

## WILDLIFE HEALTH FACT SHEET

### Artificial or Supplemental Feeding of Wildlife – why it isn't the answer.

Keep wildlife wild – it's hard to argue with. When humans provide food to wildlife it changes their "wildness", no matter what species is fed. There are various reasons to justify feeding of wildlife, including those for wildlife management purposes so understanding why wild animals are fed is important. ***The following is specific to ungulates or ruminating animals such as deer, elk, or bighorn sheep.***

***Supplemental feeding*** is feeding over a long term to enhance individual animal and population characteristics, e.g. antler size, number and survival of young.

***Emergency feeding*** is feeding when natural food sources are inaccessible or severely restricted on a short term basis, and,

***Winter feeding*** is feeding when natural food is reduced, specifically due to winter conditions such as snow cover, snow depth and can be of variable length.

#### Background

People enjoy feeding wildlife. Opportunities to be close to and to help wild animals are rare but amazing. But in order for wildlife to live a healthy and natural wild life, and in spite of the above reasons for feeding animals, *"it's not a good thing to do"*. When wildlife is fed, changes can take place with significant effects at both the individual and population level that take that wildness away or affect their health:

#### Feed

The feed type is important. It is almost impossible to recreate normal wild feeds. It can take several weeks for digestive systems to adjust to hay or pelleted feeds. If animals don't go into winter in good condition with enough fat reserves to get through this adjustment period, they can die - even with bellies full of feed.

- Dry feeds, such as hay, grains or pelleted types, are formulated for livestock and to be used with abundant fresh water sources – without water availability this dry feed can impact in the digestive tract.
- Animals that eat unnatural foods get a limited one-sided diet. Wild animals have specialized seasonal dietary requirements and obtain needed vitamins, food moisture, and minerals by using a wide array of foods from the natural environment. Most animals have evolved with very specific natural diets and have very specific bacteria in their digestive tracts. Unnatural feed may cause the wrong type of bacteria to be dominant in their stomachs, resulting in an inability to digest natural foods, once feeding is stopped. Fed wildlife can then starve to death even with stomachs full of what they should have been eating all along. If an animal is in poor condition, it also may not have the appropriate bacteria to process unnatural feed. The animal may die of starvation even though it is being fed.
- Livestock feed is expensive and should only be offered at times when it is necessary in the opinion of wildlife managers, in sufficient amounts and quality, to the animals that most need it and for the length of time necessary.

## **Population Effects**

Wild animal populations are naturally limited by a number of factors, including the food their habitat supplies. Those with poor fat reserves or high nutritional needs, such as young of the year, can and often die if natural environmental conditions and appropriate food sources are not present in the right amount and quality to sustain them.

Feeding increases animal density for the short and long term. On the long term, increased reproductive success or young survival can lead to overcrowding and increased competition for available resources with the species fed and between other species. Unintended results can include:

- Poor body condition - underweight, and poor health
- Increased predation from wild predators and humans – the fed animals are concentrated and much easier to find.
- Increased risk of infectious, parasitic, and nutritional diseases, predation, and conflict with humans.
- Disease transmission and outbreaks – arguably the highest risk consequence - numerous examples are seen in North America (NA), such as infectious diseases, e.g. pneumonia and other diseases in wild sheep, bovine tuberculosis, brucellosis and chronic wasting disease.
- Other major ecological effects are documented at different locations in NA from artificial feeding of wildlife:
  - Disruption of animal movement patterns and spatial distribution
  - Alternation of community structure with reduced diversity and abundance
  - Introduction and invasion of exotic plant species
  - General degradation of local habitat
- Animals that have learned to take human supplied feed spend time nearer to humans, increasing their likelihood of injury.

## **Alternatives to Artificial Feeding**

A better way to help wild animals is to preserve and restore natural habitats, avoid disturbances and allow them to conserve their energy to survive severe winter conditions.

- The best way to help wild animals survive a severe winter is to maintain high-quality habitat year-round. If animals go into the winter in good condition, most are able to survive persistent deep snow, ice and cold temperatures. Even in well-functioning natural ecosystems, however, some animals succumb during winter months. The winter season has always kept wildlife populations in balance with available habitat.
- Another way to help wild animals in winter is to avoid disturbing them. Animals must conserve their energy to survive winter conditions, and human disturbance causes them to move about.

May 5, 2011

Dr. Helen Schwantje

Wildlife Veterinarian

[helen.schwantje@gov.bc.ca](mailto:helen.schwantje@gov.bc.ca)

Wildlife Health website: <http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/wld/wldhealth.html>