

by Bert Byers

# One Step Closer to Key Deer Recovery

A year-long effort to translocate endangered Key deer (*Odocoileus virginianus clavium*) from Big Pine Key to Upper Sugarloaf Key in Florida came to fruition in June 2003 when two deer were released into a “soft release” pen, allowing them to acclimate to the area prior to release into the National Key Deer Refuge.

Ann Klee, until recently counselor to the Interior Secretary Norton and chair of the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, officiated by opening the gate and releasing the first deer into the release pen. The task force group represents a partnership including the federal departments of the Interior,

Agriculture, Defense, Justice, and Commerce; the Environmental Protection Agency; tribal representatives from the Miccosukee and Seminole Tribes; the Florida Governor’s Office and South Florida Water Management District; cities and counties of South Florida; and citizens’ groups.



**Key deer**

USFWS photo by John Oberheu

Dr. Phil Frank, project leader of the refuge and a Key deer specialist, was instrumental in establishing the deer release program. "We want to take advantage of the habitat on Sugarloaf and Cudjoe Keys to better distribute the deer," said Frank. "Having several populations of Key deer is important to protect the deer in case of a catastrophic event, such as a disease outbreak or a hurricane. The refuge staff erected a temporary eight-foot high fence to enclose about 18 acres to use as a soft-release pen. The pen allows the deer to adjust to the new surroundings and prevents them from returning to Big Pine Key immediately upon release."

Since the initial trap and release, three more deer have been translocated to the soft-release pen on Upper Sugarloaf Key. Four of the translocated deer have been released from the soft release pen into the unfenced habitat of the key. These deer remain in the general area on the refuge and have been observed making themselves at home. They are tracked

with radio telemetry equipment every other day to record movements.

One deer is unaccounted for and believed dead. Its radio equipment failed after the deer was released from the soft-release pen. Searches were conducted to no avail, and a buck has been recorded as lost.

Current plans call for the Fish and Wildlife Service to trap and move three more deer to Upper Sugarloaf Key. When the final three of the first eight deer translocated to Upper Sugarloaf Key are released, the Service will undertake an evaluation of the program, including the science and results to date.

The next step is to begin translocation to Cudjoe Key. A total of 24 deer will be moved to each release site within the next three years. The plan also requires that both genders be released at each site.

The refuge has been working in conjunction with our South Florida Ecological Services Office in Vero Beach to aid in the recovery of this species.

"Our research indicates the deer population has substantially increased over the past 10 years," says Jay Slack, field office supervisor, "but the increases are mainly on Big Pine Key." Slack says the translocation is fueled by concerns over the lack of deer in outlying habitats. This move makes such a catastrophe less likely to decimate the species. The populations on the nearby keys have decreased, in some instances to zero.

"We believe this is one of the final steps in our efforts to recover the Key deer," says Slack. "The location is ideal as deer habitat, literally a smorgasbord of deer food. With good science and no catastrophes, we are on the road to recovery of the deer in the foreseeable future."

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*Bert Byers is a public affairs officer with the Service's South Florida ES Office (772-562-3909 x 248; Bert\_Byers@fws.gov).*



**Ann Klee watches as the Key deer she just released from the fenced enclosure (right) scurries down the trail.**

*USFWS photo*