

Soaring deer numbers hurting other species, UBC study finds

BY SANDRA MCCULLOCH, POSTMEDIA NEWS JANUARY 24, 2011



Vancouver Sun Files / The number of blacktail deer on Mayne Island is thought to be in the thousands.

Photograph by: Ian Smith, Postmedia News

Deer are munching vegetation on some Gulf Islands to the point where they're changing the environment, such as driving away songbirds that rely on vegetation for food and nesting, a University of B.C. study has found.

"This in the end is a social decision on how we manage the environment," said Peter Arcese, a professor in the faculty of forestry and co-author of a study published this week in the journal *Biological Conservation*.

Researchers looked at the density of blacktail deer on 18 southern Gulf and San Juan Islands and found that the number of birds and amount of vegetation decreased on islands with higher deer densities.

Deer populations grow when there's lots of food and few predators such as cougars, bears and wolves, said Arcese. When predators are hunted to extinction on islands, there's an indirect effect on deer populations.

"The public needs to have a discussion about what they value in the environment and how they're going to maintain it in the future, and that may well include managing deer populations," Arcese said.

Eighty-five people from five islands gathered recently at a forum on Mayne Island to discuss options, said David Maude of Mayne Island in an email.

A hunting ban was imposed on blacktail deer on the island in the 1970s. Things got complicated in the 1990s, when European fallow deer escaped from a deer farm. Both species flourished, thanks to the greenery in gardens and growth in the forest.

Arcese told those attending the forum that Mayne Island can reasonably sustain 230 deer. The current number of blacktail deer there is believed to be in the thousands, however, while fallow deer number in the hundreds.

Both Mayne and Sidney islands are in dire need of intervention because both fallow and blacktail-deer populations are exploding, Arcese said.

Fallow deer are now migrating from Mayne to Galiano Island.

Maude said he hopes representatives from the provincial government will participate in the next forum on Mayne. The deer aren't a problem on all the islands: Portland, Russell and Moresby haven't had deer in recent memory.

"The absence of deer entirely isn't the natural situation either," said Arcese. "We've probably always had some deer but they've likely been at dramatically lower density."

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