

by Jeffrey D. Corbin a professor at Union College's Department of Biological Sciences:

<http://www.timesunion.com/opinion/article/Save-state-forestland-from-deer-5031496.php>

“The balance of our environment is a complicated thing. Unfortunately, our forests are in a state of crisis. The explosive growth in the number of white-tailed deer in recent decades threatens trees' ability to regenerate and provide these economic, recreation and ecological benefits.

The forests of the future can be seen in the carpet of tree seedlings growing slowly in the understory shade of their parents. However, that carpet is a thin one through much of our state, thanks to hungry deer who consume nearly every tree seedling save the few species they find unpalatable. Where there should be many young trees ready to replace adults as they die, instead there is little of the species variation that should form the raw material for successful resilience in the face of climate change and other environmental stresses.

Today, deer overpopulation poses a greater threat to New York's forests than anything except bulldozers. There are more than 1 million deer in New York, an average of more than 30 deer per square mile of forest. In some areas, particularly in the southeast including Long Island, the Lower Hudson Valley and the southern Catskills, you can find more than twice that density. Yet, studies tell us that forest damage is evident above 20 deer per square mile.

Scientists with The Nature Conservancy have found that in nearly one-third of the state, deer have stunted tree regeneration so much that our forests may not be able to replace themselves. Deer also depress forest growth, reduce plant biodiversity and contribute to the decline of songbird populations and forest wildflowers.

A forest is more than a collection of the trees that make up its canopy. It is a community of plants and animals that interact in complex ways. Elevating any one species above the rest, as we have done with deer, is misguided and doomed to fail. Deer populations need to be managed properly — for the sake of our forests and the benefits they provides to people, and for sake of the health of deer populations themselves. “