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Key Facts about Deer Control on Secretary Island

FIORDLAND NATIONAL PARK

What's happening?

More than 480 deer have been removed from Secretary Island in the first 14 months of a programme, being carried out by the Department of Conservation, aimed at removing deer. The programme also seeks to limit any long term re-establishment of deer on the island.

This deer control programme is part of a larger restoration programme enhancing the ecological values of Secretary Island. The restoration programme also includes the control of stoats and the reintroduction of native species no longer found or threatened on mainland Fiordland.

Why do we need to control deer?

Until 1960, Secretary Island was one of the few places in New Zealand that remained free of any introduced grazing or browsing animals. Sometime during the 1960's deer first swam to the island. By 1975 the expanding deer population had already caused major damage to the vegetation and soils.

Removing deer from Secretary Island will allow the regeneration of many plants that are vulnerable to browsing. With stoats and deer no longer impacting on the native flora and fauna, the island ecosystem can begin a natural process of restoration. It is hoped that in the future visitors to Secretary Island will be able to experience Fiordland how it used to be.

Isn't eradication a bit ambitious?

The programme is somewhat experimental as the eradication of deer has never been attempted in an area as large as Secretary Island. Consequently, a secondary goal is the trial and evaluation of different control methods and their potential application for use on other islands and similar conservation areas, e.g. mainland islands.

There are some significant advantages in the new programme over previous attempts to control deer on Secretary Island. There is now a greater network of tracks and huts allowing better foot access for hunters. Advances in technology, a greater annual commitment to deer control and knowledge gained from deer control operations in the Murchison Mountains and smaller islands in Fiordland all contribute to more comprehensive deer control.

DNA analysis of deer hair samples collected from the island suggest that this population is closely related, indicating that new arrivals may not occur very often.



Red deer. Photo - DOC

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Te Papa Atawhai

***How will we
remove deer
and prevent
reinvasion?***

The deer control programme has been broken down into three phases;

- 1) The 'knockdown' phase is aimed at reducing the deer population by 80% within the first two years.

Ground hunting with contract hunters using trained dogs and helicopter hunting are being used for the knockdown, which began in November 2006. The field observations of these experienced hunters are a vital aid to assessing and reviewing control techniques. In the first year of the programme 450 deer were removed from the island.

- 2) The 'mop-up' phase is aimed at eliminating the remaining 20% of the deer population. It is planned for the two years following the knockdown phase. During this period ground and aerial hunting will be targeted at key sites. New techniques currently being trialled for use in the mop-up phase include remotely monitored capture pens and nets, self-attaching transmitter collars and non-toxic baits and lures.

Eleven capture pens have been constructed at sites along the shores of Secretary Island, with others along adjacent shorelines of Doubtful/Patea and Thompson Sounds.

- 3) The 'maintenance' phase will begin following the mop-up phase. The focus of this phase is preventing deer re-establishing themselves on the island. The main techniques intended for use in the maintenance phase are remotely monitored capture pens, self-attaching radio collars and ground checks by hunters with dogs.

***Does this
mean I won't
be able to
visit the
island or
hunt there?***

There is nothing to stop anyone visiting or hunting on the island, although deer numbers are quite low because of the deer control programme. On some occasions there may also be professional hunters working on the island as part of the deer control programme. Access may be temporarily restricted during stoat and deer control operations.

All visitors to the island must be aware of the potential risk of carrying unwanted plant and animal pests on to Secretary Island. Once free of pests the island will be a unique haven for some of New Zealand's most endangered species. Rodents pose a particular threat, as they can so easily stow-away in boats or bags and once on the island could quickly devastate island ecosystems. It is vital that anyone visiting check that all their clothing, bags, equipment and transport are free of any soil, plant or animal pests.

***Further
information***

For more information about Deer Control operations on Secretary Island please contact:

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