

Sidney Island – Proposed Deer Population Reduction Plan

Sidney Island residents have been successfully battling the superabundance of fallow deer on our island for over a decade with visible results. According to feedback from many owners the spring of 2018 saw more growth of plant species and tree seedlings than has been seen since beginning our program. Deer numbers are significantly reduced from their 2008 peak, and a sustainable/manageable herd size to control has either already been reached or is within reach, a conclusion which can only be determined in the coming years.

Unfortunately for our island community the issue of deer continues to be a source of drama, sometimes obscuring the decades of community involvement with our Fallow deer population reduction program. The Parks proposal for eradication presents an opportunity for Sidney Island owners to come together to learn about deer management and what a balanced or more balanced ecological environment could look like on Sidney Island. We believe that eradication is not a balance and pursuing eradication is not solely the end of fallow deer hunting and the hunting community on Sidney island but is a significant change to our island and impact to our community that should be considered carefully.

To date our deer population management efforts have been spearheaded by the ecological stewardship and hunting communities, using captures, professional captures, recreational hunting by owners and guests, paid cull hunting, and owner led cull hunting. In addition to eating our indigenous plant life on the island the deer have also provided some control of invasive species such as scotch broom and hawthorne as well as more easily accessible trails for hiking/walking. If the eradication of the fallow deer project doesn't proceed through the partnership and agreement between Sidney Island owners and Parks Canada, then we will need to form an alternative, long term management plan for the fallow deer.

This document examines the tools at our disposal for fallow deer management, and shows a way forward other than eradication in a way that can hopefully bring the community together instead of divided.

Background of the Deer & Sallas Forest Strata

In 2005, at the beginning of our strata, the island was experiencing the results of decades of ineffective deer management and the resulting vegetation degradation was clearly visible. In 2005 our airstrip did not require mowing, every leaf within reach of these small deer was eaten, and you only had to squat down in the forest to see that everything green under 5 feet was gone. The animals were starving, small and malnourished. Our strata began to work together to try and reduce the deer population in a big way, we hunted them in the hundreds, we captured and killed them, and introduced cull hunts that allowed hunters and paid hunters on most of the common property (which is an expansion beyond the regular hunt zones) and eventually into the park, taking hundreds of animals off the island annually. One year we brought a portable abattoir to the island and ran a large scale managed capture using professional butchers and government food inspectors which enabled us to sell the meat for \$50,000 for the Sallas Forest strata reserves with Sidney island venison being featured in high end restaurants in Vancouver. By 2013 the efforts to reduce the deer population had been successful enough that owners started seeing some noticeable differences. This trend has slowly but surely continued as evident by some new growth of species, as noted in the work by Peter Pearce students' report. Owners have also noted that the new growth has led to a greater need for lawn mowers.

Not all the species that are growing now with the reduced population are indigenous or welcome. Scotch broom and English Hawthorne spring to mind with our open field next to the airstrip exploding in Hawthorne and raw or exposed soil susceptible to broom infestation. But these are minor issues compared to our former stripped landscape.

The ecological stewardship committee and Parks Canada have done significant research and analysis on this question. Some of today's estimates are between 290 and 590 deer for the summer of 2018. Estimating populations is not an exact science and we have no breakdown between the Fallow deer and Blacktail species. Efforts to date have lowered the overall fallow deer population by about 80% but we have no similar measure for the Blacktail population.

In hunt season of 2017/2018 the fallow deer were enough reduced that hunting the remaining population became increasingly difficult as the season progressed. As the population of deer becomes smaller an increasing effort will be required to hunt the deer.

From our mediated session on deer control and conversations on our very social island we have learned that the Fallow deer are not only appreciated by the hunting (and culinary) communities on Sidney Island but from owners and guests that enjoyed their presence on the island for their visual appeal; the beautifully spotted animals that graze and travel in groups. Spotting the swift runners before they spot you has the same thrill as witnessing eagles or ravens at play.

It is our belief that we can choose to continue with our current hunting program that is agreed upon at each AGM if our community is content with the plant life that has rebounded to date or we may find that we do indeed need to reduce the herd further to obtain our goal of a more balanced ecosystem.

