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The Deer Industry in New Zealand  
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Deer were first introduced to New Zealand 150 years ago, mainly into the South Island's Southern Alps and its foothills. Between 1861 and 1919 more than 250 Red Deer had been liberated in New Zealand for sport.

Like the possum, the Red Deer acclimated well to the New Zealand environment. By 1910 it had become evident that in the absence of predators, with a plentiful food supply and being legally protected from hunting, the Red Deer had become an animal pest. (There are no natural predators for many introduced animals. The possum – introduced from Australia in an attempt to create a possum fur industry – proliferated to the point that it too became (and is) a serious problem).

### **Dealing with Deer**

Grazing land was being eaten, native plants and trees were being destroyed, and the stripping of undergrowth was having a significant negative impact on the native forests. In 1920, concerned about increasing deer numbers, the Minister for Internal Affairs announced that deer would no longer be protected from hunting.

By the 1930s, a team of government cullers were employed to hunt and kill deer. Receiving a basic wage, cullers were paid a bonus for each skin and tail returned.

In the 1960s, due to the remoteness of hunting areas, the helicopter era began. Helicopters were used to fly the hunters in and bring deer carcasses out. Early regulations stated that carcasses were to be carried out on stretchers bolted to the skids of helicopters. When cargo straps were made legal for carrying carcasses, deer recovery by helicopter increased rapidly.

By 1970 more than 60 helicopters were being used for deer shooting and recovery. Crews were retrieving between 100 and 200 deer a day, with the top tallies being worth more than NZ\$17,000. The process involved shooting deer from the helicopter, then cleaning the animal and preparing a load for helicopter extraction. The deer populations in New Zealand have been brought under control, but to this day deer are regarded as a pest by New Zealand's Department of Conservation, and there are no bag-limits or seasons for hunting large game in New Zealand, and no or low cost for permits (and a firearms license is needed). There are no native mammals in New Zealand other than bats, and so there are programs to manage or remove them all.

With venison prices soaring and a single helicopter company given the license to recover deer in Fiordland, the "deer wars" began.

Unlicensed helicopter crews of 20 to 30 were making illegal, but highly profitable, raids. Reports of helicopters being shot at from the ground, arson, sabotage and fist fights between the hunters made headlines and forced the government to settle the situation down.

### **Farming Deer**

The export of feral (wild) deer started in the 1960s, turning a pest into an export earner. Industry pioneers saw an opportunity in the early 1970s to build on this base by capturing live deer and farming them. A new industry was born and rapidly spread throughout New Zealand.

There are deer farms now across New Zealand, ranging in size from small hobby farms to extensive commercial operations. On these farms are about 1 million deer, a large portion of the world's farmed deer population.

Sophisticated New Zealand farming techniques mean that deer are able to roam and graze naturally in the open air, free from stresses which can toughen muscles and develop strong flavors. As a result, New Zealand farmed venison is naturally tender and mild in flavor. With virtually no fat, calories or cholesterol, venison is an attractive food. New Zealand venison is exported to Europe primarily (mainly Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands). A small amount of deer is sold in New Zealand and can occasionally be found at supermarkets. But other products come from deer – the velvet for instance is collected and sold for the Asian market.

The industry had a clear progression. Its beginning was ground hunting shooting for bounty and meat. It moved then to hunting via helicopter. But as the deer farming industry developed, the helicopter was used to help capture live deer as the seed stock for deer farms. In those early days, there were no processes, so the deer industry pioneers (more like adventurers) had to develop techniques for capturing live deer, including using a long bamboo pole with a tranquilizer on the end. They also used to "bulldog" live deer. The shooter had to jump on the deer and tie it up for pickup by the helicopter. Later techniques employed a net gun.

The industry was an extremely risky one. The country in which deer were killed or captured is extremely rough, and maneuvering a helicopter was difficult. More than 50 people were killed – helicopter pilots, shooters and gutters – as the industry developed, making it one of the most deadly of the risky industries. A recent memorial plaque was unveiled in Wanaka by the New Zealand Deer Farmer's Association to mark its 40<sup>th</sup> year.

### **Visiting a Deer Farm**

New Zealand deer farms are prominent across both the North and South Islands and are easily identified because of the tall fences along the roads if not the large herds of deer.

Paddocks tend to be shaped a bit differently than the arbitrary squares of cattle operations to allow for better herd movement. And deer sheds and yards are carefully built to help work with a flighty animal like deer – tall, solid walls are in the working barns to reduce visible distractions, and hydraulic crushes are padded. There is even regulatory guidance from New Zealand's Deer Code of Welfare (2007). The animal handling systems and practices typified by Temple Grandin are taken to an extreme since most deer are less than 10 generations from wild, have a long flight distance, and tend to handle better in groups.

Deer herds are comprised of stags, hinds and breeding stock, and like our US cattle operations, care is taken with selection for breeding, animal health is a priority, and seasonal feed requirements vary. Deer operations today might specialize in venison production or velvet production and so have their own herd management emphases. It is interesting in farm supply stores to come across deer feed targeted to antler growth, for instance.

The deer farming industry peaked at more than 5,000 farms and 2 million farmed deer 15 years ago, but has consolidated to about 2,000 active farmers and slightly less than 1 million deer. Like other ag industries, there has been a shift in land use and a succession issue (in which children don't pick up the parent's passion for deer). An interesting intro source is Deer Industry New Zealand at <http://deernz.org.nz/>.