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“The recreational value of a head of game is inverse to the artificiality of its origin, and hence in a broad way to the intensiveness of the system of game management which produced it.”

— Aldo Leopold (1933:394), *Game Management*

Intensive deer management has increased dramatically across North America the past several decades. This new management philosophy is not, however, without problems or controversy.

At several levels, intensive deer management is incompatible with the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation and its keystone component, the Public Trust Doctrine (Geist et al. 2001, Geist and Organ 2004) because it promotes the privatization of wildlife and creates markets that sell public wildlife resources. Last, and critical to the future of deer hunting in the United States, deer “hunting” under the intensive deer-management model violates the fundamental concept of fair chase, which is also a cornerstone principle of hunting in North America. It is difficult to mount an ethical defense of deer “hunting” under the intensive deer management model to deer hunters, and it is impossible to mount such an ethical defense to the nonhunting public.

So exactly what is intensive deer management? For the purposes of this article, I will define it as high-fencing and supplemental feeding of deer. Captive deer managers in many states have taken it further; selectively breeding deer to produce unnaturally big antlers.

The title “intensive” deer management is actually just a disingenuous euphemism for trophy deer management. It is trophy deer management. I find it comical when I read quotations by intensive deer-management advocates and managers talking about capturing and breeding deer to “improve” the white-tailed deer’s genetics. They are not improving deer genetics. They are intensively and artificially selecting for big antlers. That is not an improvement.

In fact, these trophy deer managers are destroying the genetic integrity of these penned white-tailed deer. An Internet article recently noted that deer breeders had recently reached an important milestone by testing and creating an individual genotype identification for the 100,000th white-tailed deer. Also mentioned in the article was the fact that breeders have had to double the number of genetic markers used in testing because inbreeding deer for selected traits had increased and genetic diversity had decreased. I will leave it to your imagination to guess what “traits” they are selecting for, but I will give you a hint — gigantic antlers. No one has ever

“improved” the genome of a wild animal by inbreeding and reducing the species’ innate genetic diversity.

The intensive trophy-deer managers around the United States are intelligent, hard-working people, and I predicted decades ago that they would ultimately succeed. If we can turn a wolf into a Chihuahua, no one had to convince me that some clever person could genetically engineer the super buck — a buck with antlers so big he cannot hold his head up, just like the little dog Max in *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*. They have. But the fact is that no other genetic characteristic will matter as long as the antlers are gigantic. This is the genetic “improvement” intensive deer managers seek. They seek to re-create the extinct Irish elk (*Megaloceros giganteus*), and I predict they will succeed. Maybe they already have.

The Internet and popular deer hunting press are full of pictures of these genetically engineered penned freaks. In a popular article I wrote several years ago entitled “Great Expectations,” I poked fun at these freak penned deer. I wrote:

“If you are reading this article, I bet you did not kill one of the absolutely gigantic bucks you commonly see on the cover of the deer magazines or on your favorite hunting show. I have even more bad news; you probably never will. Where do these great expectations come from? In my opinion, they are primarily a product of the deer hunting media. As a general rule, the deer hunting media do not sell and promote average realistic adult bucks but world-class, gigantic big bucks; and many of these animals are not even ‘real.’ The magazines and shows do not want you to know it, but many of the pictures and videos of these gigantic bucks are of deer in pens. Think about it. If there was a deer that big walking around in the woods in Virginia

IS SHOOTING A PRIVATELY OWNED, HALF-TAME, SEMI-DOMESTICATED, SUPPLEMENTALLY FED, GENETICALLY ENGINEERED BUCK STANDING IN A BAIT PILE INSIDE A DEER PEN THE FUTURE OF DEER HUNTING?

