



Peace Talks Spare Ravenous Deer

By [Marc Fisher](#)

Sunday, July 20, 2008; Page C01

You spend time, energy and money on landscaping and flowers, on making your home a respite, a retreat. Then the deer come along and eat it all up. This happens again and again, and finally you go to the state and get yourself a wildlife damage-control permit, which means you can call up the man with the bow and arrow and have him come sit in a tree and take out the offending pests.



This is, according to your view of the world, either a simple matter of maintaining a reasonable balance between man and nature or a grievous abuse of man's power over the rest of the animal kingdom.

It's the sort of thing you can disagree about, maybe even get exercised about. But John and Carmela Peterson could not have imagined that their effort to save the landscaping outside their Great Falls home would result in all this: a letter from legendary TV

game show host [Bob Barker](#), pleading with the state of Virginia to liberate the deer "to tread their little path to the few remaining woods," and a statement by Ingrid Newkirk, founder of [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals](#), stating that there is hardly "anything more selfish, callous and cowardly than shooting a mother deer."

Game show host and animal activist Bob Barker, left, weighed in on the deer-hunt debate in a Great Falls neighborhood, urging Virginia officials to block it. (By James M. Thresher -- The Washington Post)

[John Peterson](#) was, in the view of some of his neighbors, preparing to kill animals who had as much right to tromp around Great Falls as the people who live on the area's two-acre lots. "None of us are farmers," says Martina Caputy, whose yard is adjacent to Peterson's. "We're not dependent on crops or anything like that. This was a senseless slaughter of the deer."

Caputy is married to Anthony Caputy, chief of neurosurgery at [George Washington University Hospital](#). In 1999, he conducted successful surgery to unblock the carotid artery of Barker, longtime host of "[The Price Is Right](#)." So when Martina Caputy heard from the state game warden that "our neighbor had as much right to kill the deer as we have to enjoy them," she decided that she needed extra firepower on her side.

She rang up Barker, long known for lending his celebrity to animal-rights causes. From his California home, Barker dashed off a letter to the [Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries](#), waxing poetic about how the Great Falls deer "walk along an ancestral path that leads them to and from their sleeping place" and warning that if the state doesn't come on down and stop the hunt, "the children will be catatonic, the neighbors will be up in arms, the fawns will be orphans and the does will be dead" -- all "for the sake of a few flowers." PETA's press operation leapt into action as well, alerting [The Washington Post](#) to the story and offering "an exclusive."

The state would not be swayed. In fact, says conservation officer Joe Landers, thinning the herd would be a public service. Landers inspected the Peterson property Wednesday and found "a lot of deer damage. His landscaping and garden were chewed down to nothing." In fact, John Peterson says, "hunting was never our first choice." They tried deterrents, even considered a fence, but that would have required a variance from the county, which recommended that he try hunting. Peterson had hired

the hunter several times before, resulting in two kills, both of which were donated to feed the homeless. (As it turns out, the Petersons are longtime PETA supporters; Mrs. Peterson once donated her car to the group.)

Although most kill permits are granted to nurseries, vineyards and farms where deer damage threatens people's livelihood, Landers says this permit was more than justified. (He adds that it's not clear whether hunting really shrinks the population: "It does not take long at all for the herd to bounce right back.") "The herd in Northern Virginia has gotten to the point where the population is almost unsustainable," the officer says, "and we're risking having a major disease that wipes out far more deer than a controlled kill would."

Daphna Nachminovitch, PETA's vice president for cruelty investigations, scoffs at that. "That's the sound bite they usually give," she says. "This isn't a population issue, but a particular family of deer. This is Bambi. This is between the life of an animal and a few shrubs." Rhetoric aside, animal-rights activists concede that the law is on the Petersons' side. So PETA is appealing for compassion. "The majority should rule," Nachminovitch argues. "Most of the neighbors love watching the animals. This is about the callousness of having someone with a bow just waiting to slice the mother in half and then watch it crawl into the woods to bleed to death."

"You've got to be kidding," Carmela Peterson responded when I told her that PETA and Barker were busy issuing news releases about her back yard. Assured that animal-rights people are not remotely the jesting sort, she got very quiet. But the Petersons met with neighbors, heard their concerns and decided that, as John says: "This is a real problem -- at times, we've had 11 or more deer in our yard -- but harmony with your neighbors is very important. We're not going to do the hunt." Which Landers greets with a big sigh of relief. "Mr. Peterson rose to the occasion," the officer says. "People have pretty strong feelings about taking deer. I hope this is the end of this one."

I was hoping it might go on long enough for Barker to show up offering a fortune in fabulous prizes. Actually, wildlife managers in many states endorse thinning the herd, and Peterson would have been entirely justified in charging ahead. But putting good relations with the neighbors first is a rare enough gesture these days that it ought to be celebrated, even if it does mean kissing the landscaping goodbye.

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