

2013 Deer Task Force Annual Report

The Deer Task Force (DTF) was established in 2009 as a result of a resolution by the New Shoreham Town Council. It was evident that the deer population on Block Island was creating an extreme health and environmental risk to residents, visitors and property and that some effort to drastically reduce or eliminate the herd needed to be placed under consideration.

The Deer Task Force was charged with the responsibility to study the topic and advise the Town Council. Since its inception, the DTF has identified many, if not all, of the deer-related issues as they affect Block Island while the deer population has continued to grow exponentially.

2013 has been a year filled with meetings both on and off the island with the intent of addressing viable solutions to reducing and/or eliminating the negative aspects that the deer have fraught upon our community.

January:

It was voted that the first priority of the DTF would be to present a plan or plans for drastic reduction or elimination of the deer herd to be presented to the Town Council by the end of 2013, if not sooner.

Managed hunts on conservation and Fish and Wildlife lands with hunters chosen by lottery finally became a reality.

February:

Different deer elimination plans were studied and discussed, primarily the Skidaway Plan and a bounty plan. A memo from Tim Cozine of the USDA regarding some of the USDA capabilities and concerns regarding extirpation of the deer was entered into the record.

March:

A meeting with a representative of DEM (Cathy Sparks) was set by the Town Council for March 20th. Representatives of the DTF met with her before the meeting.

Hunting dates for the 2013-2014 hunting season were proposed and it was suggested in a memo to the Council that the season begin on 10/15/13.

A 'Modified Skidaway' Plan was recommended and a preliminary line item in the Town budget was discussed. (See attachment)

The Town Council, in a 3-2 vote, approved the concept of a deer cull.

April:

Catherine Sparks, Assistant director of the Division of Forest Environment, RI DEM, came to Block Island on April 17, 2013, and spoke in a public forum at a Town Council Meeting regarding the excessive deer situation.

A discussion of the formation of a citizen's support group and fundraising dominated this month's Deer Task Force meeting.

Further discussion of the Modified Skidaway Plan and the upcoming hunting season continued but it was decided to wait until after meeting with the DEM to further the discussion on the plan.

May:

Representatives from the DTF began a series of meetings with the DEM at the Great Swamp Headquarters on the mainland for the purpose of developing a strategy for managing the deer herd on Block Island. The goal was to have the DEM and town representatives "work in collaboration to formulate a thoughtful, strategic approach to addressing what has been recognized as too many deer on Block Island."

It was decided that the main focus of the ongoing deer discussion should focus on the health issues and a more aggressive inclusion of Block Island Health Services and the Rhode Island Department of Health.

June:

An official letter from the First Warden to the Director of the DEM was approved by the Town Council and sent. The letter highlighted the deer-related problems that the island is experiencing, such as disease, ecological damage, nuisance/property damage, and auto damage.

Real progress in the regulatory arena was made at this time. In a letter to the First Warden from Janet Coit at the DEM, the governmental agency finally acknowledged, in writing, that a deer problem existed on Block Island and committed themselves to continuing to work with the Town to develop a "sustainable long term deer management plan".

Conversations with other organizations such as the Block Island Resident's Association, Conservancy groups, the RI Dept. of Health gained some momentum.

There was a meeting on June 19, 2013 on the mainland at the Great Swamp Management Area with representatives of the Deer Task Force and the DEM.

July:

Discussion continued on meeting with conservancy organizations to discuss the importance of opening their land to hunting.

Public education via periodic articles in the Block Island Times was thought to be an effective method of keeping the conversation about the deer in everyone's minds.

On July 31, 2013 there was a conference call with DEM and DTF representatives.

August:

Obtaining position statements from the Block Island Health Services Board and the Rhode Island Dept. of Health regarding the health hazards of the deer tick was discussed.

BIHS reported that, compared to previous years, there was an increase in the number of patients treated for tick-related illnesses

DTF representatives also presented a summary report of their July 22, 2013 meeting with the DEM. They indicated that the management plan was progressing, but not ready for the public yet.

There were two more conference calls with DEM and DTF representatives on August 16 and August 27, 2013 regarding the ongoing communication regarding a management plan.

September:

There were two conference calls between DTF representatives and the DEM. There was also a tentatively scheduled meeting between the DEM and large landowners to discuss opening their land to hunting.

There was discussion regarding State and Federal financial support in deer reduction initiatives. It was noted that when Senator Reed visited Block Island, he mentioned a \$1,000,000 grant to study Lyme disease and educate the public regarding protecting themselves from tick exposure. However, a significant portion of that money went to URI for a new laboratory.

In late September, community member, Bruce Johnson introduced his "Ticked Off" hats to be used as a fundraiser.

October:

There was significant correspondence between Health Services, the Town Council and the Dept. of Health further fortifying the argument for a deer management plan with cc:'s to Senators, Representatives and Congressmen.

The DEM also publicly announced its plan for a controlled hunt on Block Island.

November:

The press release and supporting documentation from the DEM regarding the controlled hunt proposal for the island was made public through the media and on their web-site. A public hearing on the island was scheduled for sometime in early December.

December:

A well-attended public presentation by the DEM was held at the Block Island School on December 10, 2013. The planning document for the Block Island Deer Reduction was presented by DEM representatives.

The Town Council supported the proposal but made it clear that they would not give it their full approval until all concerns from the Town Solicitor and the council members could be ironed out.

It was hopeful that these hurdles could be overcome so that reduction could begin in the winter of 2014.

Conclusion:

We feel that great strides were made in 2013 toward satisfying the original charge to the Deer Task Force regarding finding ways to reduce or eliminate the deer herd on Block Island. The collaboration between the DEM, the Deer Task Force, the Town Council, Block Island Health Services, Block Island Resident's Association, the conservation community, legislators and others has produced a plan that is ready for implementation. The Deer Task Force recognizes that this program will require constant refinement as the multi-year program plays itself out.