

Three Years of the Vegetation of the Town of Ogden Dunes, Indiana

A Qualitative Approach

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INTRODUCTION

Reports of the previous two years were based upon production of quantitative data. The directives of those investigations specified interest to Town-owned tracts. Incidental observations were also included in the analyses. The conclusions included both deductive and inferred interpretations of the data.

Budgetary considerations were the main restriction on the scopes of the studies, and thus limited the amount and types of data that could be considered. The funding for this 3rd-Phase study is significantly lower than in previous years, and the request was for a less detailed qualitative assessment of the Town's vegetation. Qualitative assessment of habitats and their components, and the value of such assessments, continue to be the fodder for debate among researchers and land managers. The inherent subjectivity of the observations themselves is a fatal flaw in attempts to produce unbiased interpretations. Criticism of the integrity of the researcher invariably becomes the crux for determination of the validity of the study.

It is therefore relevant to note the researcher's [Credentials](#), as well as his motivation for accepting this task. It was at significant personal and monetary expense that the researcher addressed this problem with appropriate scope. He is neither a resident of Ogden Dunes, nor profiting in any way from the inevitable social-political leverage of his conclusions. Throughout his roles as a public servant and as steward for lands trusts, he has been engaged in deer population management, and his opinions have remained consistent in his 29-year career. He is not an avid hunter, but has hunted deer. His personal priorities include Lyme disease, humane responsibility, and conservation of ecosystem remnants.

Methods and Conclusions

The goal, as contracted, was to visually assess the impact of deer herbivory upon the vegetation within the entire town, including the manicured landscapes, during the period of early September 2013. This was primarily accomplished from roadsides with minimal exploration of the interiors of community-owned and public tracts. From these vantage points, definitions of reasonably reproducible observations are limited to:

1. Vertical Structure— Generally referred to as browse lines, and observed as the absence of edible vegetation within the reach of deer – Approximately six feet or less.
2. Dominance— Defined in this case as conspicuously clumped distributions of a species within a specific geographic range, and observed primarily with respect to invasive species.
3. Form— Periodic herbivory by deer produces growth habits in woody plants that are distinct from those of undisturbed plants.
4. Trampling— Areas where vegetation is inhibited due to physical disturbance of soil by repeated congregation or movement of deer.

Succinctly, there was no significant visual difference in the 2013 vegetation when compared to previous years. Observations were conducted on two directed visits, and additional observations were recalled from casual visits throughout 2013. Referring to the defined observations: (1) Browse lines are evident in both green spaces and residential plantings. (2) Invasive species are dominant throughout the Town. (3) Multiple branching and root-suckering continue among wild trees, and significant stunting is evident on yews, arborvitae, holly, and deciduous shrubs in residential landscapes. (4) Trampling is significant along trails, and in resting areas.

These simple conclusions, while re-confirming deer impact, do little to describe causality. Particularly troubling is the fact that many deer have been removed from the Town, yet there are no outstanding changes that would indicate that management ever occurred. The only reasonable inference is that a large population is still present – perhaps as large as when the hunts started.

This is the end of the contracted report. The following dissertation is the personal offering from the researcher.

Swattin' Flies with The Barn Door Open

Ogden Dunes Deer Task Force, July 2012, Item 1:

“The aerial infrared deer count report performed on 2-12-2012 shows an Ogden Dunes deer population of approximately fifty with an additional fifty just outside the town limits. It is unreasonable and contrary to the understood behavior of deer to believe that all of the approximately one hundred deer do not migrate into and forage within the town limits of Ogden Dunes at some time during the year.”

This quote is a vast understatement, and everyone involved, including the Indiana Division of Fish and Wildlife and The Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, knows it. The Town of Ogden Dunes is being decimated - its ecology, its land value, its culture, its community, its health, and its reputation are all being destroyed by this single issue. I will, with no reservations, continue by adding that these burdens are not only cast upon the residents by the irresponsibility of the region's largest landowner, but more importantly by the effective intention of the Department of the Interior to saddle this small community with the expenses of its own ineptitude.

