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State must change practices to protect herd

Midwesterners have always taken deer for granted, but we can't any longer. They are sick, and they are going to become more sick if we don't make some changes in our policy toward baiting and feeding of these herds, activities known to facilitate the spread of disease.

The ethical questions on whether to bait and feed these wild animals have been trumped with the recent discovery of life-threatening, contagious diseases in Wisconsin deer. The question of right and wrong has become life or death for these animals that provide us with food, recreation and entertainment.

Deer-baiting by hunters and even deer-feeding by nature lovers has been criticized for altering the animals' instinctual behavior and taking the sport out of hunting. It also brings animals unnaturally close to one another, in such proximity to spread contagious diseases.

Until recently, disease wasn't a problem. Those days are gone.

In random testing by the DNR, three white tail deer shot in Dane County were found to have chronic wasting disease, or CWD, which causes deer to grow thin and die. This is the first time CWD has been found east of the Mississippi River.

There's no evidence that CWD can infect humans or cattle, but there is much we do not know about this disease. Consumption recommendations range from refraining only from certain tissues to eating nothing from an infected animal.

The news of CWD is joined by the discovery of bovine tuberculosis in game herds. Once again, there is no evidence that the disease is transmittable to humans, but its effect on wildlife can be severe.

In light of these discoveries, baiting and feeding must be regulated for the sake of the herd. License requirements for captive game animals need to be tightened to better monitor animals transported into Wisconsin to prevent the spread of disease. And all of these regulations should be backed by adequate enforcement procedures.

We've heard from experts and we know from observing the contagion of mad cow disease in Europe that these health threats have to be managed from the very onset to preserve the integrity of the herd.

In this debate, it is important to remember that Wisconsin's deer herd belongs to all of us, every citizen of the state. It is a vital, dynamic natural resource, as much as our rivers, public spaces, and state and national forests. Therefore, the viability of this resource is not just an issue for hunters, or game farm owners, or lawmakers. It is all of our concern.

We, as a state, have to protect the herd, or we will suffer for its decline.

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