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## Biologist Says Deer Threaten Ginseng

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**MORGANTOWN, W.Va.** - American ginseng, sister of the Asian wonder herb and a seasonal cash crop in Appalachia, has two obstacles to long-term survival in the United States: man and deer.

That's the conclusion of West Virginia University biologist James McGraw, who says that since humans aren't going anywhere, it's time to do something about the deer.

In Friday's edition of the journal *Science*, McGraw says natural, slow-growing ginseng could be extinct within 100 years if deer keep grazing at current rates.



One solution that he believes will ensure the herb's survival is to reintroduce mountain lions, wolves or other natural predators to the Appalachians.

"Nature is out of balance here because we've killed off the top predators, so the obvious solution is to restore them," McGraw said. "But obviously, that's not going to be everyone's choice."

Curtis Taylor, chief of the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources' wildlife section, called it a "totally unrealistic" suggestion.

"That would be sociological suicide," he said. "Look at what's going on out West with the reintroduction of wolves. There are hundreds of thousands of acres there with no people, and people are fighting it. I wouldn't even dream of proposing to people that we reintroduce mountain lions."

Buddy Davidson, spokesman for the state Department of Agriculture, agreed that McGraw's proposal was unnecessary.

"Don't worry about the ginseng," he said. "The coyotes will take care of the deer."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports an explosion in the number of coyotes in West Virginia. The agency suspects there are 20,000 to 50,000 of them in the state.

McGraw said another way to protect ginseng is to loosen deer hunting restrictions.

Ginseng is protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, which calls for the federal government to certify each year that harvesting the root will not threaten its existence.

Ginseng takes 18 months to germinate, then eight to 15 years to mature.

"So if deer keep lowering the population sizes, eventually, it will definitely curtail any harvesting," argues McGraw. "In one sense, we have a legal mandate to protect this species. But more importantly, that wild harvest provides an important economic supplement to many people in rural Appalachia. It provides a cushion of sorts when times are rough."

The medicinal qualities of ginseng lie in its gnarly roots. The state Division of Forestry says some 10,000 West Virginians enter the woods each fall to dig them up. Last year, they collected more than 6,400 pounds worth more than \$2 million.

Commercial demand is huge for ginseng, touted as a cure-all for everything from headaches and insomnia to sexual dysfunction. Even beer and soda makers are now adding it to their drinks.

McGraw and research associate Mary Ann Furedi studied ginseng in seven locations from 2000 to 2004, examining 800 plants every three weeks. In some spots, deer grazed on as little as 11 percent of the plants. In others, they ate every one.

Though mathematical formulas suggest West Virginia has 95 million ginseng plants, McGraw says they're seldom found in large clumps.

Taylor, of the state's Division of Natural Resources, says deer are getting a raw deal. "Deer get blamed for everything," he said. "Deer and ginseng have coexisted in the Appalachian Mountains ever since there were Appalachian Mountains."