



Policy

Hunting

Summary

The Trustees is a private, non-profit 501(c)3 organization whose mission is to preserve for public use and enjoyment, properties of exceptional scenic, historic, and ecological value in Massachusetts. As part of our mission to preserve places for public use and enjoyment, Trustees properties are open to the public for many visitor activities. The Trustees recognizes the value of hunting as an effective way to steward our natural resources and ecosystems, landscaping and gardens, and agricultural crops as well as an active recreational activity. This policy guides the designation of hunting access based on our mission values by considering safety, recreational and visitor experience, and resource protection in compliance with local, state, and federal regulations. Hunting access is allowed only on certain properties, some with specific Trustees' restrictions.

Hunting Policy

The Trustees will define hunting access on properties using these three designations and criteria:

Open to hunting (*may be limited to certain areas of the property*) for licensed hunters. Depending on the property, permission may be required (either by The Trustees or local municipality bylaws) but this permission is not meant to restrict hunter access or type of wildlife that can be legally hunted. This designation is applied:

- where **donor wishes or local bylaws** do not restrict or prohibit hunting, or,
- where there is a **history of hunting or ongoing use of the property for hunting** by a previous landowner/community, or
- where restrictions below are not applicable

Open to controlled hunting by permission only with additional Trustees' hunting restrictions,

- where **donor wishes or local bylaws** allow or require hunting by permission only or other types of hunting restrictions,
- where **there are visitor and staff safety concerns** (e.g., restrictions might include limiting hunting days, archery only, or number of hunters) including properties with:
 - less than 50% of the property is outside hunting setbacks (setbacks exclude hunting within 500' from dwellings and 150' from paved roads by state law),
 - less than 100 acres outside setbacks unless the property is adjacent to additional lands open to hunting in which case an open to hunting designation may be appropriate,
 - high visitation (based on visitation data and experience) during the hunting season, or
 - potential conflicts with programs, schools, events, or camps.

- and **where controlled hunting can be implemented to maintain or restore resources from overabundant wildlife** populations as part of responsible stewardship. The Trustees will evaluate impacts through monitoring and adjust hunting programs in response to impacts. For deer specifically:
 - Existing controlled hunting programs may be modified to increase or decrease hunting restrictions to achieve resource protection goals where surveys confirm deer abundance at greater than 12-18 deer per square mile and on properties where monitoring shows vegetation height declining or static, or deer browse surveys indicate moderate impacts or above.
 - On properties that would otherwise be open to hunting, controlled hunting may be implemented where management of hunter access and effort is needed to reach resource protection goals (i.e. limiting the number of hunters to improve hunter effectiveness and assessing numbers of deer harvested).

No Hunting

- where **donor** wishes restrict or prohibit hunting, or
- where hunting is not compatible with desired visitor experience and primary use of property, or
- where hunting cannot meet the requirements for controlled hunting above.

Designation Recommendations, Review and Approval

Based on the criteria in the above policy and in collaboration with property stewardship staff and other program staff as needed, Ecologists will review property designations annually and recommend changes 6 months in advance of the hunting season to the Portfolio Director and Director of Coast and Natural Resources for each property designation. Recommendations will be reviewed and approved by the Stewardship Committee.

Controlled Hunting at The Trustees

On properties where opening the property to hunting would impact visitor safety and experience, “controlled hunting” is implemented to address these concerns and the need to manage wildlife for resource protection. These hunts (primarily archery hunting for deer management) require written permission and a hunter evaluation process. We limit the number of hunters and wildlife that can be harvested, and require hunters to follow additional rules and regulations beyond state regulations (e.g. when, where and how they can hunt). Evaluation to select hunters includes license checks and shooting proficiency tests. Volunteer hunter coordinators and Trustees stewardship staff selectively grant permission for hunting access to certain hunters. Selected hunters are trained by volunteer coordinators or staff about the property and safety guidelines. Hunters are also required to report specific information about any deer they have harvested.

Background and Current Status

Background information below provides a brief history and context for the hunting policy on Trustees’ properties. Appendix A. is a table of properties indicating current hunting access designations and is to be reviewed annually.

Background

Hunting at the Trustees

Hunting as an effective stewardship practice for The Trustees came into sharp focus in 1983 when the Trustees realized the overabundant deer at the Crane Reservation was harming the ecosystem and leading to starving deer. At that time, some properties, particularly in the western half of the state, were open to hunting. Most of the eastern properties were closed to hunting. These designations were mostly made on the perception by staff where hunting was safe and acceptable to the communities where properties occurred. With the deer population exceeding healthy levels at the Crane Reservation, The Trustees responded by launching its first controlled deer hunt in 1985. This involved closing the property to visitors to implement a multi-day controlled shotgun hunt. The success of the Crane deer hunt, which reduced the population from 400 to 60 deer, became a statewide and regional model for the effectiveness of hunting as a stewardship practice. The Crane Reservation controlled deer hunt is one of the most remembered, successful, and pivotal events for deer management in Massachusetts. Furthermore, the experience shifted the Trustees approach to hunting towards prevention of resource damage where possible rather than waiting for negative impacts to become obvious.

