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As a lifelong resident of the North Fork, I have witnessed the explosion of the deer population.

When I was growing up, it was rare to find deer tracks in fields or in the woods, but now it's common to come across several deer in one's backyard. Historically, populations of deer were dramatically lower than they are today, and we know that without natural predators and with plentiful food sources, deer populations can double in two to three years.

The agricultural industry, a critical part of the East End economy, has experienced millions of dollars of crop loss due to white-tailed deer. Farmers have spent thousands of dollars on deer fencing to protect crops; this is an expense most cannot afford. As a fourth generation farmer, I understand this all too well.

As a Suffolk County Legislator and a former Southold Town Councilman, I have spoken to hundreds of constituents whose lives have been seriously impacted by deer, whether it is by a tick-borne illness or a car accident or, as in some cases, both. I have walked through many acres of preserved open spaces and parks in my district and seen firsthand the destruction deer have done to the natural environment.

All efforts must be made to bring the population of white-tailed deer, which has reached crisis proportions in eastern Suffolk County, down to sustainable levels. The USDA sharpshooter program is one tool that can be employed to help achieve this goal and, at least in Southold Town, the community will utilize the program to decrease the herd size and protect human health, biodiversity and property.

This does not mean that there is unanimous support for culling the herd or that no controversy surrounds the program, but if the alternatives are considered objectively, the logical conclusion is that we need to act.

Tick-borne illnesses have cost millions of dollars in treatment and lost work and caused much pain and suffering. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control reported almost 3,000 cases of Lyme disease in New York State in 2012, but it is believed the actual number is much greater due to misdiagnosis, inconclusive testing and underreporting. New York State has one of the highest incidences of tick-borne illnesses in the country and Suffolk County has one of the highest infection rates in the state.

Lyme disease is not the only tick-borne illness associated with deer. Others, such as Babesiosis, can be particularly harmful to people with compromised immune systems. In addition, tick-borne disorders unfamiliar to scientists are emerging, such as a potentially life-threatening red meat allergy that develops in some people bitten by lone star ticks.

The Suffolk County Tick Management Task Force concluded that "the issue of tick-borne disease is inextricably linked to deer overpopulation ... Any strategy for tick control must reduce the number of deer and/or the number of ticks on deer to have any chance of success."

Unchecked growth of the white-tailed deer population has devastated the natural environment and this will continue until we act to reduce the population to a sustainable level.

Conservationists and those who advocate for the protection of wildlife alike should support policies that cull the herd to protect habitat and biodiversity. In many areas deer have destroyed the woodland understory. Invasive plant species, like mile-a-minute vine, have taken over because beneficial native plants have been gobbled up by deer.

The insects, birds and other animals these native plants and ecosystems support are now threatened and have decreased in numbers. Some forests are so stripped they may not be able to regenerate.

The problems caused by white-tailed deer overpopulation are multi-faceted and costly. As a community, we need to make the hard choices and manage the herd to lessen the occurrence of disease, habitat destruction and property loss.

If you are concerned about the well-being of individual deer, perhaps you should stop driving, because hundreds are killed or maimed in car accidents yearly. It is not a pretty sight to see an animal writhing in pain after being hit but not killed.

The USDA program is conducted safely, professionally and humanely. The meat harvested is a good source of protein and will not go to waste but will be donated to food pantries and homeless shelters feeding many people in need on Long Island.

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