Urban deer, that move in smaller territories, feed on plants and are now naturally more habituated to humans, have become a significant concern in some Ann Arbor neighborhoods. As such, Ann Arbor's "deer problem" is currently that of deer exceeding their social carrying capacity (human tolerance) within small pockets of the City. We know from aerial estimates and the health of the population, there is not a biological overpopulation. We also know that complaints come largely from neighborhoods near parks/nature areas near the Huron River in Wards 1 and 2. Ann Arbor's vast park system, growing development and increasing human population has set the stage for human/animal conflict by confining and channeling the movement of these "edge dwellers" (animals that live on the edge of nature and neighborhoods) closer to human homes and inviting them to dinner through our planting habits.

The most significant problem with Ann Arbor's approach to addressing these concerns was a lack of data and clear goals, and is still a solution searching for a problem. Even the MDNR was surprised at the speed at which Ann Arbor arrived at the decision to cull, stating communities typically study deer challenges for years before proceeding with any strategy. To fully understand challenges and determine the most effective approaches, Ann Arbor needs objective baseline data, tracked over time in a consistent manner. Effective strategies are driven by goals that include specific metrics based on that baseline data and informed by wildlife experts. (Extrapolations from studies done in national parks, university nature preserves or even urban locations that do not closely mimic the characteristics of Ann Arbor are not useful in understanding or addressing Ann Arbor's challenges.)

While we do not support population reduction by death, strategies aimed at managing population numbers (whether lethal or non-lethal) are a large and uncertain undertaking that will become a permanent line on the city budget. Although the vacuum effect is denied by some, it is undeniable that culls cause community strife, pitting neighbor against neighbor—taking attention away from more critical community matters. Further, they must be repeated year after year. Ann Arbor is not an island, and deer are a native species here. Artificial, sudden population reduction makes available food more plenty, allowing the current population to benefit from less competition and higher caloric intake so that they can reproduce at greater rates, and make room for deer from outside the City to migrate in at faster rate. A successful strategy must include changes to human behavior and manmade conditions that make our community so inviting to deer. By making the issue "too many deer," we have oversimplified the situation and solution, thereby accomplishing little other than a political quick fix.

Ann Arbor needs a consistent public policy approach to wildlife concerns that continually assesses whether it is encouraging conflict or coexistence. Education is our most powerful tool. Understanding trends, behaviors and habits of urban deer will increase tolerance and the success of strategies used to manage frustrations. This understanding and consideration can be used from a larger perspective as well. From fence ordinances to prescribed burns to new development encroaching on wildlife habitat—the impact on deer movement, behavior and visibility should be considered in all city planning, along with ways to minimize harmful effects.

The City has an ornithologist and herpetologist on staff, but no wildlife specialist or even animal control officer who can assist residents with concerns. In terms of expenditure of resources, in 2016 Ann Arbor spent as much to kill 63 deer as it did to provide life-saving animal services to hundreds of lost, abandoned and abused dogs and cats.

We cannot turn back the clock. Love them or hate them, urban deer are here to stay. In terms of harm to biodiversity, there is no greater impact than humans. Pollution, including the vast use of pesticides and herbicides, loss of habitat and global warming are, by far, the main culprits. While there may be a few city parks where "over-browsing" is a concern, blaming and killing a few dozen deer will hardly make an environmental impact in a community of 135,000 residents, 40,000 students and countless visitors—making deer little more than convenient scapegoats. Further, not only do a large percentage of City residents and visitors enjoy deer as part of the natural landscape, but also deer contribute positively to the ecosystem, spreading seeds and enriching the soil for new life.

Ann Arbor's history of nonviolence, tolerance and respect for nature should help guide an approach consistent with our City values of peaceful co-existence with all wildlife. Shooting community wildlife because they eat plants does not make sense. Our parks are not plant museums. When we walk out our doors, we are not just stepping into our yards; we are stepping into the natural world, home to so many species that are a vital part of the ecosystem. Rather than being stuck in an endless, controversial and expensive cycle of attempted eradication, we should focus on effective approaches that also support peaceful co-existence. We should avoid solving community concerns with guns and teaching our children that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflict. HSHV recommends affordable and easily implementable education, combined with non-violent problem-specific mitigation efforts, driven by clear data and specific goals. This, as other communities have demonstrated, is a truly successful model of urban wildlife conflict management – and one in which we can all be proud.