

The Nutritional, Ecological, and Ethical Arguments Against Baiting and Feeding White-Tailed Deer

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The use of food plots, supplemental feeding, and baiting has been a common and legal practice in Texas for many years. There is now controversy as to whether Texas Parks and Wildlife Department should include this extra nutrition as part of their carrying capacity estimates used to determine harvest permits for private landowners. Managers should remember that nutrition is only one component of carrying capacity, which includes water, shelter, and space as well. Extensive data exists about the potential negative impact of feeding on deer. Studies in Texas (Murden and Risenhoover 1993) have shown that fed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) can degrade rangeland by overconsuming high-quality plants and underconsuming low-quality plants. Guitierrez (1999) did not find that effect when South Texas deer were offered winter food plots. Donier et al. (1997) found in Minnesota that winter supplementation increased browse pressure within 900 m of feeders. Other reports (Williamson 2000) show increased browse pressure within a 1-mile radius of feeders, perhaps due to concentration of deer. Cooper et al. (2002) found 50% kernal home range sizes of fed deer were half that of unfed deer and that browse pressure near the feeder was 7 times that of unfed deer. Supplemental feeding has been suspected of contributing to the spread of tuberculosis in deer, chronic wasting disease in elk (*Cervus canadensis*) and deer, and brucellosis in elk and bison (*Bison bison*; Williamson 2000). Crowding due to supplemental feeding led to fighting and injuries in Michigan deer (Ozoga 1972). Feeding has actually led to starvation in deer due to increases in population when feeding was initiated (McCullough 1977, Schmitz 1990). Supplemental feed is consumed by nontarget species, possibly leading them to pass disease and to attract predators. Cooper and Ginnett (2000) found decreased survivorship of simulated turkey nests within 400 m of deer feeders in Texas. In 1998 we found illegal levels of aflatoxin in 40% of 100 randomly purchased bags of “deer corn” in Texas (N. Wilkins, Texas Cooperative Extension, USA, unpublished data). The ecological significance of deer feeding and baiting is only part of the issue. Feeding leads to ethical questions as well. Feeding is part of the domestication process, along with fencing, breeding, and health programs that, due to their expense, may lead to the desire for private ownership of wildlife. Baiting, likewise, adds to the advantages of the hunter over the hunted and may decrease hunter satisfaction and increase concerns of the antihunters and the nonhunting public (Ortega y Gasset 1995). Deer managers and agency personnel should review the data presented here and incorporate it into their decision making when considering feeding or baiting of deer.

Keywords: baiting, deer, hunting, *Odocoileus* spp., supplemental feeding

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