FOR STUDENTS

Migration Barriers Student Page

A major highway was built in the state of Idaho to replace an older, two-lane road. The new highway caused a major problem for deer in the area. Whereas the old road skirted a migration route used by the deer herd when moving between summer and winter feeding ranges, the new highway crossed directly in the path of the deer's migration. The deer's migration route was blocked.

The deer tried to cross the new highway, but many were killed in collisions with autos and trucks. People were injured, and some were killed. A large fence was built along both sides of this highway, in hopes of preventing the animals from trying to cross. Even so, some deer were able to cross, with collisions and fatalities still the result.

Most of the deer, however, were not able to jump the fence that was built. Instead, most of the herd bunched up on one side of the fence. The problem was particularly critical each winter. The deer were trying to move out of the high mountains, where they spent the summer months, to get to lower feeding areas for the winter. There was not enough food for the deer if they could not get to their winter feeding area. They crowded by the fence, ate any food in the area, and began damaging the remaining vegetation and soil structure as they looked for food.

The state wildlife agency took several approaches to relieve this situation. They posted signs and patrolled the highway to have motorists slow down. During the winter, they brought in emergency food for the hungry deer. They didn't want the deer to become accustomed to being fed by humans, however, and deer in a central feeding area are also more likely to contract and spread disease. They compete more with others, sometimes even with their young, for food. And they become easy prey for their predators.

Another approach was to build a 7.5-mile-long fence to the north and east of the highway. This fence helped to hold the deer farther north and to disperse the animals. When deer spread out, they do less damage and don't seek out nearby agricultural areas.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management initiated a project to plant saltbush and bitterbrush on several hundred acres of land next to this fence. An additional 1,500 acres was seeded by plane. These bushes are now 3 to 4 feet high and provide natural winter range for the deer herd. Plans call for seeding another 3,000 to 4,000 acres, the acreage calculated as necessary to support a herd of 2,000 deer. This could result in an alternate path or corridor for the deer.

With thousands of deer, elk, and moose killed on Idaho roads every year, the state has begun to build million-dollar underpasses and overpasses. Game cameras show that the animals are using these, decreasing animal and human fatalities along the highway.

What are the options for managing the deer herd going forward? Consider the following possibilities—including costs and benefits of each—and any others that you think would be effective and appropriate:

- Issue hunting permits to reduce the size of the herd in the area,
- Live-capture and transplant deer to areas where there is sufficient room and food for them to live,
- Persuade the highway department to build more underpasses or overpasses the deer can use to move from one feeding area to the other,
- Keep feeding the deer artificially,
- Create alternate habitat and wildlife migration corridors,
- Let the deer starve, or
- Something else.