



If you build it...

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SO LET'S RECAP—European colonists arrived in Pennsylvania around 1650ish and 250 years later predators are wiped out, game species are overharvested and extirpated, half of the state's trees are gone, the Game Commission is created, and millions of acres of deer food replaced vast mature forests. History really doesn't have to be that complicated.

Because Pennsylvanians wanted the world and wanted it now, the Game Commission began a restocking program in 1906 to accelerate the return of the whitetail. Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio and Pennsylvania, itself, supplied deer. The restocking program continued for 19 years, which was probably 19 years too many.

Don't get me wrong, deer in Pennsylvania had nearly disappeared from the landscape. The key word, of course, is nearly. According to Game Commission records, 1,192 deer were purchased during that period. And in 1907, Pennsylvania became a buck-only hunting state.

As you may recall, the subject of this column a year ago was the reproductive potential of white-tailed deer. Excellent range equals twice as many deer in two years.

But Pennsylvania wasn't excellent deer range; it was exceptional, outstanding, superb deer range. And instead of succeeding into pole stage forest 15 to 20 years after the big cut at the turn of the century, young brushy forest conditions persisted for several decades by repeated fires. Holy cow, the deer hit the jackpot! Pennsylvania was the land of plenty to those who settled here, her forests did not hold nor could they support the number of deer these "new" forests could.

In 1906, the year before the buck-only hunting regulation, the harvest was roughly 800 deer, 350 of which were bucks. In 1907, the harvest dropped to 200 bucks and 30 illegal does. Five years later the buck harvest was more than 1,000. Two years later the buck harvest was more than 1,200 and by 1920, buck harvest was 3,300; more than 16 times what it was just 13 years before. I wish my money in the bank grew that fast.

Quite unintentionally, our forefathers created perfect circumstances for the roaring comeback of our soon-to-be state animal. Limited male only harvests, absent predators, abundant regenerating clearcuts, frequent fires holding back forest succession, and an agency pulling out all the stops to return game to the state. How could deer not be resurrected?

So from the ashes of Pennsylvania's forests rose a giant of epic proportions.