OVERSHOOTING PENNSYLVANIA'S DEER HERD – 2000-2024

Scientific Population-Dynamics Assessment Indicates that from 2000-04 PGC Killed 60% of Deer Herd

By John Eveland
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The following table is a scientific assessment of the actual hunting impacts that have occurred over the past 24 years to Pennsylvania's deer population as a result of an over-zealous deer-reduction program by the Pennsylvania Game Commission. As presented in the table, for nearly two decades spanning from the 1980s to 1999, the Commonwealth's deer herd had remained at a relatively stable number of 1,500,000 animals with a sustained annual harvest that averaged 378,000 deer. As a result, Pennsylvania was acknowledged as one of the top two deer-hunting state's in the nation during that period.

However, in 2000 the Commission, at the urging of DCNR and Audubon, initiated a five-year assault on the deer herd that would turn out to be the greatest conservation mistake in the over-one-hundred-year history of the agency. From the fall of 2000 through 2004, the Commission killed an officially reported 2,382,353 deer – about 500,000 deer above the normal number that would have been harvested during these five years. It represented about 100,000 extra pregnant does and fawns killed per year.

Based on the biological characteristics of deer reproduction and herd growth, after the 2004 hunting season and by the spring of 2005, there would have remained only 597,386 deer in Pennsylvania, indicating that the Commission had orchestrated the slaughter of 60% of the herd in five years. These numbers are not assumptions, but were determined from actual population dynamics of white-tailed deer in Pennsylvania and other states and PGC's actual harvest reports. Conversations with PGC Commissioners and staff around that time indicated that a uniform reduction had not occurred across the state, with the herd being reduced to a much greater extent in northern, eastern, and western tiers, and with higher herd densities remaining in some southern counties. PGC stated in private conversations that the herd had been way overshot in the north, leaving only 1-2 deer per square mile in some regions, and that deer had been literally exterminated in some eastern regions.

At that point in the spring of 2005, the Commission stated that it was planning to stop the assault, and to maintain the herd at this dramatically reduced number – 597,386 deer (although the agency staff would not indicate how far the herd had been reduced to sportsmen, legislators, or even its own board of commissioners). To accomplish this stabilization in herd size, the Commission could have only harvested 151,178 deer in 2005 and all subsequent years. Harvesting fewer deer would have allowed the herd to grow in numbers, while harvesting more deer per year would result in the continuing decline of the herd. Nevertheless, in 2005 PGC continued to release an excessively high number of antlerless allocations, and announced that they harvested 354,390 deer that year (see the table). The next year they reported that the harvest was even higher at 361,560 deer, and the Commission has continued to report harvest numbers of about 330,000 to over 400,000 deer every successive year to the present.

According to basic herd biology, if the Commission's harvest figures were correct, then the herd would have been completely exterminated from the Commonwealth midway through the 2007 hunting season – zero deer in the state. From 2008 to the present, the agency would have been killing an annually increasing deficit of deer that would have reached minus 5,474,406 deer by the spring of 2024. Put another way, in order for the Game Commission to be harvesting the number of deer that they annually report, the agency would have needed to import 5,474,406 deer from other states during 2008-23 and shot every one of them.

If the Commission's deer-reduction program and absurd harvest claims were not so devastating to deer and wildlife resources, to the tradition of sport hunting, and to the socioeconomic well-being of the Commonwealth, this circumstance might seem laughable. Instead, it has become a conservation crisis that can only be explained by Game Commission incompetence or deception. PGC claims to manage deer based on science. Sportsmen claim it's based on science fiction. The agency should be held accountable for what it has done. (over)

DEER POPULATION DYNAMICS vs PGC HARVEST CLAIMS

I. Population at Equilibrium before Coyotes and Deer Reduction

Year	Overwinter Base	Summer Population	Harvest
1997	1,500,000	1,875,000	378,000[1]
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II. PGC's 5-Year Reduction Period -- Actual Harvest

2000	**1,500,000**	1,875,000	504,600[2]
2001	1,370,400	1,713,000	486,014[2]
2002	1,226,986	1,533,733	517,529[2]
2003	1,016,204	1,270,255	464,890[2]
2004	805,365	1,006,706	409,320[2]

III. PGC's False Harvest Claims

2005	**597,386**	746,732	354,390[3]
2006	392,342	490,427	361,560
2007	128,867	161,084	323,070[4]
2008	-161,986	**0**	335,850
2009	-497,836	0	308,920
2010	-806,756	0	316,240
2011	-1,122,996	0	336,200
2012	-1,459,196	0	343,110
2013	-1,802,306	0	352,920
2014	-2,155,226	0	303,973
2015	-2,459,199	0	315,813
2016	-2,775,012	0	333,254
2017	-3,108,266	0	367,159
2018	-3,475,425[5]	0	374,600
2019	-3,850,025	0	389,431
2020	-4,239,456	0	435,180
2021	-4,674,636	0	376,810
2022	-5,051,446	0	422,960
2023	-5,474,406	0	430,010

Footnotes:

1. Average deer harvest from !980s through 1999. 2. Actual PGC-acknowledged harvests 2000-04.
3. PGC said they stabilized the herd in 2005 at a reduced population. Thereafter, the harvest would have to have been 151,178 per year in order to maintain a stable population. Instead, PGC claims about 350,000 per year.
4. If PGC were harvesting the number of deer per year as they claim, deer extinction in PA would have occurred in late 2007.
5. To achieve PGC's harvest claims from 2007-2023, they would have needed to import 5,474,406 deer into PA from other states and shot them all.

Note: If there were no coyotes and bears in Pennsylvania, PGC would need 1.7 M deer to harvest 430,010. In reality, however, with predation it would require over 2.1 M deer at estimated fawn predation, representing 80 dpsm on every square mile of forestlands, or 47 dpsm on every square mile of land area in the state, including the city streets of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

John Eveland • Independent Forester, Wildlife Biologist, and Ecologist • March 23, 2018