

ECONEWS

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Promoting the Vision of a Sustainable Vancouver Island

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BAMBIES, BUNNIES AND BACTERIA

In the Greater Victoria region of North Saanich, organic farmer Brian Hughes has a problem. In July, deer wandered onto his farm and ate 6,000 of his strawberry plants. Last week, they ate a 40 feet bed of organic lettuces. Other farmers and growers on the Island and the Gulf Islands are reporting similar problems.

The black-tailed deer have lived on Vancouver Island for thousands of years. A mature doe gives birth to two fawns a year, each May or June. As part of Vancouver Island's ecosystem, they are preyed on by cougars and wolves. Over millions of years, they have co-evolved alongside their predators, like most of the world's herbivores.

Without predators, deer can live for ten years or longer. Over ten years, a doe might produce 16 fawns, 8 of which are female. After ten years, assuming no deaths from predators, hunters or car accidents, a doe's family line will have 500 female offspring. In ten more years it will number 200,000 females (plus 200,000 males), and they all need to eat. It's no wonder they are wandering all over Oak Bay, browsing on the roses.

It's easy to see why this spells such trouble for our farmers and growers. On Sidney Spit, the entire forest undergrowth has been eaten away by predator-free deer. There is only one rational solution, but first let's consider the bunnies.

At the University of Victoria, there are 1600 bunnies, the descendants of pet rabbits whose owners have tired of them and dumped them there.

Female bunnies produce three to five litters a year, and each litter has three to seven babies - that's a total of 9 to 35 babies a year. The following year, the female bunnies all start breeding. Like the deer, rabbits co-evolved with their predators - that's why they have so many babies. If they are sheltered from predators, hunters and disease, and have

enough grass to feed on, after 5 years there will be 50,000 females. After 7 years there will be over ten million.

It's easy to see why this spells such trouble for UVic, even if disease and predation by hawks and eagles slow "the Australia problem". Within ten years of the introduction of 12 bunnies into Australia by a settler in 1859, two million rabbits could be shot or trapped a year without any noticeable impact.



The ecological solution would be to re-introduce their natural predators by breeding cougars and wolves for local release. This might turn walking the dog into a whole new experience, and create interesting adventures for cats, but this is not something most people would welcome.

That leaves three solutions - to replace the role of the predators we have driven out by organizing an annual cull; to attempt to sterilize them all; or to protect them in wildlife sanctuaries. They are cute, and appeal to our instinct to protect - but how many million can local sanctuaries take? Shipping them to Texas makes no sense at all.

Sterilization may work for rabbits if we are willing to pay the cost; but how can we sterilize all the local wild deer?

This is the point at which ecological ignorance, the desire to protect and the desire to eat meat intersect.

What has meat got to do with it? Everything - for it is highly contradictory for anyone who eats meat to complain about killing rabbits and

deer when their own eating requires the constant killing of lambs, cows, ducks, chickens, pigs, and other animals. And on the other hand, venison and rabbit offer a source of local meat that has at least enjoyed a wild life, not one in a ghastly factory farm.

Does anyone apart from a vegan who eats no animal products have a moral right to argue that there should not be a cull of the rabbits and deer?

And yet my personal reason for being a vegetarian is to reduce the deaths of animals, and when I look into those bambi or bunny eyes, my instinct too is to protect them.

So where do bacteria fit in? Bacteria also breed like rabbits, only much faster, which gives them great evolutionary flexibility. When we misuse antibiotics, we get multi-drug resistant bacteria such as MRSA. In August, an even more scary threat arose in India in the form of a gene that passes easily between bacteria and makes them resistant to almost all of the powerful, last-line group of antibiotics. To imagine a future without antibiotics, we just have to look back to the last century. It's a very grim thought.

The common factor that links the bambies, bunnies and bacteria is ecological ignorance. We urgently need ecological education for all children in our schools. Our universities should make it a requirement of entry. We cannot act wisely or live in harmony with Nature if we are so ignorant, ecologically.

For the bunnies and bambies, and to protect our own need to grow more food, we are going to need to accept an annual cull, celebrating the lives of the deer with an annual venison feast. Then farmers like Brian Hughes will also be able to grow the organic food we need without fear of going bankrupt by feeding his crops to the deer.

Guy Dauncey