Healthy Forests...
Diverse Habitats

Deer exclosures are fences that keep deer out. The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources puts up exclosures where deer browsing (feeding) is too heavy. Exclosures give plants and tree seedlings a chance to grow without becoming deer food. Exclosures demonstrate the impact on the forest when the number of deer is out of balance with available food sources.
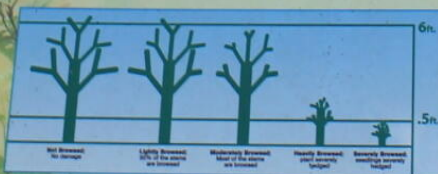
Other factors affect forest health that exclosures can't control. Acid rain dissolves soil nutrients that trees need for healthy growth. Insects and disease sometimes damage leaves. Non-native plants are introduced and compete for habitat. These factors are found inside and outside the fence. Only large mammals like deer are excluded.

Plant life is lush and thick inside the exclosure, while the outside has only a few plants, like hay-scented fern, which deer do not like to eat.

All about balance

A healthy forest habitat provides food, water, shelter and space for many types of plants and animals. A deer herd in balance with the available food source can help the forest by eating some plants, allowing for varied species at different stages of growth. Hunters and natural predators also help deer herds from growing too large. When the deer herd is balanced, the forest is healthy and habitats are diverse.

With severe deer browsing, tree seedlings may never exceed six inches, reducing forest regeneration.

It's all linked

Over browsing happens when deer eat more young plants and tree seedlings than the forest can replace. This damages undergrowth habitat for species like songbirds, frogs, salamanders, turtles and small mammals. Even deer find less food, so they don't grow as large and have smaller antlers.

What's on the menu?

In spring and summer, deer eat:
- Wildflowers
- Leaves
- Tree seedlings
- Grasses

ladyslipper orchid

During fall and winter, deer eat:
- Fruit and nuts

raspberries

As food becomes scarce they browse on:
- Shrubs
- Buds
- Woody stems
- Tree bark

acorns

The average deer eats four to nine pounds a day!

Peer for Deer

Look for...
- Tracks made by deer hooves
- Deer beds - areas of matted down vegetation where deer rest
- Buck rubs, where male deer rub against trees to leave their scent or remove antler velvet
- Piles of deer pellets (droppings)
- Stems and twigs with jagged ends torn off by feeding deer

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