Feeding Wild Ungulates – Why it isn't the Answer

WILDLIFE HEALTH FACT SHEET

Keep wildlife wild – it is BC policy and it makes sense. When humans provide food to wild animals it changes their "wildness", no matter what species is being fed. There are justifiable reasons to feed wild animals, such as to attract them for capture, but these situations are rare. The consequences of feeding a wild animal unnatural types and amounts of feed can range from mildly irritating behaviour to catastrophic health issues, so a full understanding of the reasons is important.

The following guidance is specific to ungulates (hoofed mammals) such as deer, elk, or bighorn sheep but the principle of keeping wildlife wild applies to all wild animals.

Background

Opportunities to come close to wild ungulates are rare but rewarding, especially when animals are unaware of the humans. Habituation, or increased animal tolerance for close contact with humans, occurs when animals are fed, and with this comes unplanned consequences. Some of the consequences include:

1. **Feed Effects**

   Wild ungulates have specialized and seasonal food requirements, which they fulfill by eating a wide variety of foods from their environment. Well-intentioned people may quite literally be "killing with kindness" when they provide unnatural food items to wild ungulates. Here's why:

   - All ungulates are ruminants with specific bacteria in their digestive tracts, specialized to digest their specific diet. It can take weeks for ungulate digestive systems to adjust to new food items. Rapid changes, especially at critical times such as the fall, can result in death, even with rumens full of (unnatural) food.
   - Dry feeds, such as hay, grains or pelleted types, are prepared for domestic livestock and meant to be used with abundant fresh water. Without ready access to water, dry feed can impact in the digestive tract and can kill wild ungulates.
   - Grains, pelleted feeds or surplus fruits are high in carbohydrates/protein/energy and even small amounts can cause digestive upsets that lead to diarrhea, bloating and significant damage to ungulate digestive tracts with long term effects seen sometimes in hooves and other tissues.

2. **Population Effects**

   Wild ungulate populations are naturally limited by a number of factors, including the amount and quality of food their habitat supplies. Animals in poor body condition or with high nutritional needs, such as the young, may die when natural environmental conditions and appropriate foods are not present in the right amount and quality to sustain them.

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Feeding of wild ungulates by humans increases animal density in the short term by concentrating animals around the feed source. Density increases may also occur over time if the feeding results in improved body condition or more frequent reproduction. Increased density results in increased competition for natural resources with other animals that share that range. Other consequences of increased animal density include:

- Increased risk of infectious diseases:
    - Disease transmission and outbreaks – animals in close and frequent contact with others transmit organisms more easily than when at lower density. There are many examples across North America where high ungulate density can contribute to disease issues, e.g. pneumonia in wild sheep, bovine tuberculosis and chronic wasting disease in cervids.
    - Higher stress on individual animals. Stress can lead to reduced immune function, making these animals more susceptible to infections.
    - In BC, viral papillomas (warts) in deer appear to be increasing in urban areas where deer numbers are unnaturally high.
- Poor body condition – animals may not grow or gain weight due to reduced feed quality or quantity.
- Increased conflicts with humans:
    - Increased habituation. Animals that learn to take human supplied feed as young or older animals become habituated, losing their natural wariness of humans.
    - Even bottle-raised animals (especially males) can grow up and become aggressive to those that reared them.
    - Habituated ungulates can be aggressive towards humans and their pets – especially during the spring when protecting the young fawns or in the fall during the breeding season.
    - Increased motor vehicle collisions causing injuries or death of humans and wildlife.
    - Increased mortality from wild predators and humans – when animals are concentrated and much easier to find.
- Other major ecological effects from ungulate feeding are documented across North America and include:
    - Disruption of normal wild animal movement patterns and spatial distribution
    - Alteration of native plant community structure with reduced diversity and abundance
    - Introduction and/or expansion of invasive exotic plant species
    - General degradation of local habitat

Alternatives to Feeding - Better ways to help wild ungulates

Wild ungulates benefit when we preserve and restore natural habitats and reduce human-caused disturbances, leaving them alone to conserve their energy to survive severe winter conditions.

- The best way to help wild ungulates survive in severe weather is to maintain high-quality habitat year-round. If animals enter the winter in good condition, most survive persistent deep snow and cold temperatures. Even in well-functioning natural ecosystems, however, some animals succumb during winter months. This is natural, winter mortality helps keep ungulates populations in balance with the available habitat.
- Another way to help wild ungulates in winter is to avoid disturbing them. Animals must conserve their energy to survive in winter conditions. Human-related causes of disturbance such as from recreation (e.g. snowmobile activity) and chasing by domestic dogs can result in wild ungulates expending valuable energy.

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