■ W. MATT KNOX

Antler Religion

and someone could get close enough to take perfect pictures or a video of it, don't you think some Virginia deer hunter would have already put an arrow or bullet in it? Of course they would have. Really gigantic adult bucks that do not mind standing still and having their picture taken do not have very high survival rates in the wilds of Virginia. This unrealistic expectation mess hit me several years ago at a deer convention when I saw a vendor with a poster or calendar picture of a deer that was so big, I immediately decided the antlers must have been computer generated. As is often the case, I was wrong. That same day I was told the deer was 'real' and he even had a name. Later at the same convention, in a large public session, I was shown pictures of this deer in his pen, was told that he was fed and given clean water every day and that his semen was collected to sell for captive deer genetic breeding programs. I was even told he was not allowed to breed real does, because they might kick and injure him. I did not know whether to laugh or cry."

Intensive Deer Management and the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation

The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation traces its origin back to an 1842 Supreme Court decision (*Martin vs. Waddell*) that declared those resources and rights (including game animals and related hunting rights) that had previously belonged to the king of England were transferred from the king to the citizens of the United States, with their independence. In a later 1896 decision, the Supreme Court (*Geer vs. Connecticut*) articulated the theory of state ownership of wildlife and made the first reference to wildlife as a

public trust resource (Organ and Mahoney 2007).

There are seven major components of the North American model (The Wildlife Society 2007), and intensive deer management violates most of them, including the keystone principle that wildlife is a public trust resource. Under this philosophy, white-tailed deer belong not to the individual but to the people of the state, and responsibility for managing deer is entrusted to a government agency in a common ownership by the state for the benefit of all people. As was noted by Stinson et al. (1999), the reduction of a public resource to private ownership is a fundamental issue underlying the confinement of deer behind high fences for private or commercial purposes, and allowing private possession and sale of native wildlife requires a profound change in the guiding philosophy of North American wildlife management.

Numerous threats to the North American model have materialized during the past century, but probably the most significant has been the privatization and commercialization of wildlife, especially white-tailed deer.

Privatization of deer causes problems. I believe the chronic wasting disease wildfire currently sweeping across the eastern United States can be directly tied to the privatization and commercialization of deer. In my opinion, the captive deer industry is the smoking gun behind CWD. In 1994, at the Southeast Deer Study Group Meeting in Charlottesville, Va., Valerius Geist warned deer managers from across the United States that if we allowed private individuals to capture, farm and commercialize deer, a serious disease problem was inevitable. He was correct.

The second and third principles of the North American model violated by intensive deer management are the elimination of markets for wildlife and the allocation of wildlife by law. Under the North American model, no monetary value is attached to wildlife, and access to wildlife resources is allocated by law, not by markets, land ownership or special privileges. Yet a recent article on the Internet noted that a deer auction held in Texas had grossed \$888,000. According to the press release, the highest animal sold for \$42,500.

Last, intensive deer management goes against the principle of democracy of hunting. Under the North American model, all citizens have the opportunity to hunt and be stakeholders in wildlife decisions, not just the privileged. Yet I have heard proponents of intensive deer management tell an audience that intensive deer management is good for the democracy of deer hunting, provided you had the \$10 million needed to purchase a ranch and erect a high fence. Teddy Roosevelt warned the public about the potential negative influence of money on the principle of democracy of hunting more than a century ago. Describing the enemies of game, he included the "rich people, who are content to buy what they have not the skill to get by their own exertions."

Intensive Deer Management and the Concept of Fair Chase

Fair-chase hunting is also a cornerstone of the North American model, and deer "hunting" under the intensive deer management approach is not fair-chase deer hunting. In the superb 1994 book *Beyond Fair Chase: The Ethic and Tradition of Hunting*, author Jim Posewitz wrote that fair chase is fundamental to ethical hunting because it addresses a balance that allows hunters to occasionally succeed, while animals generally avoid being killed. Posewitz also noted that the concept of



nook
by Barnes & Noble





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fair chase is important to hunting because the general public will not tolerate hunting under any other circumstances.

While public support for legal deer hunting has increased slightly in the United States during the previous decade, several surveys during the past decades have shown overwhelming opposition of the American public for trophy hunting (Kellert 1980, Duda et al. 1998, Duda and Jones 2008).

