

Background

In the late 1970's resource managers at the parks noticed increasing evidence of deer browsing in the historic woodlots. At the same time, permittees that maintain the agricultural fields reported increasing deer browsing on field crops. In 1985, research was begun to document deer browsing impacts to the woodlots and to determine the deer population status, movements, and habitat use. Population surveys commenced in 1987 in the 11 square mile deer study area and have continued to the present. The April mean population estimates have ranged from 721 to 1,441 deer for the study area.

Data from the study showed that the woodlots and cropfields could not be maintained in a way necessary to achieve park management objectives. The high level of deer browsing was preventing a sufficient number of tree seedlings from becoming established, which is needed to perpetuate the historic woodlots. The agricultural program was unable to grow historical crops to maturity in Eisenhower NHS and the southern part of Gettysburg NMP due to deer browsing.

In 1992, the parks proposed to manage the level of deer browsing in the parks so the landscape management objectives could be met. The estimated number of deer in the study area that will have a level of deer browsing that allows the parks to meet their landscape management objectives is approximately 80 deer (see Appendix C and Appendix E of the EIS). The 1995 population survey estimated 1,148 deer in the study area.

Reasonable options for controlling the level of deer browsing were investigated. The decision was made to complete an environmental impact statement (EIS) in order to reach a decision on the best deer management alternative that would enable the parks to meet their management objectives. The EIS process was begun on August 21, 1992, with the publication in the **Federal Register** of a Notice of Intent to prepare a draft EIS. A public information meeting and a scoping meeting were held to identify issues and concerns related to the deer management proposal. The Notice of Availability of the draft EIS was published in the **Federal Register** on November 14, 1994. The comment period on the draft EIS ended February 10, 1995. Substantive comments were responded to in the final EIS which was released May 26, 1995. The Notice of Availability of the final EIS appeared in the May 16, 1995, **Federal Register**.

The Selected Action

The National Park Service has selected a combination approach (Alternative 5) to reduce the deer population and thus the level of deer browsing in the parks. Alternative 5 is the combination of Alternative 2B and Alternative 4. Deer will be shot in the parks by authorized personnel (Alternative 2B) and hunted outside the parks by licensed hunters in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Game Commission and private landowners (Alternative 4). The two methods will be repeated, as needed, annually from October through April. The deer population will be reduced to a predetermined population density so the parks can meet their landscape management objectives.

Basis for Decision

The selected action addresses the impacts the deer population has on the historic woodlots and cropfields, which are components of the cultural landscapes of the parks. Without the proposed action, the NPS would have increasing difficulty in maintaining the essential landscape features necessary for understanding the historic occurrences of each park. This action should also reduce deer browsing damage to private property near the parks.

Shooting deer inside and outside of the parks is the most effective and efficient method to reduce and maintain the deer population at a density which will have acceptable impacts to park woodlots and cropfields. With increased public hunting outside the parks and no shooting in the parks, there would be limited effect on deer density in the parks (see p.65 of the EIS). Alternately, shooting deer only in the parks, while hunting on private land remained limited, would diminish the effectiveness of reducing deer density in the parks. An effective combination approach will have fewer impacts to visitor use and cost less than using Alternative 2B alone (see p. 66 of the EIS).

Encouraging public hunting outside the parks is the preferred method, according to NPS policy, for controlling wildlife populations in parks. In this case, however, shooting inside the parks will occur during the same period. This was determined to be necessary to achieve the density goal because it removes the parks as a place where deer seek refuge. Hunting is not permitted in either park, because it is not authorized by law (see p. 103 of the EIS). Therefore, only NPS authorized individuals will be allowed to shoot deer in the parks. The

NPS will seek to coordinate deer management activities near the parks with nearby private landowners and the Pennsylvania Game Commission. Private landowners that are willing can increase hunting opportunities by allowing or increasing hunter access to their land during the deer hunting seasons. The Pennsylvania Game Commission, which establishes the length of the hunting seasons and harvest limits in the state, may play a crucial role. If the effort to increase public access does not result in sufficient deer being killed, the NPS will seek cooperation from the Pennsylvania Game Commission to increase the number of deer that could be killed near the parks.

Measures To Minimize Impacts and Address Public Concerns

The selected alternative incorporates a variety of measures to minimize the adverse environmental, social, and economic impacts as described in the final EIS.

Visitor safety will be the first priority before and during any management action. Shooting in the parks will occur only in areas where and when public safety and resource protection is assured. Deer will be shot in the parks during both day and nighttime hours. To ensure public safety, night shooting will be conducted only at bait stations which will also improve the effectiveness of the reduction program. Prior to each annual reduction period, public notification will be provided as to the time period when shooting may occur and the areas where access will be restricted or prohibited. This notification will lessen inconvenience to visitors and provide for public safety. Only NPS authorized individuals highly skilled and trained in the use of firearms and public safety will shoot deer in the parks. This requirement will result in a humane means of direct reduction and reduce the risk of damage to historical resources. The venison will be donated to food service organizations for distribution to the needy. The hides, if removed, and entrails will be disposed of consistent with federal and state laws. In the short term, a large number of deer will be killed annually to reach the density goal. When the population is reduced to the density goal, fewer deer will need to be killed annually to maintain the population at that level. As the management action progresses, the remaining deer population will be monitored by park personnel. Monitoring information on the deer, woodlots and cropfields, will guide the ongoing deer population maintenance program.