

DEER PROGRAM HISTORY

Introduction

White-tailed deer in Virginia have a remarkable and interesting history. Historical changes in deer distribution patterns, population trends, and management practices in Virginia are representative of those in many southeastern states. Deer herds at the time of European settlement around 1600 were plentiful and widespread. Over-exploitation during the next 300 years resulted in near extirpation* of deer by 1900.

When the first European settlers arrived in North America in 1607 at Jamestown Island, Virginia, they described an animal found in abundance, which would become known commonly as the Virginia white-tailed deer. Early records indicate that white-tailed deer were present statewide, but highest population densities occurred in the coastal Tidewater region.

The exact number of deer that inhabited the Commonwealth of Virginia at the time of European settlement is unknown. However, one of America's foremost naturalists, Ernest Thompson Seton, estimated the deer herd in the eastern United States to be 10-20 deer per square mile at the time of European settlement.

Seton's estimate, when applied to the land area of Virginia, equates to a pre-colonial population of 400,000- 800,000 deer (Figure 1).

* extirpation means extermination

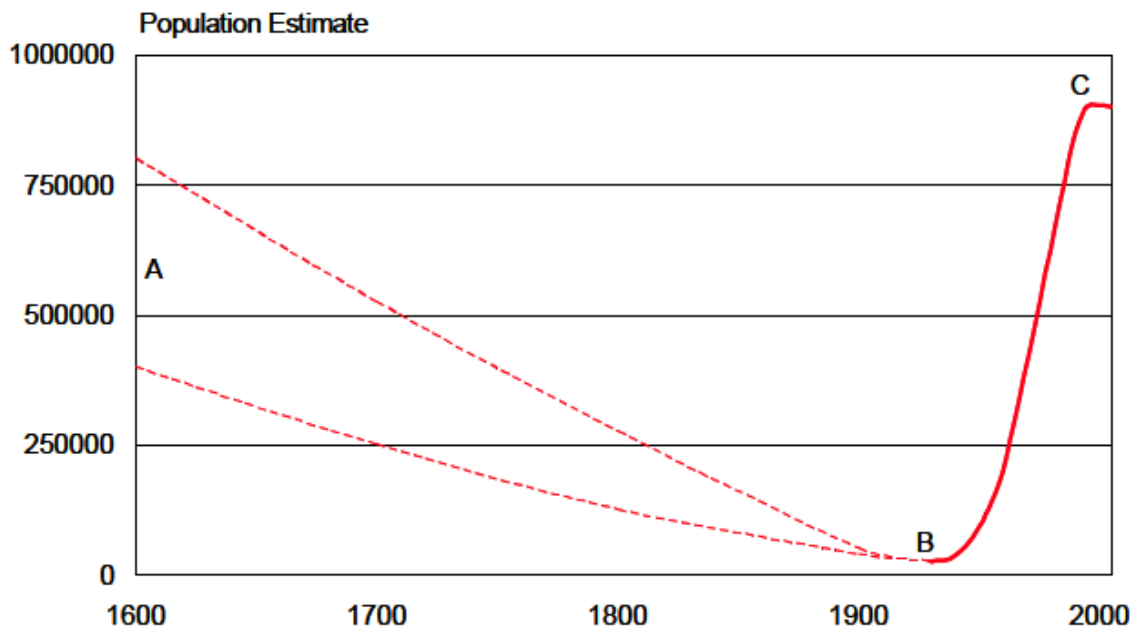


Figure 1. Hypothetical population curve for Virginia's deer herd, 1600-present.

From: Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. (June 2007). *Virginia Deer Management Plan, 2006-2015*. Wildlife Information Publication No. 07-1. Richmond, VA. Available <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/deer/management-plan/virginia-deer-management-plan.pdf>.