

Shot For A Tulip

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Is one of the most educated communities in America losing its mind?

Cayuga Heights has been said to have the most Ph.D's per capita of any municipality in America. Yet today, its trustees are on the verge of approving an expensive, dangerous, and frankly bizarre plan that if put into effect, is certain to put a serious dent in our community's well-deserved reputation for sensible, compassionate, and forward-thinking public policy.

As most people in Ithaca know, there has been a controversy around the fate of the deer in Cayuga Heights, whose appetite for tulips, heirloom tomatoes, and ornamental shrubbery has, in the minds of the current mayor and trustees, created a situation so dire and unacceptable, that action of the most extreme sort is not only justified, but urgently required.

According to the plan now being considered, every single deer in the village is slated to be violated or killed. The first phase involves capturing 60 female deer, surgically sterilizing them, then puncturing their ears with numbered tags and encumbering their necks with radio collars. These are the "lucky" individuals. The intended fate of every other deer in Cayuga Heights, including pregnant does and fawns, is to be shot dead at 8 to 10 undisclosed bait sites in our neighborhood backyards. This annual massacre, to become a part of our local culture, will be carried out by out-of-town contractors who earn their living exterminating wildlife.

The ethical grotesquery of this plan appears to be lost on those who conceived it, who seem to be oblivious to the mental and emotional torture that will be experienced by the few deer chosen to survive, not to mention the many people who care about these gentle animals. Year after year, deer in and around Cayuga Heights will be lured by piles of corn into the kill zone, and those marked for survival will watch as their herd mates are brutally killed right in front of them. Were such a sadistic policy to be carried out against dogs or cats, or horses, an outraged crowd of us would spontaneously rise up to stop it. But the deer, ironically, because they live free of direct human control and are no individual's private property, are somehow seen as unworthy of moral consideration.

Do we really want to live in a society where bureaucrats meet behind closed doors to arbitrarily decide how many of each species are allowed to live, then send technicians out to mark the few chosen to survive as ornamental reminders of a bygone era, doomed to move among us as freaks festooned with the trappings of their utter domination by humans? Do we want to cover the eyes and ears of our children as unsuspecting animals are methodically executed in our neighbors' backyards?

Living amongst us are many people who, through wise plant choices, and skillful use of fencing and deer repellents, enjoy beautiful gardens without causing harm to anyone. Mass killing and extreme control of our indigenous wildlife is neither necessary, nor ethical, nor safe. And if it is scientific at all, it represents science at its most twisted.

Everything about this plan is emblematic of the mindset that is destroying our planet, and at odds with what we stand for as a community. Because the trustees of Cayuga Heights have rejected proven and practical non-violent approaches to reducing deer-human conflict, because they refuse against all reason to allow residents to erect fences high enough to safeguard their plantings, should the rest of us just sit back and do nothing? Should we accept armed men firing deadly weapons in our neighborhoods, to protect tulips? Or is it possible, with all the brilliant, creative and compassionate people living in this community, that we can come up with a more sensible approach? I think we can. n

This guest opinion was written by James LaVeck, an award-winning documentary filmmaker and a 20-year resident of Ithaca. He is one of the co-founders of CayugaDeer.org, Ithacans for Safe, Rational and Ethical Solutions to Deer Human Conflict. To find out what you can do, visit www.cayugadeer.org.