

The buck stops where? Case exposes rift over caring for deer

January 8 2017, by Michael Hill



This Jan. 5, 2017 photo provided by The Evelyn Alexander Wildlife Rescue Center Inc. shows a deer being cared for by the rescue center on Long Island in Hampton Bays, N.Y. Recent New York state guidelines mandating limited intervention have stirred heated debate and even a lawsuit. Under those guidelines, the largely volunteer force of 1,300 licensed wildlife rehabilitators in the state can no longer nurse injured or sick adult white-tailed deer indefinitely. They have 48 hours to either release or euthanize them, making this deer's fate uncertain. (Virginia Frati/The Evelyn Alexander Wildlife Rescue Center, Inc. via AP)

A dramatic, ultimately tragic tussle over a one-antlered deer that somehow wandered into a tiny Manhattan park has cast a spotlight on a simple question: How much should humans step in to help troubled wildlife?

Recent guidelines by New York state officials mandating limited intervention by wildlife "rehabilitators" stirred heated debate and a lawsuit even before last month's case of the white-tailed buck that became a celebrity for about two weeks when it appeared in Harlem's Jackie Robinson Park.

TV and tabloid coverage of the [deer](#), which likely crossed a bridge or swam over a river to get to the park, caused residents to worry about its safety. It didn't seem fazed by the many onlookers who snapped pictures and fed it through the fence. And what if it scampered out into the streets and got hit by a car?

New York City officials announced plans to euthanize the deer, but New York's governor stepped in with a late reprieve and a plan to relocate it to a wooded area upstate. In the end, the deer some had nicknamed "Lefty" for its single antler died in a shelter, officials said, apparently overcome by stress.

This was the kind of animal-in-peril scenario New York officials had in mind last summer when they issued new guidelines for the 1,300 licensed wildlife rehabilitators, who are called upon by police and other agencies when deer get sideswiped on highways, tangled up in suburban fences or otherwise imperiled.



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Under the guidelines, the largely volunteer force can no longer nurse injured or sick adult white-tailed deer indefinitely. They have 48 hours to either release or euthanize them. They can't take in adult moose and black bears at all. And fawns and black bear cubs can be rehabilitated only between April 15 and Sept. 15.

The rules exposed a rift between the state agency that regulates hunting and deer populations, and the wildlife rehabilitators who try to heal them. One rehabilitation center has sued to void the rules related to deer.

"Our argument is something got hit by a car, an animal is hanging from a fence, an animal is stuck in a park in Harlem, and we just need to help the individual animal," said Ginnie Frati, director of the Evelyn Alexander Wildlife Rescue Center on Long Island, which filed the lawsuit. "They deserve to get a second chance."

Added Kelly Martin, president of the nonprofit New York Wildlife Rehabilitation Council: "We have the ability to alleviate suffering and help where we can. We don't just turn our backs if there's something we can do. ... I don't know how a person can see an animal with a broken bone and just say, 'Oh well,' and walk away."

But New York environmental officials said in an email that they became concerned about the deer rehabilitation after coming across some that were being held indefinitely.



This June 2016 photo provided by The Evelyn Alexander Wildlife Rescue Center Inc. shows a fawn being cared for by the rescue center on Long Island in Hampton Bays, N.Y. Recent New York state guidelines mandating limited intervention have stirred heated debate and even a lawsuit. Under those guidelines, the largely volunteer force of about 1,300 licensed wildlife rehabilitators in the state can no longer nurse injured or sick adult white-tailed deer indefinitely. They have 48 hours to either release or euthanize them. (Virginia Frati/The Evelyn Alexander Wildlife Rescue Center, Inc. via AP)

A state wildlife biologist said in court filings that large animals kept by rehabilitators for long periods can become used to human contact, potentially creating problems once they're released back into the wild. And survival rates for rehabilitated deer are low under any circumstances.

While states' rules for big game wildlife rehabilitation vary widely, New York officials say there are similar rules in some neighboring deer-heavy states. For instance, standard [wildlife](#) rehabilitation licenses issued in Massachusetts do not allow taking in deer in without special permission.

Fрати fears rehabilitators will ignore the rules, which could result in license revocations, or that untrained people will start taking in deer.

And she also sees something of a disconnect between the new rules that call for restraint and the intense interest top state officials showed in the Manhattan deer last month.

But New York Department of Environmental Conservation executive deputy commissioner Ken Lynch said this past week that animal incidents are considered on a case-by-case basis.

"That was a very unique situation," he said, "because of the location, because of the visibility and because of the public interest in it."

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