

Vancouver

March 25, 2018

Members of the Sallas Forest Strata Council –

Attached to this note you will find a commentary on Parks Canada's proposal to eradicate the fallow deer from Sidney Island. It responds to questions that other owners have put to me, presumably because of my long involvement in the strata corporation and the limited partnership that preceded it, including our dealings with Parks Canada and the deer.

These questions have not been selected because they are the most important, but because they raise issues that are sometimes not well understood. My purpose is to help clarify, and perhaps simplify, the issues at stake, and to comment on their relevance to our response to Parks Canada.

I know that others, including the Council, have provided background material on many of these questions, and I apologize for some repetition.

I hope you will find it helpful.

Peter H. Pearse C.M.

Extirpation of Fallow Deer from Sidney Island:

Some questions

What's the issue?

Over the last four decades, Sallas Forest and the Limited Partnership that preceded it have wrestled with the problem of managing Sidney Island's excessive abundance of European fallow deer. Parks Canada has recently resolved to extirpate this invasive species from the National Park land on the island. They have asked us whether we would support them in extending this extirpation to Sallas Forest lands as well, which they are willing to organize and undertake at no cost to us.

What's the purpose?

A general objective of Parks Canada is to protect and preserve National Park lands in their natural condition, which calls for eliminating invasive, alien plants and animals. Parks Canada's biologists have identified the fallow deer as by far the biggest threat to the island's natural environment, and their proposed eradication is "...the single most effective step landowners and Parks Canada can take towards improving the ecological health of the island, and restoring one of the most at risk ecosystems in Canada."

Sallas Forest has a similar objective. Our Statutory Building Scheme, endorsed by all owners, provides that our Strata Council will manage the common property with the primary objective being to "...preserve its natural environmental attributes and aesthetic values..." Among other things, this calls for ridding our property of alien species of plants and animals introduced by previous owners.

Accordingly, over the last 38 years, we have eliminated non-native animals such as angora goats, Chinese pheasants, and turkeys. Fallow deer, by far the most disruptive to the forest environment, have received by far the most attention. Our records show that we have removed some fourteen thousand fallow deer by various means: recreational hunting, commercial guided hunting, capture and sale of live animals, capturing and butchering for sale of venison and dispatching by sharpshooters.

Control of the prolific fallow deer has been particularly urgent because of the damage they have inflicted on the forest. The whole forest ecosystem has been disrupted, and reforestation of areas logged in the past has been particularly difficult and costly.

Thus Sallas Forest, and its predecessor Limited Partnership have expended very substantial human and monetary resources in an effort to reduce the excessive population of this non-native and highly invasive species of deer.

Are we making progress?

Our intense effort to reduce the over-abundance of fallow deer and their damage to the forest has been remarkably successful in some respects. The number of fallow deer on the island has been reduced substantially, from roughly two thousand a decade ago to two or three hundred today. The forest has begun to recover and the deer, which showed signs of starvation in the past, are now fat and healthy.

Nevertheless, recovery is far from complete: most of our native trees, including all the deciduous species, are still not regenerating without artificial protection. The forest understory, shrubs and wildflowers are still sparse, and so are the songbirds that depend on them.

A recent study by UBC ecologists found that of 18 Gulf and San Juan Islands studied, Sidney Island has the most undeveloped understory vegetation and the lowest abundance of songbirds.

All these signals and research lead to the conclusion that the fallow deer need to be reduced further to enable sensitive plants and trees to recover from many years of predation. However, further reduction is becoming increasingly difficult, because the time and effort required to capture deer or for hunters to find them increases exponentially as the population is reduced. Despite increased effort, reduction of the fallow deer has slowed over the last few years.

Moreover, our success in reducing the fallow deer population is precarious; past experience has shown that any respite in the control effort will quickly result in renewed population expansion.

Whose deer are they?

We do not own the deer on Sallas Forest land. All deer in British Columbia (except those in licensed deer farms) are the property of the Crown, which in this case is represented by the Wildlife Branch of the provincial government's Ministry of Environment. We can control or manage the deer only to the extent approved by the Wildlife Branch.

Over the last four decades the Wildlife Branch has recognized our difficulty in controlling the over-abundance of invasive fallow deer and, because they are not a natural species in this region, we have been able to negotiate acceptable (but not always our preferred) hunting and management arrangements.

Inevitably, we are at the mercy of the Wildlife Branch in managing the deer on Sallas Forest land, and governmental agencies occasionally change their policies, especially policies concerned with wildlife. Thus our lack of property rights in the deer, and without authority to manage them as we wish, leaves us in a weak and vulnerable position in managing the invasive fallow deer over the long term.

A third public agency concerned with deer management on Sidney Island is The Islands Trust, which holds the covenants to our Conservation Areas. And a fourth interested party is the local First Nation. Significantly, all three public agencies - Parks Canada, B. C. Wildlife Branch and The Islands Trust, have considerable expertise in wildlife management, and all four of these interested parties support the proposal to eradicate the invasive fallow deer from Sidney island.

Why has Parks Canada come up with this idea now?

This is not a new idea. Since assuming responsibility for the former Sidney Spit Provincial Marine Park in 2004, Parks Canada has consistently pressed us to agree to a plan to eradicate the fallow deer from the island. We have resisted doing so for several reasons: it is potentially a divisive issue among owners; we thought we could reduce and manage the deer population adequately; and Parks Canada's earlier eradication plans would have cost us a substantial amount of money.

Nevertheless, Sallas Forest and Parks Canada did agree to consider eradication again in the future, and in the meantime we would cooperate in reducing the population substantially, as we have done.

Parks Canada's present proposal is refreshingly new insofar as it does not require us to pay any of the cost, estimated to be in the order of \$1 million.

How much would hunting have to be reduced?

Eradication of the fallow deer would immediately reduce the island's deer population to the much less abundant native black-tail deer. Over the following five to ten years the black-tail population would be expected to grow to a density similar to that found on other Gulf Islands that support only black-tail deer and have no natural predators.

At the beginning of this transitional period especially, the relatively sparse population of deer will reduce hunters' rate of success in bagging deer, allowing some hunting to continue while the deer population grows. When it reaches its sustainable density, an effective, continuing, hunting program will be essential to prevent over-expansion of the population.

What's my conclusion?

The considerations reviewed above lead me to conclude that we should seize the opportunity Parks Canada's has offered us, for several reasons:

- Most importantly, by eliminating an exotic, invasive species, the proposed extirpation of the fallow deer will advance our primary objective in managing the island's resources and environment, namely to protect and preserve them in their natural condition. (Having drafted this part of our Statutory Building Scheme with help from our lawyer when our Strata Corporation was created, I can attest that this was the intent of this provision.)
- It will eliminate by far the biggest threat to the island's ecosystems and environment.
- Reducing the deer population to one native species will greatly simplify our challenge in deer management, and put an end to the otherwise endless effort, expense and uncertainty associated with fallow deer.
- All the other parties having an interest in the deer support Parks Canada's proposal to eradicate the invasive fallow deer.
- Parks Canada's proposal offers an extraordinary opportunity to undertake this expensive project without financial cost to us.

