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Study: Deer overpopulation may hamper forest health, diversity of tree species

By Mike Crissey, Associated Press, 1/7/2003 06:22

PITTSBURGH (AP) They voraciously chew up trees and seedlings, placing the forests of the eastern United States in danger of becoming stunted tree farms or pasture land. They're not a new parasite, but a familiar antlered animal deer.

While some have blamed the loss of forest land and species on logging and herbicides, a study by U.S. Forest Service researchers in northwestern Pennsylvania showed that too many deer may be just as detrimental.

The study, being published in February in the journal *Ecological Applications*, shows larger deer populations may lead to shorter trees and fewer species, even in areas without cutting. It also comes close to pinning down how many deer is too many for a forest to handle at least in northwestern Pennsylvania, where deer have few other food sources.

"Deer are a problem, whether you log or don't log," said study co-author Steve Horsley, a researcher with the Forest Service's Northeastern Research Station on the edge of the Allegheny National Forest.

"Overpopulation of deer is a threat in a number of northeastern states. Pennsylvania has had overpopulation for a long time, about 80 years," Horsley said.

Deer change the makeup of forests with their appetites. They prefer certain saplings such as the sugar maple, pin cherry, and black and yellow birch leaving other species largely untouched. In open areas, deer grazing can allow ferns to spread, stealing valuable sunlight from some trees.

Other studies have tried to tally damage done by deer by fencing off a stand of trees and comparing it surrounding forest where deer graze freely. But the research is limited, Horsley said, because deer don't always eat in the same place and the supply of tasty trees changes.

Jim Findlay, a forester at Penn State University's agricultural extension program, said the study was a warning to Pennsylvania and other northeastern states with unchecked deer populations.

"The longer forests are exposed to high deer populations the more effect we are

going to see on vegetation," Findlay said.

But Jim Kleissler, spokesman for an environmental group called the Allegheny Defense Project, said the Forest Service was trying to blame deer to deflect criticism for poor management of the forest.

"Deer populations are up from the management itself," Kleissler said. "Clear cuts attract deer. They are creating their own problems."

On the Net:

Forest Service Northeast Research Station: <http://www.fs.fed.us/ne>

Ecological Society of America: <http://www.esa.org>

Allegheny Defense Project: <http://www.alleghenydefense.org/>