In an article I wrote a couple of years ago, I poked fun at “hunting” under intensive deer management. In a tongue-in-cheek popular article entitled “How to Kill a Big Buck, Guaranteed?,” I wrote:

“So how do you kill a big buck? It can be very easy. If ethics/fair chase and money are not an issue, find a commercial deer pen. I guarantee it, and so will they. Texas would be a very good place to start. Pay the money, show up, wait for the feeder to go off, and, voila, you can kill a big buck. Many, if not most, will take MasterCard or Visa, and promise confidentiality. Some operators will send you video or photographs prior to your ‘hunt’ so that you can pick out the big buck you want to kill beforehand. No sense in shooting a stranger. Other than the requisite, ‘I killed a gigantic buck inside a pen’ photograph, you will probably not ever have to touch the deer. If you want to do it the old fashioned, cheap and ethical way, you have to read the rest of this article. The bad news is that if you are still reading this article, it is very hard to kill a big buck.”

In one of my favorite pro-intensive-

deer-management articles, M.K. Johnson describes how high-fencing small areas can make hunting fun and easy, and landowners can obtain high prices from clients for guaranteed hunts. In contrast, he noted that, in free-range conditions, only one superior 3-year-old deer per 500 acres per year can be produced on average, and “then you have to find it.”

In a successful 2000 game farm initiative in Montana to close mammal-shooting preserves, proponents of the ban used the slogan, “Real men don’t shoot pets (The Wildlife Society 2002).” In that debate, the Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society noted that game farms eliminated fair chase through the morally indefensible act of killing “trophy” animals in a penned situation, that under those penned conditions fair chase was nonexistent and that the killing of an animal in those conditions was degrading to the shooter and the animal.

In 1997, when it was in the process of outlawing high fences, the Board of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources adopted a position statement that read, in part, “The SCDNR is opposed to the existence and construction of fenced areas designed to specifically enclose and impound deer. Further, SCDNR is opposed to and deplors the ‘hunting’ of deer within enclosures and believes that this activity is unethical and unsportsmanlike (Stinson et al. 1999).”

Some people will say intensively managed deer are not pets, but they are. Intensive deer managers are well into the process of taming and domesticating white-tailed deer. In a very general sense, domestication involves three factors: capture; providing cover, food, and water; and genetic selection for

specific traits, in this case big antlers. Deer in pens are not wild, free-ranging deer. Many of these deer are “registered,” just like purebred AKC dogs.

All that really matters in intensive deer management is big money, big antlers and the gross Boone and Crockett score. The gross Boone and Crockett score is the sole criterion of success and monetary value. It is ironic that intensive deer managers measure their trophies, success and accomplishments using the scoring system of one of the premier conservation organizations in the United States, the Boone and Crockett Club — a scoring system that clearly states that the killing of a deer inside a high fence gives the hunter an improper advantage over the deer and does not constitute fair chase (Boone and Crockett Club 2006).

In a recent popular article I wrote, I called this cultural obsession with trophy deer management and Boone and Crockett scores “the antler religion.” The people who practice this antler religion worship the deciduous bones that grow from a deer’s head. Deer hunting among practitioners of the antler religion is nothing but a contest. They think the bigger the score, the better the deer. I am not impressed with a deer’s Boone and Crockett score or trophy deer hunters. I do not understand or comprehend the antler religion.

The good news, however, is that it’s very easy to identify the followers of the antler religion. If you tell them about or show them a picture of an adult buck you or someone else killed, they will automatically ask, “What did he score?”

“Very intensive management of game or fish lowers the unit value of the trophy by artificializing it. Consider, for example, a trout raised in a hatchery and newly liberated in an over-fished stream. No one would claim that this trout has the same value as a wholly wild one caught out of some unmanaged stream ...”

— Aldo Leopold (1966:285), A Sand County Almanac

Editor’s note: Another version of this article was published in 2011 online as an “In My Opinion” article in The Wildlife Society Bulletin.

