



ENVIRONMENT REPORT — July 12, 2002: Elk Disease

By Mario Ritter



This is the VOA Special English ENVIRONMENT REPORT.

A mysterious disease is killing animals in one of America's most popular natural areas. The animals are large deer called elk.

Elk once lived in most areas of the United States. But hunters killed so many of them that they survived only in the western states. Some elk have been brought back to other areas of the country. Wildlife officials recently decided to re-establish elk populations in the eastern part of the country. In the past two years, they have brought two groups of elk from Canada to an area in the state of North Carolina. The National Park Service released the elk in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Now, three of the elk have died mysteriously. Some biologists fear that the elk may have died from chronic wasting disease. Biologists say there were no signs of infection in the elk until they became weak and died. Some biologists say the disease cannot be observed except in a dead animal.



It is not known if the disease can spread to cattle or other farm animals. However, chronic wasting disease is linked with mad cow disease, or bovine spongiform encephalopathy. Wildlife experts say the only way to stop the disease from spreading is to kill thousands of elk.

The elk in North Carolina first came from a protected area in Alberta, Canada. A total of about fifty elk were released into the Cataloochee area of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Everything seemed to be going well until a park biologist found three dead female elk. Two of the animals were pregnant. The animals appeared to have been starved. The National Park Service reported the deaths in late April. Now, state biologists have banned transporting elk into and out of the area.

Concern over diseases affecting wild animals like elk has increased recently in the United States. The state of Wisconsin announced a plan to destroy fifteen-thousand deer. Officials in Wisconsin fear that some deer in the state may carry chronic wasting disease.

The disease was first found in the western state of Colorado in the nineteen-sixties. Since then, it has been found in deer and elk populations in several states.

Some national park biologists do not believe that chronic wasting disease killed the elk in North Carolina. They hope that studies of the dead animals will soon show that they are right.

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