

Opposition to slaughter mounts

Catalina Island Conservancy moving forward with mule deer eradication plan without permits

By JIM MATTHEWS

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The Catalina Island Conservancy is moving forward with a plan to eliminate all mule deer on the island despite protests from most island residents, the City of Catalina, animal rights groups, and broad coalition in the hunter-conservation community. The Conservancy hopes to begin the lethal removal of all deer beginning this fall, even though it has not prepared an environmental impact report, as required by state law, and has no permit from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) at this point in time.

The consortium of diverse groups is prepared to sue the Conservancy to prevent the slaughter if it is ultimately approved by the CDFW. While the CDFW is publically saying no permit has been issued at this point, the Catalina Island Conservancy (CIC) is acting as though the CDFW has already issued a “scientific collection permit” for the removal, and most of those in opposition to the deer removal say a deal has already been brokered between the CDFW and the CIC through Governor Gavin Newsome’s office.

“The blood will be on Governor Newsome’s hands if this goes forward,” said Rick Travis, a spokesperson for the California Rifle and Pistol Association, which is opposing the removal. “Our number one opposition to the project has been the science tries to compare apples to dinosaurs. The CDFW has said ‘no’ to the permits twice in the past because the Conservancy has never had the science to support the removal. It is unbelievable the CDFW is acquiescing now.”

Melinda Benson is a lawyer and former island resident assisting The Coalition to Save Catalina Island Deer with the petition to stop the deer removal.

“The Conservancy is riding on the coat tails of a true scientific principle – that some non-native species on some islands have been devastating to the native plants and wildlife on those islands, but they simply have not shown that to be the case with mule deer on Catalina Island,” said Benson. “What [scientific data] they’ve offered to the CDFW is an embarrassment.”

While no one with the Conservancy would personally respond to repeated attempts for comment on their plan, its website claims “the herd of roughly 2,000 mule deer are [sic] devastating the Island’s sustainability.

“The situation has become untenable for the deer and for the Island’s ecology, leaving the Island at a tipping point. After consulting with California Department of Fish and Wildlife, it has been determined that a strategic

deer management program is required to implement the plan to revive the Island’s ecosystem,” according to the website.

The Conservancy lists of series of threats posed by the deer ranging from overgrazing of a number of plant species to increased erosion and assisting the spread of non-native plants, but none of the cited studies show a direct causation to any of the problems the island is experiencing, according to Travis, who is also representing the National Rifle Association and Safari Club, all which are opposing the deer removal project.

Travis suggests the studies cited by the Conservancy ignore that of the plants survived over 200 years of heavy grazing by feral goats, sheep, wild hogs and cattle, all species which no longer are on the island.

The idea these same plant species are now endangered by mule deer is specious because nearly identical plants on the mainland have remained viable and thriving. The scientific studies used to support the Conservancy’s plan to eliminate deer, say the deer may be additive to minor negative impacts, but even those impacts are not threatening any of the plant species and linking them as drivers to erosion and the spread of non-native plants is wild conjecture, according to Travis.

The Conservancy is even ignoring its own “Catalina Island Climate Resiliency & Restoration Strategy” plan, which calls for a complete compliance with California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), yet no Environmental Impact Report (EIR), Environmental Assessment (EA), or Negative Declaration document has been presented to the CDWF or public.

Pastor Lopez is one of about 3/4s of Catalina Island’s 4,000 residents and over 100,000 people off the island who have signed one or both of pair of Change. Org petitions to stop the deer removal. Lopez, who was

O.N.S
OUTDOOR NEWS SERVICE

Originally Published in
Western Outdoor News
April 26, 2024
www.OutdoorNewsService.com

born on the island in 1949 and has lived there since, said the CIC was using “skewed science – there’s no sound science about it. I’m totally against it.”

“The Conservancy has done nothing but damage here,” said Lopez. He talks about the inhumane removal of the pigs, goats, and sheep in 2016. He said the contractor, White Buffalo, that removed the goats used herding dogs that were not vaccinated and the diseases they introduced almost wiped out the Island Kit Fox population. Lopez said the Conservancy blamed the residents’ pets – ignoring that all pets had to be vaccinated.

“[The Conservancy] has a lot of money, influence, and clout,” said Lopez. “We are hoping the Department of Fish and Wildlife will deny the permit, but it seems like they are working with the Conservancy this time.”

Tim Daly, a media spokesperson for the DFW, wrote via an e-mail that the Catalina Island Conservancy has applied for a Scientific Collecting Permit (SCP) and the agency was evaluating that application. “The proposal is then either approved or denied. The CDFW is waiting for all the submissions to begin the evaluation process and make a decision. The approval process can take several months, depending on the complexity of the proposal.”

Daly wrote the agency could not evaluate if the CIC is in compliance [with the state’s environmental laws] because it “doesn’t have all the submissions” and “cannot make a determination of what level of documents will be required. CDFW’s issuance of a collection permit and approval of any CIC restoration plan will first be subject to required environmental review under California law, including substantive review under CEQA (the California Environmental Quality Act). However, that effort also awaits additional information and analysis from CIC. Those materials, when submitted, will help CDFW structure and implement an effective effort to meet its environmental review obligations.”

Daly did point out that a 2007 application for a depredation permit to remove the deer was “not the appropriate permit for the requested activity, in part because of the large number of animals involved.” The 2016 permit request was also denied because CDFW needed additional information and planning documents from CIC.”

The City of Avalon also is a sticking point for the deer removal. In November, 2023, the city government passed a resolution to deny the Conservancy the right to manage/kill deer within the city of Avalon. This would effectively make the Conservancy’s effort to eliminate the deer on the island impossible.

Within the past three weeks, the Conservancy told city officials they would give the city the opportunity to have one last public hunt for deer this fall for 700 animals if they reversed the resolution to deny them the opportunity to remove deer within the city limits. After examining the Conservancy’s proposal, the city denied the Conservancy’s request.

Currently, the Conservancy manages the deer numbers with public hunts under their Private Land Management (PLM) program run through the CDFW. First introduced to the island in the 1930s, most observers say the hunting program keeps the deer numbers healthy and in check with the available habitat. They also say there are not 2,000 deer on the island, as the Conservancy claims, providing no data on how that 2,000 number was derived. In fact, the numbers are much lower than in the past, according to long-time island residents who have hunted the deer for decades. This past year over 300 deer were taken off the island under the PLM license.

Hunters and other wildlife enthusiasts would like to support the effort to keep deer on the island, can sign the petition available at Change.Org (<https://www.change.org/p/stop-the-slaughter-of-mule-deer-on-catalina-island>).

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