Sidney Island Hunting Season and Information

Our hunt program is set up to have as little impact on the non-hunting community as feasible. The current length of the hunting season is 45 days which spans from about Oct 30th to mid-March. This is split across 5 hunt segment weeks with cull hunting arranged within that time. These hunt segment weeks are proposed and voted on each year at the AGM and communicated to islanders each year as well as signs are posted at the dock to ensure islanders are aware when hunting is in progress.

1. Hunting success can be very dependent on the weather. One proposal is to have the option similar to a rained out baseball game to have 1 or 2 additional hunt segments scheduled within the same time frame in case of poor weather.
2. The rut or mating season occurs in early October, the hunt season could continue with the same length of time but shift the dates to begin earlier than the end of October to have the most effective result on overall deer reduction. Early October has not been included in the hunt dates because BC schools have a professional day the weekend following Thanksgiving. Hunting segments have been scheduled in a way to place them to avoid when many owners may plan to be on the island.

How does the hunting work on Sidney Island?

Our hunting rules are based on safety for everyone on the island. Hunting on Sidney Island is tightly controlled with hunters confined within hunting zones or to stands overlooking open fields or trails. Hunters sign up to the zone/stand they will hunt ahead of using the zones - hunters may not track prey or shoot across zone boundaries, increasing safety for hunters in adjacent zones. The zones themselves are primarily in the center of the island and around the airstrip.

Cull hunting was added to the deer reduction management plan to allow reaching parts of the island that cannot be hunted without significant extra coordination/communication. Cull hunting is limited to designated days and expands the regular hunt zones to include all of our common property areas.

For hunt season 2017/2018 there were 4 hunt segments and 1 cull hunt segment which was owner lead. In the past we have funded paid cull hunts, many of the hunters involved also hunt with us as guests during our regular hunting weeks. This means that our cull hunters also have significant local knowledge and knowledge of our fallow deer behavior.

For hunt season 2018/2019 we proposed to have owner led cull hunts on the second weekend of each hunt segment. This was adjusted at the AGM to occur instead during the week.

Hunting has a long tradition in Canada and there are many examples of owners, owner's children and guests who have learned hunting and the care of venison on Sidney Island. We, as a hunting community, could host an information session and provide mentoring in a more formal way to anyone interested in hunting on Sidney Island. This would help to provide information and knowledge to young/new owners or kids of owners who may be interested and provide an opportunity for learning from more experienced hunters. Also guests of owners interested in hunting would be welcome.

Cull Hunting and Capture

There is volunteer efforts required for our live captures and with lower population numbers the captures had become less effective. With lower numbers of deer population and the higher results obtained from culling efforts (paid or owner led), at this time we think that a focus should be on both recreation hunting and cull hunting. Based on monitoring we would consider future captures as an option but will focus on only cull hunting and recreational hunting methods for now.

Volunteerism on Sidney Island

Whether we have eradication of deer with the Parks plan and in the future only have to hunt blacktail deer or we agree to increase the number of deer taken annually, we have to recognize that there is a need for community involvement. Volunteer efforts and possible funding which we think would include other activities outside deer control but support for owners with other invasive species management.

Conclusion:

We believe that we can control the fallow deer population on Sidney Island and strike a balance and compromise for our community; we are a model of how a community presented with a problem can come together and solve that problem. Deer will always be with us on Sidney Island, whether they are Fallow or Blacktail. Open dialogue and understanding from across the community will continue to be critical to accomplishing our goals.

Our take away from our mediated owners' discussion group was that there was a strong sense that compromise should be considered. The purpose of this document is to provide information and ideas on what we as a community can do as an alternative, because eradication is designed to be permanent, although we do know that both species of deer swam here and will again swim over, eradication will certainly change Sidney Island.

The decision on whether or not to eradicate fallow deer will have long lasting consequences. We think with a continued ongoing commitment to manage the deer and a collaborative coming together of our Sidney island community that we can be successful at finding a markedly improved ecological balance and a stronger community.