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How much room to roam?

At the former Seneca Army Depot, the debate continues over how much land rare white deer deserve.

By KRIS DREESSEN / kdressen@mpnewspapers.com



Half of the 700 or so deer that live in the former Seneca Army Depot in Romulus, N.Y., are white. They may be the world's only white deer herd and will be affected by land decisions on how to develop the 7,500-acre area of the base, where the deer live. (STAFF PHOTO/JACK HALEY)

ROMULUS - White deer that roam the former Seneca Army Depot will continue to have a home there, say the owners of the site. But supporters of the rare herd - maybe the only one of its kind in the world - say they deserve a higher profile in the depot's future.

Initial plans call for 1,445 of 7,500 acres to be set aside as a conservation area to draw visitors who would come see the white deer that live in the former base. But the nonprofit group Seneca White Deer is working to preserve the herd as a tourist draw and is encouraging officials to dedicate a larger chunk of the property to the conservation and eco-tourism cause.

"The opportunity to see a white deer is extremely good compared to any other place in the world, because we have them concentrated in this 7,500-acre area (in the depot)," said Dennis Money, co-founder and chairman of Seneca White Deer. "We want people to have a Kodak moment. People are going to come here because it's unique in all the world."

The Seneca County Industrial Development Agency (IDA) owns most of the 10,600-acre former depot, which housed Army munitions and military personnel from 1941 to 1996. The IDA is deciding what to do with land that was set aside as a conservation area, about 7,200 to 7,500 acres completely enclosed by a 24-mile fence. It's where a herd of about 700 deer live - half are white.

Also on the massive site are more than 500 abandoned "igloos" - bunkers that housed munitions, small arms, rockets, missiles and other weaponry.

IDA Executive Director Glenn Cooke said the preferred plan for the depot, recommended by a private consulting firm last summer, divides the more the 7,500 or so acres into a number of uses, including conservation, residential and resort development, power generation (including wind or another green energy) and training facilities for law enforcement or the military. Another 1,500 acres would be reserved for future large-scale development.

Another consultant is looking into what group or agency should oversee the preferred plan. She has met with Seneca White Deer and other potential users and her report is expected later this month, Cooke said.

While the white deer boosters contend the herd will lose habitat, Cooke maintained that's not so. The conservation area earmarked for eco-tourism is 1,500 acres, and the deer will be free to roam the entire area, as they do now, he said.

The military is responsible for maintaining the perimeter fence until 2012.

"We don't see any of this affecting the deer," said Cooke.

Money's group has a different vision for the former depot. It hopes to run motorized tours that highlight the depot's conservation and military history. Guides could dress in military garb and visitors would ride the many roads filled with rows of igloos and see the white deer and other wildlife, such as nesting ospreys.

Seneca White Deer said land could also be used for camping, horse trails or an environmentally friendly lodge in the future.

While the group is glad the IDA included eco-tourism in its plans, Money said more acreage is needed to make it work and the land set aside for eco-tourism needs to be more diverse.

The earmarked conservation land does not include any igloos, which runs counter to Seneca White Deer's proposal to include base history in tourism packages, said Money.

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At 1,500 or so acres, "the area is way too small to be attractive for people to come and pay an admission fee," Money argued.

Seneca White Deer is concerned for the herd's future. Even though the perimeter fence will remain intact through at least 2012, companies that move in could put up their own fences and disrupt the deer, he said.

To garner support for their cause, Seneca White Deer supporters have been sporting yard signs that say "save the white deer." The group produced 350, all with donated money, Money said. It has also rented billboards in Seneca County and started a letter-writing campaign to state and Seneca County officials, including the IDA.

Money's group is also trying to gain public support for its plan by giving presentations at schools, organizations and group meetings as far away as Buffalo.

"We have raised a lot of public awareness," Money said.

Regarding the depot plan, Cooke said the could be modified at any time.

"As time goes by and we look at various competing uses, we'll try to make the best decisions for the property and community," he said.

Money maintains the eco-tourism idea can work in combination with other uses, such as police and military training. He said tours wouldn't run in winter or on days when training was in session.

Area tourism officials say a chance for the public to visit the white deer should be a big draw.

"I think people will come to see the deer as part of an entire experience," said Sally Berry, program director of the Finger Lakes Tourism Alliance, which promotes a 14-county area over 9,000 square miles, including Letchworth State Park and Ithaca's gorges.

The depot already has its own infrastructure, such as paved roads and railroad tracks. That's a big benefit, Berry said. The depot is prime for eco-tourism for the rare deer and activities like hiking, biking and bird watching, she said. Because the depot land is flat, she can also envision bike rental shops for family outings there too.

Berry said she toured the depot area with Money and other Seneca White Deer board members last fall and said there are "tons of possibilities."

Where did the white deer come from?

Some 700 deer make their home in the former Seneca Army Depot - half are white.

They may be the only white deer herd in the world; they are considered the world's largest herd of white deer.

The 10,500-acre depot operated as a base from 1941 to 1996. The Army fenced in 7,500 acres the first year; some deer lived inside and got fenced in. Over time and without predators, the deer population thrived.

The white deer are not albinos. Each brown deer has a recessive white gene, according to John Cleary, transition coordinator and security chief at the base in Romulus, Seneca County. Time, and inbreeding among the fenced-in deer, brought out the white gene. A base commander in the 1950s spotted a white buck and ordered it protected.

The white deer thrived.

The Army operates a deer hunt for active and retired military personnel and civilian base employees each year to manage the herd. There is a special lottery to be able to kill white deer.

Interaction

- www.senecawhitedeer.org - The home page for the Seneca White Deer organization, which is dedicated to protecting the white deer herd in the former Seneca Army Depot in Romulus, N.Y. They advocate using the base for deer-based eco-tourism.

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