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## Hunt for solution takes aim at deer

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STAFF WRITER

Some 340 hunters have registered to participate in the Monmouth County Park System's first white-tailed deer hunt, which begins tomorrow.

Jack Spoto, president of United Bowhunters of New Jersey, said he believes that figure will increase because some of his members told him last week that they still intend to apply for a free access permit to hunt in parts of nine county parks.

Spoto, of Freehold Township, said some experienced hunters, however, may skip the county hunt because they won't be bothered to go through the additional hurdles imposed by county park officials, such as taking a hunter education course. But he thinks that's a mistake.

"The parks are good hunting grounds and worth the effort," he said.

The thought of holding even this limited hunt in county parks makes many animal-rights advocates bristle.

For months, they have tried to persuade county officials to stop the hunt. They have offered gentle alternatives, such as birth control, fencing, roadside reflectors to curtail car-deer collisions and the planting of deer-resistant vegetation.

But county officials say these measures simply won't address the real problem: the imminent danger of forest degradation as a result of overgrazing by deer.

"We listened, we checked them out and we found none to be legal or effective," James Truncer, director of the county park system, said of the suggested alternatives.

County officials have concluded what hunting groups have said for years: Hunting is the only effective method to culling the deer population.

Truncer insists that park officials -- stewards of the natural resources within the more than 13,000 acres of county parkland -- had to do something to maintain the balance of nature for the benefit of all flora and fauna in the forest.

"When the dominance or behavior of one species, such as deer, threatens the well-being of others, active intervention is required," he said. "Once you lose the understory and native plants, you start to lose songbirds and small mammals. . . . We reached the point where we have to do something."

Susan Russell, policy director for the Rumson-based Center for Animal Protection, sharply disagrees with the county's reasoning.

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"We're debating false issues," she said, adding that she tried to show county officials studies that proved hunting does not reduce the deer population but they wouldn't listen. "There's just no reaching these people."

Russell does not accept Truncer's argument that the forest has reached the point where they are being degraded because of deer. She suggested that park officials need to do a better job of promoting biodiversity in the parkland. That can be accomplished, she said, by converting turf fields to wildflower meadows and instructing farmers who



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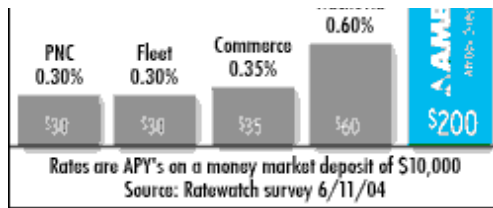
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lease county lands to stop planting crops, such as corn, that are appetizing to deer.

Doris Lin of Freehold Township is working with Russell and other animal-rights activists who are pushing for the use of contraception as an alternative to the hunt.

Freeholder Amy H. Handlin met with Lin and other activists

on Thursday but told them she came to the same conclusion as park officials. The use of contraception, she reminded them, is being used only on a trial basis in several areas of the country and is not yet commercially available. She pledged, however, to petition the federal government to allow Monmouth County to participate in one of its trials.

Bill Porter is a researcher at the State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry. The wildlife ecology professor has studied the various approaches to deer management for about 20 years.

"Contraception has been portrayed as inexpensive and effective, therefore a good solution," Porter said during a telephone interview from his Syracuse, N.Y., office. "But in my experience, it's neither inexpensive nor easy to apply."

While the chemistry works well and in some cases is remarkably cheap to produce, communities, he said, can have a devil of a time vaccinating the animals or ensuring that the drugs don't harm other species.

Porcine zona pellucida, or PZP, for example, can be administered through a dart gun, but the deer must be vaccinated yearly. Scientists, he said, are working to develop vaccines that would only have to be injected once in the lifetime of a doe.

But communities will still have to figure out how each animal will be targeted? Will you tag their ears or shoot them with a paint splotch? Who's going to administer the vaccine and at what cost?

#### Safety concerns

Truncer, director of the parks system, said his agency has taken steps to ensure the public's safety.

The hunt is limited to adults, who are prohibited from discharging their weapons within 450 feet of any building or school playground. They must use tree stands and keep their weapons unloaded until they are in position to shoot.

Still, some people feel uncomfortable with the thought of hunting occurring so close to their property lines.

Jim McReynolds, vicar of the Episcopal Church of the Holy Communion in Fair Haven, lives on Jacksonville Road, roughly five minutes away from Turkey Swamp Park in Freehold Township. He enjoys walking his dogs and hiking on Alder Trail within the park -- and was aghast to learn that hunters are allowed to fire weapons within the park at times when people are present.

"It seems like an accident waiting to happen," McReynolds said. "Someone could just be walking in the park and get hit by a stray bullet."

McReynolds added that he has discussed the issue with county park officials and learned that while people are allowed to hunt in the park during the day, there are restrictions placed on what they can do. For example, hunters can only shoot from tree stands that are in areas far from where the general public usually travels.

Park officials have staunchly maintained that adequate signage has been posted near the hunting areas, and park rangers, who are bestowed with police powers, will vigorously enforce the rules.

"But what they haven't taken into account is that bullets travel hundreds of yards," McReynolds said. "So let's be realistic. At age 56 I've seen things like this, when everyone says it was an accident and it could have been prevented."

#### Done deal

Jack Spoto rebuffed claims from the opposition that hunters were in cahoots with county park officials from the beginning. He said his group never met with park officials while they prepared their Deer Management Report, which was presented to the Board of Recreation Commissioners in February and approved in April after four public hearings.

Spoto did say, however, that a few Middletown homeowner associations, including Harts-horn Woods Association, asked for a meeting with his group to see how they could help them combat their deer problems.

"We suggested they petition the Monmouth County Parks System to allow hunting," he said.

Truncer said the park system began studying the deer problems long before the homeowner groups came to him with their complaints that the deer residing in neighboring county parks were spreading Lyme disease, causing accidents on the roads and eating their ornamental shrubs.

Richard D. McOmber of Navesink River Road told the free-holders Thursday that three homeowners associations -- Hartshorn Woods, Riverside Drive and Monmouth Hills -- began to discuss the issue in May 2001.

Leaders of these groups, which represent 360 families, subsequently met with Truncer to lobby for action.

"They did a super job in reviewing the positive and negative aspects of a thinning operation," McOmber said. "I urge the board to let the recreation commissioners do the job you appointed them to do."

Nothing new

The coming hunt may be a first for the Monmouth County Parks System, but it's nothing new for Monmouth County.

Hunters have raised their rifles and aimed their bows at animals here for centuries. Private landowners continue to open their lands to hunters, and state preserves have also done so for years. They include Assunpink, Manasquan and Turkey Swamp wildlife management areas, as well as Allaire and Monmouth Battlefield state parks.

The county also estimates that of the 6,000 acres it has acquired for parkland since 1990, 5,300 acres had been open to hunters under prior ownership.

Spoto noted that his members harvest the deer for their meat and pelts. He added that an arrow shot by a skilled bowman results in neither cruel nor agonizing death, as portrayed by their proponents. They die just as fast as if killed by a bullet, he argued.

Besides, he said, it's a more humane response to overpopulation than allowing them to continue to be killed by automobiles.

"To me, what's worse?" Spoto asked. "Being cleanly dispatched and having its resources used, or being hit by a car and left spattered to rot on the side of the road?"

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