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## Timber Overharvest and the Future of N.B.'s Deer Yards

Throughout New Brunswick, from early winter to spring, White-tailed Deer concentrate in low-lying forested areas, referred to as deer yards. This enables them to survive when the going gets tough. As snows deepen, deer seek shelter in the older softwood stands of spruce, fir or cedar or any mixed stands of these tree species. Having walked through dozens of deer yards, and having studied the movements of deer in the 1970s as a DNR biologist, I quickly learned just how important large conifers were to deer. Most deer beds (depressions made by the body of a resting deer) I observed were within 65 cm of a tree whose trunk diameter was 30 cm or greater and at least 90 years old. Surprisingly, the snow depths just outside the edge of deer beds I observed averaged 25 cm less than at 3 m distant, even though these latter measurements were still within the stand of large conifers. The conclusion drawn was that, not only were the mature stands of conifers critical for deer survival, but the largest trees within the mature stands were selected by the deer. These large trees provide a presumed windbreak and specific canopy, reducing deer heat loss during the coldest nights of winter.

In northeastern N.B., (Miscou-Kedgwick River), where I was stationed for more than 30 years, there were 300 active deer yards in 1983 when the deer herd peaked. Thereafter, the deer population steadily declined, not so much due to severe winters or habitat loss, but through coyote predation. We conducted numerous surveys, including aerial surveys, and found that at least 80 deer were killed every two weeks by coyotes on the

Restigouche River and its major tributaries alone. Additional mortality included deer killed by coyotes on the conifered slopes of those same rivers and in the dozens of deer yards elsewhere. Within just a few short years, the largest yard on the Nepisiguit (Bathurst) contained no deer, nor did most of the other yards. The largest deer yard (with approximately 1,000 deer) in the entire administrative region, at Simpson's Field (Upasquitch Lake), was 8,000 hectares (16,000 acres), but its entire deer herd was likely extirpated by coyotes by the late 1980s, as examination of hundreds of dead deer confirmed. By 1994, only 6 of the 300 yards had any deer left. At that time, and during the late 90s, it was rare for a DNR enforcement officer to see a deer, even when on night patrol. Due to lack of deer prey and an outbreak of mange, coyotes rapidly declined by the late 90s. Since then, due to the lack of coyotes, the deer population has slowly but steadily increased. About 20-30 % of the 300 previously unoccupied yards were recolonized by deer by 2013 (unpublished NB DNR data), with the "seed" for this re-colonization originating from the few deer yards still in use.

The new forestry Strategy for New Brunswick will allow timber companies to eliminate all yards currently unoccupied by deer in winter. If the public allows politicians and government bureaucrats to do this, we will never again see the numbers of deer we saw in New Brunswick the early to mid-80s. There will simply not be adequate habitat available to support deer during the winter months.

What can citizens do to correct this situation before it is too late? Express your concern, not only to politicians, but also directly to senior officials within the individual timber companies. There are previous cases where individual companies have not exercised the liberty allowed by the Province. For example, when buffers for medium width streams were officially set at 30 m on each side of a water course, Frasers Co., requested that I establish buffers on maps twice that width. This was the direct result of a media campaign

criticizing the narrow buffer strips that we put in place. Likewise, where government policy required 60 m buffers on larger streams, Frasers and Avenor (Dalhousie Mill) both requested 100 m buffers on each side of such streams. Finally, on the Restigouche River, the timber licensee requested a 150 m buffer on each stream side, mainly for aesthetic purposes.

By speaking up now, you can help save the several hundred deer yards about to be eliminated for all time.

*Restigouche River  
Photo by S. Dietz*

