

Catalina deer in the crosshairs: Will compromise avert a planned slaughter?

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Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) herd. Credit: Wikimedia Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication

After months of intense community outrage over its planned slaughter of thousands of nonnative mule deer, Catalina Island Conservancy officials

have indicated that they may be open to considering optional plans, such as relocating the deer and reducing the population through sterilization.

"There is always room for compromise," said Kim Sudhalter, a conservancy spokeswoman. "There are a lot of viewpoints on this issue and, yes, we're listening to them. ... Should we find the need to make adjustments, we may do that."

Ever since conservancy officials announced in November that they were committed to using sharpshooters in helicopters to kill roughly 1,500 [deer](#) in an effort to save Santa Catalina Island's unique native vegetation, many of the island's 3,000 residents have responded with outrage, protests, petitions and even threats.

At a recent community forum, however, passions seemed to ebb slightly when Los Angeles County Supervisor Janice Hahn urged the conservancy to consider alternatives to the eradication plan.

"I understand that the conservancy considered and dismissed several alternative proposals, including relocation of the deer, extending the deer hunting season and sterilization," said Hahn, whose district includes the island, situated about 22 miles off the Southern California coast.

"I know that none of these ideas are perfect, but given the fierce opposition to the proposal, I'm asking you to put your plan on hold and reconsider other options," she told forum attendees.

Hahn's call for compromise marked a sharp turn in attitude toward the issue—just two months ago, Hahn said the county has no jurisdiction in the matter.

Nevertheless, the prospect of mutual agreement was a source of elation for Lisa Berman, spokeswoman for the "Stop the Slaughter of Mule

Deer on Catalina Island" petition drive, which had gathered 17,238 signatures as of Wednesday.

"The big question everyone is asking is this: Why does it have to be total eradication?" she said.

The conservancy believes that the deer removal effort is consistent with the vision of the Wrigley family, who bought up much of the island in 1919 and later deeded it to the conservancy.

By culling nonnative animals including goats and pigs, the conservancy follows its mandate to repair damaged landscape and restore conditions that had been severely altered by ranching and farming, officials say.

Deer have browsed seedlings of manzanita and island scrub oak—a Channel Islands endemic—into oblivion in some places, according to conservancy scientists.

Climate change is also taking a toll on the landscape and forcing deer to take an even bigger bite of native plants. They also wander into Avalon in search of nourishment from garden greenery and garbage.

After consulting with [state wildlife officials](#), the conservancy requested a scientific collection permit to use sharpshooters in helicopters—and in some cases surgical sterilization—to eliminate the deer in order to ensure the survival of 60 species of plants and animals found nowhere else on Earth.

"None of us get into this field of work to kill animals," said Lauren Dennhardt, the senior director of conservation for the conservancy. "But sometimes it becomes your job to correct the wrongs of the past."

A final decision by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife is

expected later this year.

State law requires the department to take into account [public concerns](#), according to Tim Dillingham, a spokesman for the agency.

"We're here to listen to concerns the public has," Dillingham told forum attendees. "We're very interested in what you have to say."

Critics pointed out, however, that the community forum did not allow any comments from the audience. Instead, a panel of scientists and officials including Dillingham responded to pre-written questions selected by a moderator.

They also complain that the conservancy failed to involve the [local community](#) in the planning process or recognize that many people consider the deer an important part of the island's natural beauty, and a wildlife resource for hunters.

Robin Cassidy, a small-business owner in Avalon and a 50-year resident, said [public engagement](#) is essential to give stakeholders room to draft a strategy to accommodate both conservancy officials and "those of us who care deeply about the fate of all life on Catalina."

"While compromise might be a little premature at this point, the recent emergence of meaningful dialogue is an exciting development, and we welcome it with open arms," she said.

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