



VIRGINIA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

Conserving Wild Flowers and Wild Places

RESOLUTION REGARDING DEER MANAGEMENT

Whereas, the Virginia Native Plant Society formed in 1982 to “Preserve Wildflowers and Wild Places;”

Whereas, Virginia’s native flora, the natural communities they comprise, and the many species that depend on them are under increasing pressure;

Whereas, after human land disturbance, over-browsing by white-tailed deer represents one of the most serious threats to our native flora, the vegetative communities they comprise, and the many species that depend on them; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, that the Virginia Native Plant Society:

1. Promotes the reduction of white-tailed deer populations where necessary to protect and restore Virginia's native vegetative communities and the plant and animal species contained therein; and
2. Supports Virginia state agencies charged with managing wildlife populations and monitoring and preserving our natural resources; and
3. Encourages support for and establishment of programs and organizations that emphasize skill and ethics among hunters and wildlife management professionals to maximize efficiency and minimize animal suffering, recognizing that regulated hunting is the most effective and efficient tool for managing free-ranging deer populations in most circumstances.

Background:

The Virginia Native Plant Society (VNPS) formed more than 30 years ago as the Virginia Wildflower Preservation Society around two basic principles: appreciation of our native flora and a desire to protect it. The first priority of the VNPS conservation program was to influence human behavior to stop or minimize habitat destruction and preserve good examples of our native plant communities.

In the 1990s VNPS added a second conservation priority: combating the spread of non-native invasive species (NNIs). This strategy arose from a growing realization that species introduced by humans over several centuries are threatening the integrity of our native plant communities. Whether the introduction of Japanese stilt grass or the chestnut blight in eastern North America, NNIs have dramatically altered our landscapes.

Today, many of our remaining forest ecosystems are negatively impacted by deer browse. Deer will eat everything native, with few exceptions, to include almost all of the forbs in the forest as well as all shrubs and trees within five feet of the ground and consume many of the acorns and hickory nuts, thus reducing the reproduction of these trees and the food supply for other wildlife. Deer have removed most vegetation from some forests below five feet, creating a distinctive “browse line.” This may be contributing to local declines in the populations of select forest bird species due to loss of the understory, the loss of many of our woodland

forbs, and a change of our forest stand composition. As our forests are oversimplified, we lose native species and non-native invasive species become the dominant understory.

In 2008 the USDA Forest Service began to make dire predictions about eastern forests due to the over-browsing by white-tailed deer. There are no longer any apex predators except for humans. The problem is so severe in some areas that even if we could reduce the number of deer immediately to within ecologically sustainable levels, it would take from years to decades, to recover certain native plant species. If we act soon, we can retain enough native plant stock and seed that many species could recover within remaining forests and repopulate surrounding areas over time. This is even more critical with the expected shift of species and communities across the landscape in response to climate change.

VNPS joins with Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, USDA Forest Service, the Virginia Natural Heritage Program, the Maryland Native Plant Society, landowners and managers in Virginia and others in supporting and urging agencies, landowners, and individuals to manage the number of white-tailed deer in order to protect our native flora and the communities in which they live.

Additional Information:

Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries - The agency's Deer Management Plan, currently under revision, directs VDGIF to establish deer population management objectives that balance social and ecosystem demands. The plan recognizes the various impact of deer herbivory on understory plants and animals. Better defining deer ecosystem impacts at the management unit level are essential to meeting this goal. Current research is taking the first step toward development of practical, efficient assessments of deer impacts. <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/deer/management-plan/>

Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute – Primarily through the work of Dr. Bill McShea, several research projects showing impacts of deer on forest vegetation and birds, e.g. McShea, W. J., and J. H. Rappole. 2000. Managing the abundance and diversity of breeding bird populations through manipulation of deer populations. *Conservation Biology* 14(4):1161-1170.

Cornell University - In a study published in March 2014 titled *Deer Browsing Delays Succession by Altering Aboveground Vegetation and Belowground Seed Banks*, researchers confirmed the role of deer browse in altering forest succession and composition.

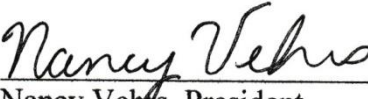
Maryland Division of Natural Resources - In a study published in 2014 in the journal *Biodiversity*, Wesley Knapp, a Botanist, and Richard Wiegand, a State Ecologist with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, stated that 41 years of data shows precipitous declines in the number and variety of orchids in the Catoctins in Frederick County, with three species vanishing altogether from spots where they had been seen year after year. Seven other species have dwindled by more than 90 percent, while nine shrank by between 51 percent and 87 percent. Only two orchid species gained or held their own.

State of Maryland and the Maryland Native Plant Society - A work group commissioned by the Maryland state legislature to study the condition of Maryland's native plants released a report in 2014 that stated "we are losing our native biodiversity to habitat destruction from human activity, the invasion of non-native species, and the over-abundance of white-tailed deer."

Kirsten Johnson, President of the Maryland Native Plant Society, chaired the work group and stated that exotic plants are crowding out some native species, but the biggest threat comes from deer.

The report also stated that "Parklands that in our lifetimes displayed a profusion of spring wildflowers do so no more. Many of our forests, including those protecting our reservoirs, are missing the understory of shrubs, tree saplings and herbaceous plants that permit forest regeneration and support animal life. ... As the plants go, so go the animals — the birds, the mammals, the reptiles, the bees and butterflies and the other insects that depend on native plants for food and shelter."

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Nancy Vehrs, President