

Eveland: PGC Accusations False and Misleading

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In the July 4, 2014 issue of Pennsylvania Outdoor News (PON), my commentary entitled "A Perfect Storm" described three mechanisms that are working in tandem to reduce the size of Pennsylvania's deer herd and deter herd growth. Subsequently, in the August 1 issue of PON, PGC accused me of writing an article that contained multiple inaccuracies. I encourage everyone to read these two commentaries and decide for yourself which of us is attempting to mislead readers.

In 2000-01, I was asked by the senate majority leader to assess PGC's deer-reduction program, and again was requested by the Office of the Governor and the majority leader of the House Game and Fisheries Committee in 2007. In 2010, members of PGC's Board of Commissioners asked me to prepare a new deer management plan for them in the event that they could muster a majority of votes to halt the deer-reduction program.

From my investigations, I have come to two over-riding conclusions: (1) that no significant benefits have resulted after 14 years of herd reduction—not for science, society, nor economy—while the negative impacts to the future of sport hunting and the commonwealth have been great; and (2) that PGC's deer-reduction program is designed to serve foresters and radical environmentalists at the expense of sportsmen and recreational hunting, and as such is in violation of PGC's legislated mission and state law.

According to PGC's first misleading accusation, *"First, he states the Game Commission's reduction goal was five to six deer per square mile."* However, my statement was misquoted, and, instead, read as follows, *"Although game commissioners privately stated a target goal of only five to six deer per square mile, the Game Commission admitted to have overshot this target number, leaving only one to two deer per square mile in some areas."* In point of fact, however, these deer-density numbers were told to me by a commissioner during a private meeting.

Further, PGC states in its commentary that the agency's target deer-reduction density was 21 deer per square mile. While this may be a noble-sounding statement, it is shameful for PGC to attempt to convince sportsmen that 21 deer per square mile exist within many areas of northern-tier, eastern, and central counties. Few deer have led to few and decreasing numbers of hunters afield, and few deer and few hunters have led to virtually "silent" opening days – even during a concurrent season.

PGC claims that hunters harvested 352,920 deer in 2013. If we consider the impacts of predation at PGC/Penn State published study rates of 22.5% to 50% fawn mortality, there would need to be 1.7-2.1 million deer in the state in order to sustain such a high harvest. It would also represent an average of 66-81 deer per square mile on all forested lands in the state. Do any outdoorsmen believe that this many deer exist in Penn's Woods?

PGC continues to claim these outrageously-high annual harvest estimates in an attempt to minimize the great impacts of its deer-reduction program — a misguided action that is driving hunters away in droves and, according to a legislative study, inflicting an economic cost to the commonwealth of \$285-415 million each year.

Therefore, PGC's first misleading accusation is both inaccurate and deceitful.

Regarding PGC's second misleading accusation, PGC wrote, *"The author falsely claims that predation impacts on fawns have doubled or tripled in Pennsylvania. He inaccurately uses information from a 1-square-mile area in northern Pennsylvania and applies it to the entire state."* PGC's statement, however, is entirely false. Although PGC is counting on some readers not referring to the actual content of my commentary, in reality, I first referred to the published results of a 2000-01 PGC/Penn State study that concluded *"22.5% of the total fawn crop succumbed to predation"*. I next referred to a recent Penn State survey of predator/fawn studies throughout eastern states that indicated that coyote predation accounts for about 50% of fawn mortality. In addition, from the Penn State survey I referenced studies in southeastern states that report a 75% coyote impact on fawns.

As a fourth reference, I noted a 12-year Quality Deer Management Association study from Tioga County that was conducted by wildlife biologist Kip Adams. From his published document, as many as 50-75% of fawns could be lost to predation. Unfortunately, in an attempt to mislead the reader, PGC focused its commentary on this 1-square-mile QDMA study area, attempted to discredit the QDMA study, and conveniently disregarded the other documented studies that I had listed. Therefore, by intentionally ignoring the sources of my data in an attempt to deceive PON readers into believing that my metrics were based solely on suppositions and a 1-square-mile area, PGC is refuting the published results of multiple reputable government, university, and private predation studies, including Penn State surveys.

