

SNG-Nowlan-deer in your headlights?

Is there a deer in your headlights?

By Jim Nowlan

I was recently driving along on a rural state highway, minding my own business (as they say), when out of nowhere (as they say) darted a white tail deer that seemed intent on colliding with my car, which it did.

The damage wasn't much, though more than \$1,500 to fix (heavy breathing on a car probably results in more than \$1,500 to repair at the auto body shop).

I was among the 15,000 drivers in Illinois estimated to have been in a deer-vehicle accident (DVA is the parlance) this past year. Accidents with injuries range from 500-600 annually in recent years, and fatalities from 4 to 10.

So here we have a public policy issue in which there is an implicit price on life. That is, public policies could be enacted by the state Department of Natural Resources alone, without legislation, that could reduce the number of fatalities each year.

Should we?

There are about 800,000 deer in Illinois, according to a 2008 estimate by the state natural resources agency. Each year in Illinois, hunters harvest about one-quarter of the deer population across 112 days of hunting by firearms and bow-and-arrow.

Deer hunting is a substantial business in Illinois. There are outfitters in my rural area that provide lodging and deer hunting opportunities from people across the country, who like the big, fat, corn-fed deer in our state.

Beer sales probably spike during the busiest hunting season in October-November as well, as do purchases of heavy canvas, camouflage-design overalls.

And if every hunter bagged one deer on average, that means close to a quarter million people enjoyed the outdoors and their sport.

Yet there are costs involved.

State Farm Insurance estimates the likelihood of a driver being involved in a DVA at 1 in 174 per year. So over a lifetime of say 50 years of driving, your odds of being involved in a DVA are pretty good.

The insurance company says the average cost of repairing a vehicle from such an accident is about \$3,500, or about \$50 million for the total number of accidents in Illinois this past year. You and I pay for this in our insurance premiums, of course.

Auto body shops in my area are known to ask customers if they can put off their repairs until spring, so the shops can focus on deer accidents.

The white tail deer was almost extinct in Illinois in 1900. As a boy in the country in the 1950s, I rarely saw a deer. Today, it is hard to avoid them.

In 2008 the legislature created a deer population control task force. The group of legislators and interest group members basically ratified the status quo.

They recommended that policy be based on the number of accidents per billion miles traveled and that slightly above 200 accidents per billion miles made sense. This was a bit lower than the accident rate in prior years.

This includes some fatalities, of course, which is my point about public policies putting a price on acceptable levels of death.

Is that acceptable?

sClearly there are major benefits from hunting for the many sportsmen and women.

On the other hand, deer have become a nuisance in many urban areas. The city of Rock Island recently okayed bow-and-arrow hunting of deer in the city. This was in response to complaints of yards plundered by deer and by reports of people seeing as many as 17 deer at a time inside the city boundaries.

Urban counties report the largest number of DVA, which makes sense because of their large populations. In 2012, Cook, Madison, Peoria and Will counties, all urban, reported the largest numbers of DVA, even though most of the hunting goes on in rural counties such as Pike and Fulton.

I suggest that we could reduce fatalities, injuries and nuisance problems by culling down to about zero the deer herds in urban counties, while promoting deer hunting in those rural counties with substantial deer habitat.

And by the way, whatever you do when driving, SLOW DOWN at dawn and dusk during the fall and spring on tree-lined highways, and DON'T SWERVE if you encounter a deer in your headlights.