Ogden Dunes is literally surrounded by land owned by the United States Government. The National Lakeshore has dragged its feet for decades with deer control, and in May of 2012, published their Management Plan. Their experts examined four possibilities: do nothing, issue prophylactics and birth control pills, kill them, or a combination of these. Nowhere in this plan are timelines for implementation, on-the-ground strategies, assignment of duties, and measureable goals discussed. It appears to simply be an official means for maintaining inaction.

To my knowledge, none of the responsible agencies know the actual size of the population across the region. The Division of Fish and Wildlife published “record harvests” last year, but there are inherent flaws with using reported kills as the only means of estimation - especially in the urban matrix of Northwest Indiana. Until the contrary is proven, it is my professional opinion that the population of the deer that occupy Ogden Dunes is representative of an extended population that significantly exceeds what has been measured in proximity to the Town.

This extended population occupies, and is effectively confined to, a distinct area bounded by industry to the west and interstate highways on the south (Attached Map). For discussion purposes, I limited the east end of the range to

State Road 149. This area is actually open to the east through the East Branch of the Little Calumet River corridor, which funnels a constant influx of deer into this dead-end from a much larger area. For discussion purposes, I limited this extended range to around 10,000 acres (5500 in Porter County and 4800 in Lake County). Of course there is a certain 'permeability' of these boundaries, but the door swings both ways. In total, the United States of America owns over 4800 acres, over 50% of the habitable land, within this defined zone.

There are sub-populations of deer throughout this range exhibiting a variety of survival strategies. Some of deer seen in Aetna and Miller Beach probably tend to be resident, similar to what is observed in Ogden Dunes. There are also likely to be sub-populations that defend the superior forage in the dune-and-swale of the Miller Unit. Other sub-populations are using the agricultural lands and wetlands adjacent to the West Branch. And others are thriving among the floodplains of the East Branch. And there are certainly groups that are nomadic; they move throughout the range, opportunistically competing for food and mates. I suggest that deer with this nomadic disposition rapidly filled the habitat void created by the culls in Ogden Dunes.

The question that really bothered me was, "Why are they coming to Ogden Dunes?" After 3 years of research, I know that the vegetation within the Town is poor forage. In general, the forage growing on sand is of lower quality than is found on loams, peats, and hydric soils. The various corn feeding stations may contribute to the attraction, but these cannot account for the replacement of the population in one year. I would be less concerned if the influx had occurred over the course of 5 years. The only reasonable answer is that the entire range is massively overpopulated, hungry, and confined. With no effective migration outlets to the south and west, deer keep piling into the range from the east, and have no option other than to spread out wherever they can.

This discussion would be lacking if I did not include a note on Lyme Disease. Again, the National Lakeshore is actively suppressing the magnitude of the problem in this region. The Center for Disease Control has recently stated that the infection rate in America is far higher than was previously understood. Here in Northwest Indiana, it is no secret that hundreds, if not thousands of people are chronically sick. The National Lakeshore is promoting visitation to an area that is infested with disease-carrying ticks, yet their policy is not proactive dissemination - They only provide information pamphlets when asked.

“Funding” is their general excuse. I submit that they are expending far greater monies in their enforcement of exclusion of hunting. There is no scarcity of ethical hunters in the region, and they will be more than happy to remove these deer - for free! It is time that the United States behaves like a responsible neighbor.

Every resident of Ogden Dunes is to be applauded for their investments in this problem. Politics, emotion, and rationality included, there is no question that everyone has stepped-up to fight battles that none should have had to fight. This also applies to neighboring land managers, farmers, and land trusts that similarly have expended their limited time, money, and community resources to protect their values. I am confident that a combined voice, armed with the simple information include here, can bring this issue to an end.

RESEARCHER INFORMATION

John Ervin is an independent entrepreneur residing in Valparaiso with no professional fealty to any organization, governmental or otherwise. He was formerly employed by the State of Indiana, The Nature Conservancy, and several private-sector corporations. He earned a BS (92) in Biology at Purdue. His post-graduate study of botany, entomology, and evolution at Ball State (97-99) was accompanied by research of beetle fire ecology in the Dune-and-Swale remnants of Lake County. In the private sector he was employed as process engineer, arborist, nurseryman, landscaper, and applied entomologist. In the two years following his departure from public service, his ventures have included ecological consultation, public speaking, grant proposals, community building, and authorship. His dedicated mission in the community of Northwest Indiana is to foster coexistence between humans and the ecosystem.

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