



The Issues At Hand

No pens, no fences, only 100 percent fair chase hunting...oh, urp!

By Dr. James C. Kroll

Editor's note: This previous column is still timely, so we thought we would dust it off and share it with our readers once again.

Every year or so, an article comes out in which the author asserts he is going to cover the "controversial issues" of fair chase. He goes on to give a rehash of the same old material, presented in such a way not to offend anyone. In so doing, he deftly sidesteps the real issues we are facing as deer hunting and deer management come into the 21st century. This column, I promise you, will deal with the most important issues. In doing so, I probably will step on a few toes in the process, but it is time someone steps up to the plate on this critical issue.

As a caveat, let me assure you I have broad experience in deer hunting. Of the several hundred bucks I have killed—some of which have been record-book animals—only a handful have come from high-fenced properties; not because I am opposed to them, but I prefer to hunt the wild, far away and challenging places. I also want to assure you bowhunters I have indeed killed lots of bucks with a bow (recurve, compound, etc.), so do not think you

have anything on me. I also have hunted whitetails in every habitat in which they reside, including the tropics and New Zealand. In saying this, it is not my intent to be boastful, rather to assure you I have "walked in your boots."

It is hard to imagine two cavemen, Muck Muck and Tamud, sitting around the campfire, engaged in a spirited discussion of what is fair chase. These folks would, and regularly did, kill more than they needed—and never worried about how fair their tactics were to the game. North America is covered with evidence of mass over-kills. Hunting to these folks simply was the way to survival. It was not play.

Subsistence hunting persisted in one form or another until the early part of the 20th century for many peoples. By the mid-20th century, hunting (and often fishing) had become a recreational rather than a subsistence activity. Although I still hear folks talking about "getting their venison," countless tons of venison lay in freezers around the country, slowly getting freezer burn. For many people today, hunting no longer is a means of bringing meat to the table, other than as a novel treat.

One of my pet peeves is the persistent use of the term "sport hunting." Hunt-

ing, as it exists today, pure and simple, is a ritualistic return to our roots. It rightly should be called "recreational hunting," which better describes what it does for us. It allows us to re-create ourselves annually. It is a reconnect with our genetic tendency to hunt and gather.

The word "sport" is defined as (1) that which diverts and makes mirth; pastime; amusement or (2) mock; mockery; contemptuous mirth; derision. In regard to hunting, it is defined as: "Diversion of the field, as fowling, hunting, fishing, racing, games, and the like, especially when money is staked." Obviously, if we view hunting as sport, we look at this activity in a much different way than when we consider it to be recreation.

Sports must have rules, and intuitively there must be a winner of the game. The purpose of rules in sport is to assure all sides play fairly. The focus is on the participants, not the game itself or the object of the game. No one ever concerns himself with the welfare of the ball or bat, only whether or not all participants are being treated fairly and obeying the rules of the game.

It was not until hunting became a "sport" that rules became important. What are the rules of hunting? Unfor-

tunately, in North America, other than game laws and a few rules associated with record books, there are none!

A friend of mine collects very old books. Not long ago, he showed me his latest acquisition. It was a book published in Europe some time in the 1500 to 1600 timeframe. It was entitled "The Rules of Hunting." It was a fascinating read.

warfare in American society. Politicians tend to use this to generate support for their particular political agendas, and nowhere do we see this more than in modern hunting. The NRA published an article (in American Hunter) detailing how the periodic study by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, on hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation in America, revealed three important

tan areas. Bottom line: give up blaming the cost of hunting for the loss of hunters! The federal data clearly support less than 10 percent of the hunter's dollar goes to hunting rights and privileges.

Nowhere is this class warfare world more obvious than in the issues related to high fences, on which some politicians, game agencies and academicians have tried to focus growing hunter frus-

If we are to make hunting a sport, rather than recreation, it is time to write the rules. But, I would be opposed to making it a sport. Animals should not be the object of sport. If, however, hunting is to be considered a ritualistic opportunity to retrace our past, and if we really care for the animals, the rules have to be written by each of us individually.

In it were discussed how hunters should purport themselves, especially in regard to proper pursuit. The focus was more on a hunter being an important part of management than deciding what was "fair."

Although written hundreds of years ago, it informed the reader on how to age live deer, a topic only recently "discovered" by American wildlife managers and the outdoor press. To date, however, no one in America has written such a book.

