herd reduction is unnecessary, and some oppose working with Dr. DeNicola, the leading deer sterilization expert, because he also does lethal culling for communities that request it. Mostly these opinions are sincerely held, deeply felt, and loudly expressed. The challenge is to let them be heard without letting them dominate.

Legal Issues (state): In most if not all states, deer are legally owned or controlled by state departments of natural resources (DNRs) and may not be touched without a state issued permit. These state agencies may manage state lands and wildlife primarily for the benefit of hunters and other recreational users. Non-lethal deer management proposals can be viewed defensively as contrary to the interests of hunters and resisted by those agencies. The policies and politics governing DNR approval of sterilization programs are important and can vary from state to state. (CliftonDeer.org minimized its threat to hunting interests by focusing its program on one square mile of a densely populated urban Cincinnati neighborhood containing three small parks where hunting is less practical for a variety of reasons. It also had the Park Board's support for the permit request.)

State trespass statutes and laws governing hunting on private property may apply to darting and removal of deer for sterilization. Being prepared to answer challenges based on such statutes could prove helpful, and law enforcement's supportive involvement will also help.

Legal Issues (local): Local trespass ordinances and laws governing the discharge of firearms within city limits might apply. Failure to obtain necessary ordinance changes in advance could provide objectors with a basis for stopping the project at the last minute, a costly situation.

Supportive involvement of local law enforcement is important. It gives some cover and comfort to other government officials, and increases community acceptance of field darting operations that take place mostly at night and often on private property and public roadways.

COSTS

Who pays?: To win approval and support from the Cincinnati Park Board and avoid probable controversy over public funding requests that could delay or stop the project, CliftonDeer.org agreed to raise necessary funds privately, at least initially.

Expenses: Most of CliftonDeer.org's budget goes to pay for the services and expenses (including travel expenses) of capture and surgical professionals to come to Cincinnati for 4 to 6 days each year. Significant other expenses included costs for organizing a 501(c)(3) corporation, website design and maintenance, fundraising and community education materials (such as posters, flyers, and t-shirts), bait corn, and annual deer population surveys. We are also investing significantly in local training (increasing our costs in the short-term, but significantly lowering our costs long term as local volunteer expertise is developed).

In total, CliftonDeer.org has spent about \$95,000 in its first 3 years of operation. This has paid to sterilize ~91% of the adult female population in the study area, reduce the deer population in the study area by ~19%, and send a local volunteer to darting school, among other things. (Caution: framing program costs as \$/deer, or in comparison to volunteer bow-hunting, can be misleading for a number of reasons.)

Costs for subsequent years will go down if and as the time White Buffalo spends in Cincinnati shrinks with fewer deer to sterilize, and as local volunteer expertise is developed to replace White Buffalo's capture and sterilization services.

Fundraising: CliftonDeer.org almost certainly could not have launched nor maintained this program without funding from national wildlife organizations and foundations. We also believe small dollar local fundraising, comprising about 10% of our total funding, is very important for long term viability as it forces us to reach into the community for "buy-in" and support. Our few experiments with "flashy" fundraising tactics, including crowd sourcing, have generally failed; what tends to work is to educate the public with facts (not spin), answer questions transparently, and clearly state our financial need.

MORE INFORMATION

For program history and details, or to contact us, go to www.cliftondeer.org