PGC further deceived PON readers by stating, *"The Game Commission has thoroughly investigated predator impacts..."* I would ask the PGC how they could make such a misleading statement considering that the agency's board of commissioners recently directed the deer team to design a study that would determine the actual impact of predation on fawns. After much contemplation, the deer team reluctantly responded that such a study would cost \$3.9 million and take multiple years to complete.

Therefore, PGC's second misleading accusation is both inaccurate and deceitful.

Regarding PGC's third misleading accusation, PGC wrote, *"Finally, Eveland claims predation and antler restrictions will prevent deer populations from increasing. To the contrary..."*

In reality, my article referred to a "perfect storm" scenario in which high antlerless-license allocations, heavy predation, and antler restrictions have combined to virtually assure that reasonable herd growth would be a difficult task, at best, even if PGC's deer team were directed to reduce the number of antlerless allocations. A published Penn State survey of Southeastern predation studies concluded: *"In that region, an average of only one in four fawns survives to three months of age."* When combined with doe hunting, these deer populations would be unable to sustain themselves in the face of such heavy coyote predation.

Regarding the negative impact of antler restrictions on herd growth, I will make two points. First, quoting a 2003 official DCNR Deer Management Plan, *"Increased restrictions for antlered bucks made it harder to harvest a buck, so hunters were more apt to harvest an antlerless deer instead."* This intention of antler restrictions seems to be diabolical, but, nevertheless, is a DNCR-quoted reason for antler restrictions.

Secondly, antler restrictions skew the over-winter population to include a higher percentage of adult buck and fewer does and fawns, thus decreasing the growth potential of the herd. Permit me to explain: prior to the time of antler restrictions, PGC intended that no more than 10% of the post-hunting-season herd that was carried over the winter into spring should consist of adult buck. In this regard, if we were to assume a nominal carrying-capacity density of only 10 deer per square mile prior to the year 2000, then only one of those 10 deer would have been an adult buck, and the remaining nine would have consisted of pregnant does and fawns.

However, under the current antler restriction policy, PGC has adjusted the percentage of adult buck in the overwinter herd to as high as 40%. Thus, under this circumstance up to four of the 10 deer would consist of adult buck, while only six would consist of pregnant does and fawns. Besides the effect of more buck limiting the amount of food for does and fawns during the critical winter period, by increasing the percentage of buck in the herd and decreasing the number of does, PGC staff has been able to incorporate into the program another deterrent to herd growth.

Therefore, PGC's third misleading accusation is both inaccurate and deceitful.

Regarding PGC's failure to perform its duty, although I concede that the PGC deer team has a right to again attempt to discredit my commentaries and reports (that are, incidentally, based on original documents and published material), PGC should not deceive sportsmen, legislators, and its own board of commissioners by downplaying the impacts of a deer management program that is the greatest conservation mistake in the over-one-hundred-year history of the agency. In so doing, PGC is intentionally ignoring its legislatively-directed mission in Title 34 *"to serve the interest of sportsmen for recreational hunting."* As such, the PGC deer team and those who support their agenda to instead serve the interests of foresters and fringe environmentalists at the expense of sportsmen are in gross and deliberate violation of state law, and should be held accountable.

Implying an intention to work with hunters, PGC concluded in its commentary of accusations, *"Some of this controversy would be eliminated – and hunters and the Game Commission could work together toward a common goal...if individuals stopped their attempts to create conflict based on false and deceitful claims."* However, the following three quotations speak for themselves in expressing PGC's true attitude toward sportsmen.

- PGC's previous leader of the deer team commented to the Governor's Council, *"If we can just keep the deer-reduction program going for at least one generation of hunters, there won't be enough left who remember the good old days."*
- In an article entitled "Enough" that was published in the August 2012 issue of Pennsylvania Game News, Deer Biologist Ms. Fleegle wrote, *"We've all seen it – the child (sportsmen) promptly begins...the temper tantrum. The adult (PGC)...has to teach one of life's most unpleasant lessons, 'You can't always get what you want'... The Game Commission has not always been a very strict parent. So the Commission once again said no to demands calling for more deer as it stood in the midst of countless blue balls."*
- Just prior to his recent firing, PGC's executive director stated to the Governor's Council, *"Hunters are not a consideration in deer management."*

Again, I ask the reader to decide which of us is deceitful, and if the PGC is really interested in "working with hunters", or simply in silencing them.