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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release OCTOBER 11, 1955

FLORIDA KEY DEER TO GET GREATER PROTECTION

The approval of a public-land order withdrawing 71 acres of public land in Monroe County, Florida, on the lower Florida keys, for use of the Fish and Wildlife Service as an addition to the National Key Deer Refuge, was announced today by Secretary of the Interior Douglas McKay.

This marks another forward step in the program for the protection of the diminutive Key deer which has been threatened with extinction through loss of its natural habitat on the Florida keys.

The Key deer, smallest of all American deer species, appears to be a diminutive form of the well-known white-tailed deer, although many naturalists believe this deer to be a unique species. The average adult Key deer measures about 38 inches from nose to tail, 26 to 29 inches tall, and weighs about 30 pounds. When full grown, the Key deer is about the size of a collie dog. The young are no bigger than cottontail rabbits.

The present population is approximately 112 animals. In 1951 the number was estimated to be 32.

Because the Key deer is not a migratory animal, it does not automatically come under Federal jurisdiction. For this reason, the Federal Government can protect the animal only in areas that are declared refuge lands.

282

The National Key Deer Refuge was established on February 1, 1954, upon 915 acres of leased, privately owned land, as the result of a clause in the Interior Department's Appropriation Bill for 1954 which permitted the Fish and Wildlife Service to lease and manage lands within the natural habitat of the Key deer. Under refuge management the lands are protected from fire, vandalism and illegal trespass. These leases, however, may be cancelled for any reason or at any time with but 90 days' notice.

Until the refuge was established, the cost of patrol and fire prevention had been underwritten for several years by the Boone and Crockett Club and the National Wildlife Federation.

Service officials declare that the present program of protection is effective only insofar as habitat remains available to the Key deer. Unless the Key deer's habitat is preserved, the species will be lost.

The character of the water supply is a limiting factor on several keys. Some of the waterholes become so brackish during periods of dry weather that the deer

are forced to abandon areas containing ample food and suitable in all other respects. The possibilities of the Service being able to establish Key deer on keys where they are not now present will depend upon the success of efforts to provide a suitable supply of water for use during drought periods.

Protection measures by the Fish and Wildlife Service and other conservation agencies have thus far saved these unique animals from extinction. Biologists claim, however, that a herd of 200 is the minimum that will assure survival of the species.

Once abundant on the keys, these tiny deer have suffered a decline in numbers over the years, due to illegal hunting, highway fatalities, and the general encroachment of civilization. Because the species can retain its identity only in the habitat provided by the Florida keys, no attempt has been made to transfer key deer to other localities. The establishment of new breeding colonies, a practice often used with rare animals, has thus been ruled out in connection with key deer conservation efforts.

The National Key Deer Refuge also affords protection to the roseate spoonbill, frequently referred to as the pink curlew; the great white heron, the largest of the American herons; and the white-crowned pigeon which has had its only home in the United States in these keys where it nests in the mangroves.

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