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Thriving Michigan

Redefining true business success by focusing on positive effects on our society and environment, and the creation of a more sustainable economy.

During World War II, the U.S. Coast Guard operated a radio station on St. Matthew Island (128 square miles). The weather was awful, and keeping the base supplied with food was chancy. Someone decided to stock the island with an emergency supply of food by importing and releasing twenty-nine (29) Reindeer – a number a Fish and Game biologist had calculated to be well within the island’s “carrying capacity”. Keep the balance going between animals and the stuff they eat – lichens and willow bushes – and you’ve stocked the island with a bottomless meat locker. If storms kept the supply ships away, the men could shoot a reindeer for dinner.

These 29 animals found themselves in reindeer paradise—ample food supply and virtually no predators at all except for the men of the Coast Guard station. When the war ended, the base was shut down and the last predator left. That same biologist returned to the island twelve years later and found those original 29 reindeer had become 1,350; just a little short of the number calculated as the island’s ultimate carrying capacity. The animals were fat and seemed to be in excellent health. But he also noticed that the lichen mats were starting to look a little thin.

He didn’t return again until the summer of 1963; the reindeer population increased from 29 animals to 6,000. He saw reindeer tracks, reindeer droppings and trampled willows. And everywhere he looked, wall-to-wall reindeer. Not surprisingly, the animals didn’t look so fat and healthy.

When he returned to the island three years later (in 1966), the island was just about unrecognizable. The willows were gone. The last patches of lichen were gone, too, chewed down to gravel. Reindeer skeletons were scattered over the tundra. He found only 42 animals left alive. It was a classic case of “overshoot”; virtually the entire population of 6,000 reindeer died of starvation.

Lesson of St. Matthew Island: Overconsumption Leads to Collapse. You can’t go on consuming more than your environment is able to renew. It might take a while, but there will come a terrible day of reckoning, a catastrophe that biologists call “collapse”. Those reindeer had destroyed a predator-free paradise.

Redeeming Value of this Story: Eventually, the foliage will return to St. Matthew Island. This is not the case for the natural resources that we continue to take from the earth. They are not renewable. 97% of all the energy and material that goes into manufacturing our society’s products is wasted. Only 3% ends up as a finished product that still has any value six months later.

Excerpts taken from:

“Confessions of a Radical Industrialist: Profits, People, Purpose—Doing Business by Respecting the Earth” by Ray C. Anderson