



Survival of the Key deer in the wild depends mainly on the acquisition and preservation of sufficient habitat to ensure a viable population. Land is being purchased by government agencies and private conservation groups from willing sellers, thus addressing the reasonable investment-backed concerns of property owners. A major goal of land acquisition is to preserve natural greenbelt corridors connecting the existing patchwork of publicly-owned lands. As part of this effort, deer underpasses and fencing were constructed on U.S. Highway 1, to allow the deer to transit the busy thoroughfare without risk of being killed by vehicles.

How you can help:

- Obey posted speed limits;
- Refrain from feeding the deer and encourage others to do the same;
- Keep dogs leashed or confined;
- Minimize fencing to allow freedom of movement for the deer;
- Remove exotic pest plants and plant native trees and shrubs;
- Discourage development in critical greenbelt corridors;
- Urge elected officials to support laws benefiting the deer; and
- Volunteer at the National Key Deer Refuge and with environmental groups.

Historically, the Key deer have been viewed as a food source, a tourist attraction, a pest, a traffic hazard and even a political pawn. But, most importantly, they are a fellow creature that has likewise been recognized as a national treasure. Protection of the still-endangered Key deer is a major part of efforts to save what remains of the unique Florida Keys environment.

*Prepared by Key Deer Protection Alliance,
an all-volunteer, grassroots, 501(c)(3)
nonprofit organization dedicated
to the protection of the Key deer.*

www.keydeer.org

Key Deer Protection Alliance, Inc.
P.O. Box 430224, Big Pine Key, FL 33043

SAVE THE
FLORIDA KEY DEER



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What are Key deer? They are the smallest of all North American deer (*Odocoileus virginianus clavium*), a subspecies of the white-tailed deer, found only on a few islands of the lower Florida Keys. No bigger than a large dog, an adult doe stands about 24" at the shoulder, weighing about 60 pounds. Bucks are slightly taller and weigh about 80 pounds. At birth, fawns weigh only two to five pounds.

Stranded by a rising sea level about 4,000 years ago, they evolved in a subtropical setting with vegetation of West Indian origin. Evolution produced a distinct, diminutive subspecies, well-adapted to its island home.

Hurricanes, droughts, drownings, poaching and development reduced the Key deer population to less than eighty by 1949. Extensive protection efforts, by the federal government as well as those of local environmental groups and individual activists, have helped the herd to recover to its current population. The National Key Deer Refuge was established in 1957. The Key deer has been a federally-listed endangered species since 1967.

Needs of the Key Deer: To meet needs for food, water, breeding, and social interaction, Key deer travel widely through many islands; however, only a few islands fulfill enough of their needs to support full-time resident populations. Big Pine Key, because of its size, diverse plants and accessible year-round supply of fresh water, is thought to provide home to about 65% of the total deer. Since water sources often dry up on many nearby islands, the Key deer's future is closely linked to land-use practices on Big Pine Key. In an effort to diversify the herd and improve the species' probability of survival, a number of deer have been translocated to Cudjoe Key and Sugarloaf Key.

Space and habitat requirements go beyond just food and water, since the Key deer use different habitats daily as a part of their normal behavior. In addition, there are two periods each year of extensive movement and dispersal. One is the breeding season (September-December), and the other peaks in April and May when family units break up and pregnant does prepare for fawning. To discourage inbreeding and to enhance genetic variability, it is essential that opportunities for movement and dispersal are available, both on and off Big Pine Key. The historic range of the Key deer extended from Big Pine Key to Key West. Habitat loss is the greatest long-term threat to the survival of the Key deer.



- Human impact:** Key deer have very few natural predators, but unfortunately we, as humans, fill that role all too well. Negative factors include:
- Habitat loss from development;
 - Road kills by vehicles;
 - Supplemental feedings by some humans which tame the deer, leading to congregations near roads and in residential areas, malnutrition and diseases.
 - Killings and maimings by free-roaming dogs; and
 - Poaching and wanton killing.

Realizing the negative impact of these factors, local and national wildlife organizations, working with state and federal agencies, have taken major steps to try to preserve and protect the Key deer.