

Acquisition of permits to field-handle, rehabilitate/release, and establish a sanctuary for non-releasable Florida Key Deer

Proposal

Submitted to

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

30 July, 2023

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Save Our Key Deer, Inc. is a 501C3-registered company. TIN: 82-2119535



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1. OBJECTIVE

At present, no rehab, foster care or sanctuary for unreleasable Key deer exists in the Keys. The objective of this proposal is to apply for permit(s) that would allow Critter Litters Inc.'s Tracy Garcia (a licensed Florida wildlife rehabber residing in Big Pine Key) and, under her oversight, specific volunteers from Save Our Key Deer, Inc. to handle Florida Key Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus clavium*) for the purposes of 1) render field assistance (if possible) to a compromised deer (e.g. remove rope tangled in a buck's antlers, remove PVC pipe collar stuck on a deer's foot, etc.); 2) keep an adult deer at a FWC-approved enclosure for rehab purposes or an orphaned fawn for a finite time interval before release; 3) establish and maintain a Key deer sanctuary for unreleasable deer.

Such activities are presently permitted in the Florida Keys and elsewhere for endangered sea turtles and manatees, and rehab facilities for non-endangered mammals and birds are relatively plentiful, but no such aid is available for the Key deer. Our hope is to provide, with FWC's support, such much-needed assistance and "level the playing field" for the Key deer. Additionally, FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) has extensive programs and involvement in rehab-release related activities and research for sea turtles and manatees, but is not similarly involved with Key deer. Collaboration with our groups could thus serve to expand FWRI's activities to include this important Florida mammal.

2. JUSTIFICATION

2.1 Historical Key deer care

The present lack of rehab, foster and sanctuary care for the Key deer is a relatively recent change. Since the establishment of the Key Deer Refuge, from the 1970s through at least 2010 Refuge staff along with local veterinarians and wildlife rehabbers provided many such services. The Refuge's involvement was especially strong in the mid-2000s when a dedicated facility was built (Figure1). Some rehab and foster care was available in more recent years through the rehab-licensed Florida Keys Wildlife Rescue, Inc. on Big Pine Key, but that non-profit ceased operation in 2015. Its proprietors moved out of the Keys and any licenses were lost. The Sheriff's Animal Farm in Key West holds permits for permanently keeping Key deer, but do not wish to use them and no longer hold any unreleasable Key deer. In a few cases, Key deer were permanently transferred to zoos on mainland Florida.

The re-establishment of permitted facilities for at least the rehab and foster care functions thus has a strong precedent. The care can be provided on private land with no financial or staff burden on FWC or USFWS/Refuge.



Figure 1. Refuge staff with Key deer in rehab photographed in 2006-2007

2.2 Existing care for endangered sea turtles

Founded in 1984, the Turtle Hospital (Hidden Harbor Marine Environmental Project, Inc.) in Marathon is permitted to handle, provide medical care, rehab, and foster various species of sea turtles. The very successful self-funded non-profit can serve as a model for what we are striving to achieve with the Key deer, although our initial goals are by far not as extensive as the Turtle Hospital's at this time. FWC has extensive involvement with sea turtle issues and the Hospital, and this collaboration can be emulated with the proposed Key deer activities.

2.3 Existing care for manatees

Same as with sea turtles, FWC has long-term involvement with manatee issues, even maintaining the Save The Manatee Trust Fund. FWC provides the emergency hot line for people to call to report and injured manatee (same as presently exists for the Key deer), and works with the Dolphin Research Center which is licensed to respond and even hold an injured manatee for a limited time. This is another example of an already existing program that should be emulated with the Key deer.

3. TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 Personnel and experience

Ms. Tracy Garcia, resident of Big Pine Key, holds a Florida Wildlife Rehabilitation Permit through her non-profit organization Critter Litters, Inc. She has wide-ranging rehab experience. She is able to utilize Save Our Key Deer, Inc. (SOKD) Board members and volunteers for wildlife care under her permit. With a permit specifically allowing her to rehab Key deer, she would work with SOKD to establish FWC-approved rehab facilities on private property(s) that would allow successful soft-release of the rehabbed animals. Similarly, weaned orphaned fawns would be soft-released from the facility. This is being done successfully with other deer throughout the US, and SOKD's Board members Valerie Preziosi and Jan Svejovsky have direct experience with this as they were very active in Project Wildlife and Wildlife Center in San

Diego County, California (including deer) before moving to the Keys in 2016. During their residency in the Keys, they have gained great experience and knowledge of Key deer behavior, biological needs, diseases, and injuries as they have assisted FWC, MCSO and USFWS in numerous rescues and field cases, in addition to conducting ecological research of the deer for peer-review journal publication. The desired permit for deer field assistance and rehab would be specifically for individuals with prior experience or specialized training which would be reviewed by FWC. Veterinary support for Critter Litters is provided by Dr. Michael Dunn and staff of his Keys Animal Hospital in Marathon. Dr. Dunn has also committed support to SOKD since 2018. He is unique in Keys veterinarians in that he has extensive deer experience working both in and outside the Keys.

3.2 Space provisions

Multiple SOKD volunteers have properties suitable for siting rehab and fawn foster care enclosures, and have expressed interest in providing such space. As part of the permitting process, SOKD and Critter Litters will work with FWC to choose the best sites and build the enclosures.

Several potential sites are being explored by SOKD for a permanent Key deer sanctuary. The intention is to have the site accessible by the public as an education display in addition to housing unreleasable deer. Two examples are Pigeon Key off Marathon (which already houses several unreleasable birds) and the Moose Lodge property on Big Pine Key (which contains a year-round natural fresh water pond and undisturbed vegetation). Both sites already have permanent caretaker staff, which would minimize the sanctuary's logistics and expense. If FWC is open to the Key deer sanctuary concept, SOKD will pursue these and other potential siting possibilities.

3.3 Financing

All expenses related to the desired Key deer activities will be supported by SOKD, which obtains funds from direct donations and non-profit directed grants.