



In My Opinion

The Antler Religion

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ABSTRACT Intensive deer management characterized by high fences and supplemental feeding and, in some instances, selective breeding programs, has increased dramatically across North America (NA) over the past several decades. This new management philosophy is not, however, without controversy. At several levels intensive deer management is incompatible with the NA Model of Wildlife Conservation including the fact that it promotes the privatization of wildlife and creates markets that sell public wildlife resources. Lastly, deer “hunting” under the intensive deer-management model violates the fundamental concept of fair chase, which is a cornerstone principle of hunting in NA. © 2011 The Wildlife Society.

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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*

In February 2010, I was invited to speak at the Monday night *Shoot From the Hip* (SFTH) session at the 33rd Annual Southeast Deer Study Group Meeting. The meeting, which was an outstanding success, was hosted by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in San Antonio, Texas, USA. The title of my presentation was *The Antler Religion or Is Shooting A Privately-Owned, Half Tame, Semi-Domesticated, Supplementally-Fed, Genetically-Engineered Buck Standing In A Bait Pile Inside A Pen The Future of Deer Management?*

The SFTH session is an informal, open, point-counterpoint discussion among several invited panelists and all the meeting attendees on a current deer-management topic. Quality deer management has been the SFTH topic several times in the past. Often the topic is controversial and this year's topic was no exception. The topic was the meeting's theme: *Quality Deer Management to Intensive Deer Management: The Next Step or the Last Straw?*

I was invited to speak because, as the session moderator, Mitch Lockwood (White-tailed Deer Program Leader with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department) noted in my Introduction, I do not sit on the fence as it relates to high-fencing deer; I am against it. I warned the audience as I started my comments, “If you are an advocate or proponent of intensive Texas-style deer management, you and I disagree.” The following text is a combination of the comments I made at the meeting and additional thoughts.

When Mitch asked me to be on the SFTH panel and asked me to describe my opposition to intensive deer management, I advised him that this would be complicated. Obviously, I

oppose it, but I only actively oppose and fight it in Virginia, USA, where I live and work. I do not actively oppose it in Texas.

So just exactly what is intensive deer management? For my purposes, I will define it as high fencing and supplemental feeding of deer. Captive deer managers in many states, including Texas, have taken it even further; they are selectively breeding deer to produce unnaturally big antlers.

If Texas is at the vanguard of intensive deer management, then Virginia is surely bringing up the rear, but Virginia is not unique. There are many other states that could serve as a contrast to intensive management. In Virginia:

- Commercial deer farming is no longer allowed.
- Deer hunters are not allowed to hunt deer over bait.
- Deer hunters and the general public are not allowed to feed deer for 4 months each year during deer season, and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries does not encourage the feeding of deer at any time of year.
- Private individuals are not allowed to hold native or exotic deer in captivity without a permit from the Department (today we have 20 nature park—zoo-type facilities holding about 600 deer in captivity, including 6 facilities that hold 20 white-tailed deer).
- Under state law, private individuals are not allowed to capture live deer or treat them with any biological chemical or drug.
- And, most importantly, private landowners are no longer allowed to erect high fences with the intent to enclose or capture native free-ranging deer.

I think it is safe to say that deer management in Virginia is the antithesis of intensive deer management in Texas.

This article could be construed as an attack on Texas deer managers and Texas deer management. That is not the intent of this article. I would guess that >95% of the deer range in Texas is not behind a high fence and, therefore, I would assume that probably >95% of the deer killed in Texas are free-ranging and killed under circumstances most deer hunters would agree was fair chase. This article is a criticism of the intensive deer management conducted behind high fences across the United States. This industry is not unique to Texas; it is also common in many other states.

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In my opinion, the title “intensive deer management” is actually just a disingenuous euphemism for trophy deer management. It is trophy deer management, and it is all about big antlers and big money. I personally 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.

As I told the audience in Texas, I will give the Devil his due. The intensive trophy-deer managers in Texas and elsewhere 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*. 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 recreate the extinct Irish elk (*Megaloceros giganteus*), and I predict they will succeed.

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* (Knox 2005:12–13), 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 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, 30/30. Later at the same convention, in a large public session, I was shown pictures of 30/30 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.

