

[From Spring 1993]

Big Game Hunting: Past and Present

Big game hunting on Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge has been an important management tool and a popular recreational activity for twenty-eight years. In 1962 the sika population on the refuge reached an estimated 1,050 animals. The estimate was based on trapping and tagging studies, night surveys and track count studies. This figure was considered extremely high and steps were taken to establish a public deer hunt to reduce the herd. By the time final preparations were made in 1964, the herd had reached an estimated 1,300.

A plan was initially developed to trap and transfer sika to less crowded habitat off of the refuge. However, state wildlife managers rejected the idea of introducing an exotic species into areas occupied by the native white-tailed deer. It was also learned that the trap and transfer method was extremely time consuming and not very effective. Managers decided that the most efficient method of controlling the sika population would be to initiate a regulated public hunting program.

On October 5-10, 1964, the initial public sika hunt was held. A total of 783 hunters took 237 sika during the six day shotgun season. A three day archery season was added to the big game program in 1965 and 613 archers bagged 34 sika. One buck weighed 153 pounds and is the largest sika ever harvested on the refuge. The six day shotgun hunt that year was the least regulated and most dangerous hunt ever conducted on the refuge. On opening day, 576 hunters harvested 180 sika. One hunter received a minor buckshot wound in his right hand and was taken to a local doctor for treatment. By that afternoon, he was back on the refuge hunting. A total of 286 sika were harvested during the 1965 season.

Managing habitat for a diversity of wildlife has required the refuge staff to modify the big game hunt frequently over the years. Some hunting seasons were four days long while others were ten weeks. Hunter participation ranged from 49 people to 1,876 and sika harvests from 0 to 330. A white-tailed deer season was opened in 1967 and then closed in 1987. Even hunting of feral goats was permitted in 1967 and 1968.

A total of 687 sika were bagged during the first five years of the hunt program. Over the next fifteen years (1969-83) only 638 sika were harvested. By 1978 the sika population was increasing and more liberal bag limits were implemented. The sika population continued to skyrocket despite harvesting 742 from 1984 to 1988. During the last four years, another 1,162 sika were bagged. The yearly harvest peaked in 1989 at 330, but it wasn't until 1991 that a measurable decrease in the adult (breeding) population occurred.

The 1992 harvest of 239 sika was down 24% from 1991 but the percentage of adults bagged remained at last year's level. Archery permits were issued to 165 hunters and 30 sika were bagged during the two week season. Archers were required to complete the National Bowhunter Education Program or an equivalent course in order to qualify for a permit. The firearm hunt area was divided into 17 compartments with a maximum of three

hunters permitted in each compartment. The season was five weeks long and there were two hunts per week. Permits were issued to 304 hunters and 209 sika were harvested.

Why did the sika population explosion occur? And, why was it so difficult to get under control? Debating those questions and trying to write a new hunt program for the next season will occupy some staff time during the spring of 1993.

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