

Protest staged to save deer set to be killed at park

BY TRAN LONGMOORE

SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER

More than a hundred people staged a Saturday-afternoon protest outside Kensington Park in a last ditch effort to save the lives of up to 250 deer scheduled to be killed in the next six weeks.

The protest, organized by the Metroparks Deer Preservation Council, was staged to generate public outcry about plans to have sharpshooters bait and kill more than half of the park's famed deer herd before March 1.

"I don't know, maybe it's too late. But we still have some hope," said Council President Judy Brock, as motorists drove down Milford Road, honking horns in support or shouting derivative comments at the placard waving protesters.

Milford resident Barbara Young said shooting tame and trusting deer is inhumane. She likened it to "shooting fish in a barrel."

The people-friendly deer, known to eat out of the hands of park visitors, are one of Kensington's greatest draws. Plymouth resident Rosita Smith visits the park several times a year. When her daughter and granddaughter visit from Colorado, Kensington Park is always first on the agenda.

"I know of nowhere else in the world like it," Smith said. "But if they start shooting the deer, they'll ruin everything."

Protesters had harsh words for the Huron-Clinton Metropark Authority, the state Department of Natural Resources and Gov. John Engler.

"Metroparks are a sanctuary for these deer and other wildlife," said Lou Nantais, who lives next door to the park on East Bunn Road. "This isn't about saving vegetation and wildlife. This is about making the hunters happy."

Nantais disputes deer population estimates.

"I drive down the road every day, and there I've noticed a reduction in the deer I see," he said.

Last year, it was estimated that 928 deer lived in the park. That number dropped to 464 based on aerial infrared counts done two weeks ago. But Nantais wonders why the

Metroparks used deer living outside the park when figuring population density.

"They're trying to skew the numbers," he charged.

Nantais and many other protesters said the authority is fudging with the numbers to get more support for hunting plans.

Protesters say that sport hunting organizations have been lobbying the Metroparks for hunting since 1996.

KENSINGTON

"Why are there representatives from hunting groups on the Metropark Wildlife Advisory Committee?" Brock asked.

In 1995, a Gov. Engler-initiated task force on the issue recommended that urban parks and recreation areas be opened to hunting and fishing.

While park rangers are per-

forming the culls this year, protesters say that hunters will soon be clamoring to get into Kensington.

Protesters also decried Metroparks' lack of foresight. Many biologists say that hunted deer populations have a reproduction rate which doubles that of non-hunted deer. Hunted deer are nearly three times more likely to have twins than other does, and they begin reproducing at a younger age. In other words,

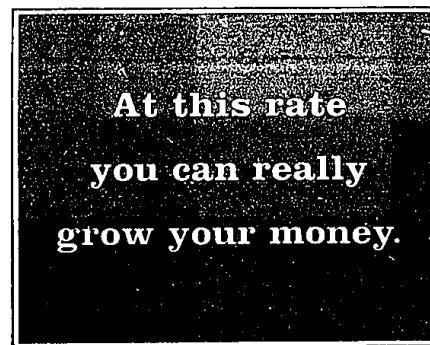
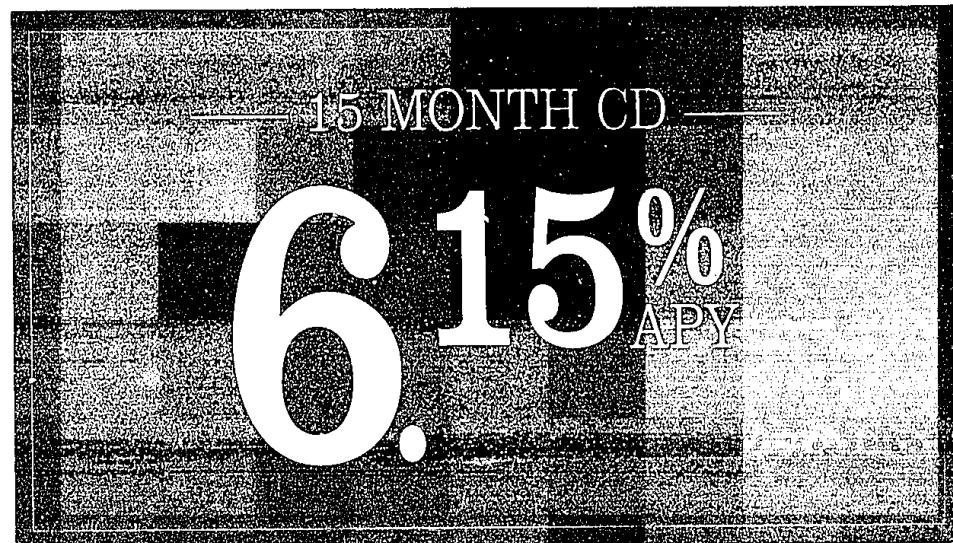
critics charge, hunting is just a form of harvesting the next year's crop. The New Jersey Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife states that "the deer resource has been managed primarily for the purpose of sport hunting."

Protesters also said that the deer population is not significantly damaging the park's vegetation as the Metroparks purport. "No baseline study was ever done on Kensington Park's

vegetation," Brock said.

According to a permit received from the state Department of Natural Resources, the cull can take place anytime now through March 1. Park officials say rangers, who will kill the deer at night, are still in training. Spokesman Dave Molanen refused to say when the cull will start.

(*Tran Longmoore is a staff writer for The Milford Times.*)



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