1-1-1960

Extinct' Key deer now abound in the Keys

Hampton Dunn
'EXTINCT' KEY DEER NOW ABOUND IN THE KEYS

By HAMPTON DUNN

BIG PINE KEY --- Historically, the cute little key deer that is distinctive to the Florida Keys dates back at least as far as 1545. Memoirs of a Spanish seaman who was held captive by the Caloosa Indians at that time reported "many small deer."

The Indians themselves first started protecting the animals, against the Spanish and English sailors enroute between European and South American ports who put ashore here to collect fresh venison.

But as time passed, and Henry Flagler ran his railroad down to Key West, followed by an overseas highway, the keys felt the touch of development and the influx of visitors. The key deer began disappearing at a fast rate. By the early 1950's the key deer population had shrunk to possible 28.

Alarmed conservationists decided to do something about it. One group, the Boone and Crockett Club of New York, paid the salary of a protector, Jack Watson, to watch over the diminishing herd. And the movement grew to establish a refuge.

And so it was, in 1954, that a National Wildlife Refuge for key deer was established on more than 9,000 acres of attractive land on Big Key Island and surrounding area. Leader in getting necessary legislation was Congressman Dante Fascell (D-Fla.) whose district includes this key. It is about 130 miles southwest of Miami on U.S. 1.

From the day of official protection, the number of key deer began to increase and the strange little animal was saved from destruction.

A buck weighs from 60 to 90 pounds, a doe from 35 to 65 pounds. The largest measures about 38 inches from nose to tail.