As I told the audience in San Antonio, I strongly oppose high fencing and feeding deer, or intensive deer management, for 2 major reasons. First, because it undermines the North American (NA) Model of Wildlife Conservation and its keystone component, the Public Trust Doctrine (Geist et al. 2001, Geist and Organ 2004). Second, and very critical to the future of deer hunting in the United States, from a fair chase perspective it is difficult to mount an ethical defense of intensive deer management to deer hunters, and it is impossible to mount such an ethical defense to the nonhunting public.

INTENSIVE DEER MANAGEMENT AND THE NORTH AMERICAN MODEL OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

The NA Model of Wildlife Conservation traces its origin back to an 1842 Supreme Court decision (Martin vs. Waddell), which declared that 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 7 major components of the NA 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 do not belong 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 NA wildlife management.

Numerous threats to the NA model have materialized over the last century, but probably the most significant of these has been the privatization and commercialization of wildlife, especially white-tailed deer and especially in Texas.

Privatization of deer causes problems. As I told the audience in Texas, I believe the Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) wildfire we currently have 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 SE Deer Study Group Meeting in Charlottesville, Virginia, Dr. 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 and we were duly warned.

The second and third principles of the NA Wildlife Model violated by intensive deer management are the elimination of markets for wildlife and the allocation of wildlife by law. Under the NA 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 <2 weeks after the San Antonio meeting, there was an article on the Internet about the Texas Deer Association's Superior Genetics Whitetail Deer Auction grossing US\$888,000 in San Antonio. The good news is that the auction manager noted that deer with proven pedigrees were doing really well in the market these days. According to the press release the highest animal, selling for US\$42,500, was for the sister of a buck that scored 252 at 3 years old. The doe, from High Roller Whitetails, was bred to "20/28," a buck that scored >310 (www.ammoland.com/2010/03/10/texas-deer-association-auction-raises-bar-for-wildlife).

Lastly, intensive deer management goes against the principle of Democracy of Hunting. Under the NA Model, all citizens have the opportunity to hunt and be stakeholders in wildlife decisions, not just the privileged. Yet at the Texas meeting, we were advised by a proponent of intensive deer management that the Texas model of intensive deer management was good for the democracy of deer hunting in Texas, provided you had the 10 million dollars needed to purchase a ranch and erect a high fence. Teddy Roosevelt (1893:292) warned the public about the potential negative influence of money on the principle of Democracy of Hunting over 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 NA Model, and intensive deer management is not fair chase deer hunting. In a superb book written by Jim Posewitz (1994) entitled *Beyond Fair Chase: The Ethic and Tradition of Hunting*, Mr. 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. Mr. Posewitz also noted that the concept of 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 over the last decade, several surveys over 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?* (Knox 2006:10), 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, Johnson (1999:20) 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, under free-range conditions, only one superior 3-year-old deer/500 acres/year can be produced, on average, and "then you have to find it."

In a successful 2000 Game Farm initiative in Montana, USA, 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 (2000) noted that game farms eliminated fair chase through the morally indefensible act of killing "trophy" animals in a penned situation, that under these penned conditions fair chase was nonexistent, and that the killing of an animal under these conditions was degrading to both the shooter and the animal.

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 3 factors: capture; providing cover, food, and water; and genetic selection for specific traits, in this case big antlers. These animals are not wild, free-ranging deer.

In 1997, when they were in the process of outlawing high fences, the Board of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources adopted a position statement that reads 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 deplores the 'hunting' of deer within enclosures and believes that this activity is unethical and unsportsmanlike" (Stinson et al. 1999:2).

All that truly 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. As I told the assembly in Texas, it is truly ironic that intensive deer managers measure their trophies, their 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 (Knox 2009:13), 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 personally do not understand or comprehend the antler religion. I guess I am an antler religion agnostic. I am not impressed with a deer’s score or trophy deer hunters.

In conclusion, I advised the audience in Texas,

If you want to raise and shoot privately owned, half-tame, semidomesticated, supplementally fed, genetically engineered, bucks standing in bait piles, inside of pens in Texas, that is your business. You will call them trophies or ‘giants.’ I predict that the majority of the deer hunters in the US will eventually come to consider them antlered cows.

Tonight, I am very lucky; I am a deer-management apologist for the state of Virginia. I am not the deer-management apologist for Texas. I do not have to defend intensive Texas deer management. In my personal and professional opinion, it is indefensible.

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

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