The Crane hunt provided an example of a reactionary hunt to extreme deer overabundance. But once deer were controlled, the efficacy of a shotgun-only approach became apparent and highlighted the need for an adaptive approach to controlled hunting where fewer hunters were needed and the property did not need to be closed to maintain a sustainable deer population. The issue of deer overabundance extends well beyond The Trustees boundaries. Especially in eastern Massachusetts, where hunters have limited access to private property or because of legal setbacks, few areas can be hunted leading to overabundance. Opening conservation lands to hunting may be the only real option for preventing overabundant deer and the inevitable negative impacts that follow. Furthermore, as an organization dedicated to protecting significant resources for public use and enjoyment, hunting is a traditional activity enjoyed by many members and visitors that can help with preventing resource degradation. As a result, the Trustees developed its first Hunting Policy in 2009 that led to many properties being opened to hunting, either as “open to hunting” or “controlled hunting”, primarily for deer management and resource protection. This was often in partnership with towns opening municipal conservation lands to hunting as well for more effective control and success.

Hunting for Stewardship of Natural Resources

Hunting has proven over time to be an effective way to manage for healthy wildlife populations and resilient ecosystems, especially where natural functions such as predation have been disrupted. This is especially the case with white-tailed deer populations. Abundant white-tailed deer populations can reduce plant biodiversity and the health of ecosystems. Research has demonstrated that at high abundance (>20 deer per square mile), deer browsing of vegetation can prevent forest regrowth, reduce habitat resiliency and species diversity, eliminate certain plant and rare species, and cause damage to agricultural crops, gardens and landscaping.

When trained and experienced Ecology Program staff identify ecological damage associated with overabundant deer, the Trustees will consider hunting as part of a program of best management practices at its properties. Deer density goals at Trustees properties are based on those established by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/deer-management>.

Target deer densities in Massachusetts are 12-18 deer per square mile. This density is set to keep deer populations at levels where major impacts to habitat are not occurring and are in balance with social desires/tolerance. Where habitat is already degraded, deer populations may need to be lower than 12-18 per square mile to allow habitat to recover. Where appropriate, The Trustees will monitor deer population impacts using vegetation monitoring (USDA 10-Tallest Method and The Massachusetts Deer Browse Impact Survey) and gather population estimates using spotlight surveying. Where spotlight surveys confirm deer abundance at greater than 12-18 deer per square mile, hunting will be recommended. On properties where monitoring shows vegetation height declining or static or deer browse surveys indicate *moderate impacts or above*, hunting will be recommended.

Damage to cultural and agricultural resources

At an overabundant level, animals may also negatively impact other significant features of a property. For example, deer can damage historically important plantings in a designed landscape and both deer and non-migratory ¹ Canada geese can damage agricultural crops. In these cases, The Trustees will work to apply a number of solutions, including deterrents (e.g. deer fencing) as part of a program to minimize negative impact, but values hunting as an important management tool and an option to consider.

Public Health and Safety

Several diseases are transmitted to humans by ticks, which depend on deer for a part of their life cycle. Research has made correlations between deer abundance, tick populations, and tick-borne illness. Studies are variable, however, and do not conclude that a reduction of deer will prevent tick borne illness. Research has indicated deer populations at low densities, for example < 10 deer/sq. mile, may help reduce the population of ticks which can carry tick-borne diseases. Overabundant deer can also increase the risk of deer related vehicle accidents. The Trustees considers human health and safety as a potential secondary benefit to hunting where deer populations are controlled.

Hunting as a recreational outdoor activity

Hunting is generally considered a traditional Massachusetts pastime and an active way to spend time outdoors. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has regulated and promoted hunting as a recreational outdoor activity for decades through statute (M.G.L. Chapter 131), a landowner tax incentive program called Chapter 61B which provides landowners lower tax rates for allowing public access for recreational activities including hunting, the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreational Plan (SCORP), and programs to support hunter education and opportunities for youth and people with disabilities.

Today there over 55,000 licensed hunters statewide whose purchase of hunting licenses directly funds the conservation of both game and non-game species alike and the protection of habitat and public open space. The most popular game species hunted include deer, turkey, and waterfowl. Like fishing, hunting provides an opportunity to harvest a natural resource, especially as a local source of food. Hunting also offers a unique way to enjoy the experience of being outdoors and appreciate the privilege of public access to our natural resources and open space.

Providing access to open space for public use and enjoyment is a core value of the Trustees mission and having properties open to hunting without restrictions supports this value. Many of The Trustees' western Massachusetts properties and several in eastern Massachusetts are open to licensed hunters. Properties open to hunting by the 'general public' means that hunters can hunt for any legally hunted

¹ The Trustees will acquire all necessary permits (i.e. Federal Migratory Depredation Permit) if hunting is needed out of season to control wildlife populations found damaging significant resources.

species and do not need through a selection process but may need to request permission for certain properties. In general, these properties have relatively less visitation than other properties, a longer established history of hunting access, and more available space (acres) outside of hunting safety setbacks. An important benefit of designating properties as Open the Hunting is it reduces the time demands for Trustees stewardship managers and ecologists.