



Key Deer Fact Sheet

Key Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus clavium*) inhabit 20-25 islands in the lower Florida Keys. This endangered species is found no where else in the world and is the smallest sub-species of the white-tailed deer in North America. Due to uncontrolled hunting, Key deer numbers were estimated to be less than 50 in the 1940's. Increased law enforcement and the establishment of the National Key Deer Refuge in 1957 provided protection for the deer and its habitat. As a result of these efforts, the population has since increased. Currently, the population is estimated to be between 600-800 deer (year 2000 estimate) with 75% of the population located on Big Pine and No Name Keys.

Deer Distribution

No records exist documenting the origin of the Key deer. Key deer were likely isolated from the mainland 6-12 thousand years ago when the last glaciers melted. Earliest mention of Key deer is found in the memoirs of Fontandeo, a Spanish explorer held captive by Native Americans in the 1500's. Although early records suggest a wider distribution of the Key deer, current estimates suggest they occupy

a range from the Johnson Keys to Sugarloaf Key.

Physical Characteristics

Key deer are sometimes referred to as "toy deer" because of their small stature. Deer color varies between reddish brown to a grizzled gray. Facial coloration includes a distinct dark mask between the eyes and across the brow. In comparison to other white-tailed deer, Key deer are shorter; average shoulder height is between 24-32 inches. Female Key deer (does) average 65 lbs. while males (bucks) average 85 lbs. Maximum recorded weights for does and bucks are approximately 100 lbs. and 125 lbs., respectively.



Average deer height

Reproduction

The breeding season ("rut") occurs in the fall of each year (September-December). Some breeding can occur as late as February. During this time, bucks fight with one another with their antlers to establish dominance and gain the right to breed. Such activities sometimes result in injuries, but this is a natural part of the Key deer reproductive cycle. Dominant males search for receptive does and breeding occurs.

Once a doe is pregnant, the gestation period is approximately 7 months (200 days). Most fawns are born between April-June and weigh 2-4 pounds at birth. On average, each adult female has 1 fawn per year. Antlers on mature bucks are dropped February-March, and growth of a new set of antlers begins almost immediately. Antler growth is completed by August and velvet is rubbed off by early September.



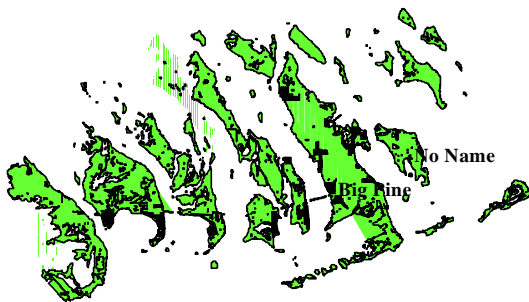
Foraging Behavior

Key deer are herbivores (=plant eaters) and spend the majority (approximately 50%) of their time foraging on over 160 plants species, both native and planted species. Favorite foods of Key deer include hibiscus, Gumbo limbo, red mangrove, and other woody plant species. Key deer are most active in late evening, night and early morning hours. Freshwater is important to the survival of Key deer; and the lack of

freshwater can limit deer distribution on some islands.

Due to the friendliness of Key deer, people feed them. Feeding Key deer is not encouraged and is illegal. Negative impacts from feeding deer include (1) loss of fear of humans and (2) increase in disease transmission. Loss of the natural fear of humans in developed areas increases the susceptibility of Key deer to dog attacks, entanglement in fences/nets, and possible poaching. Feeding deer may

also cause them to group in small areas facilitating the spread of diseases.



Key deer distribution in the lower Florida Keys.

Mortality Factors

Highway mortality accounts for the majority of deer deaths (about 50%). Other mortality factors include disease, entanglement, drowning, and dog attacks. In general, male survival is lower than female survival. In the last several years, deer mortality has been increasing as the deer population has increased. Currently (year 2000 estimate), the population is growing 1-3% per year.

Diseases also have increased in the deer herd in the past few years. Diseases that impact the deer herd include large stomach worms and brain abscesses. Large stomach worms are found in both sexes and all age-classes, however, stomach worms generally affect deer that are less than a year old. If the infected deer survives, it will eventually become partially immune to the disease and serve as a carrier to other deer. In extreme cases, entire age-classes may be impacted. Brain abscess is a bacterial infection that primarily affects older Key deer bucks. Symptoms of the disease include head lesions/open sores, and a loss of coordination. Brain abscesses make deer susceptible to roadkill or drowning.

The Key deer is a unique and an important component of the Florida Keys. For more information about the Key deer and its habitat, feel free to contact the National Key Deer Refuge at 305-872-0774.