We conducted a study here at the Institute for White-tailed Deer Management and Research on what people consider the definition of fair chase. To our surprise, two totally different interpretations appeared between hunters and non-hunters (and anti-hunters). When it was all said and done, hunters consider fair as being related to each hunter having "fair access to the game." To the non-hunter, fair was having consideration for the animal and its welfare. So, it turns out the vast majority of hunters really could not care about whether they are being fair to the animals, provided some other guy does not have unfair access to the game. As Shakespeare said, "Therein lies the rub!"

Today, we see a great deal of class

things: 1) hunters are getting older; 2) the number of hunters is declining; and, 3) the annual expenditures and income of hunters is going up.

From these "scientific" facts, they concluded the "little man" is being priced out of hunting. Yet, they failed to consider every time we conduct such a demographic analysis on hunters, not surprisingly they have gotten older by the number of years since the last study.

Baby Boomers (of which I am a member) are the largest segment in our population. Further, our fathers are passing away or no longer hunting. It is a real fact that baby boomers make more money than their fathers, even if they are hourly wage earners. So, yes, the average income is indeed rising for every recreational segment. The same can be said for golf, fishing or even ping-pong!

The number of hunters indeed is declining, but for what reason? Every credible study suggests a lifestyle change, rather than the cost of hunting is causing this to happen. It is no longer convenient to hunt; and, the amount of discretionary leisure time in America is at an all-time low.

The fact is, the average American no longer has time to hunt, especially for the majority who live in large metropoli-

tration in regard to poor quality hunting opportunities.

It is similar to what we are seeing in the Middle East where theocratic dictators are selling the idea America is the cause for the misery and poverty of their people. So, today we see an effort—whether on purpose or accidentally—to divide hunters based on class warfare.

Texas is a unique state. I do not have to tell you that. And, deer hunting, especially trophy deer hunting, is an integral part of our hunting heritage. In the past, access to big bucks pretty much was the privilege of folks with large ranches or properties. That does not mean the poor hunter could not have a chance at a big buck, rather there is more abundance of big deer on large properties.

Then, along came high fences, which created access to trophy bucks on relatively small properties. This did not fit well into the minds of the landed gentry. One landowner told me, "I don't understand all the fuss about high fences. There are plenty of large ranches for people to hunt." This "let them eat cake" mentality really describes how large landowners and the wealthy think about trophy deer hunting. They do not live in the real world.

By the turn of this century, these folks discovered, to their horror, small landowners were producing bigger bucks and more of them. High fences were and are going up at an accelerating pace. Just like the Middle Eastern radicals, this movement provided the perfect victims on which to focus public frustration. The large landowner can profess to be looking out for the little guy, yet our study on why people build high fences clearly showed the number one reason was frustration, not growing bigger bucks.

Folks are tired of trying to manage their deer on small properties, only to have the neighbors kill the young bucks

high-fenced ranch. To his amazement, it took hunting all day for six days to kill a trophy.

The same person who criticizes fencing is often a person who hunts over bait or from a truck (legal in Texas). In fact, I often facetiously have said, "In Texas, the average buck kill either is a mugging or drive-by shooting!" In South Carolina, where the state agency has "whipped up" a frenzy among hunters against fencing, they hunt deer with dogs! In Michigan, until recently, deer hunting has been a battle of the bait piles. I have seen hunters bring in an entire semi-load of sugar beets over which to hunt from his heated box

a bowhunter event, I will be met at the door with this question: "What kind of bow do you use?" That is a no-win question to answer.

If I say a recurve, the compound guys react negatively. If I say a compound bow, the "traditional" hunters scowl. You cannot provide the correct answer.

Hunting as recreation has fragmented to the point each group is battling with another over seasons, tactics and equipment. Who really cares what weapon you are using as long as you are out there hunting deer and supporting land management? If it were legal, I would support those who use claw hammers!

The most self-important, sanctimo-

I firmly believe we each must develop our set of rules for hunting and rules governing our personal conduct in the field. These rules should arise from our own abilities and capabilities, not from what we think will make others happy.

they let walk! I am of the firm opinion, if deer were managed better by public agencies, there would be a whole lot less high fences. The growing popularity of the Quality Deer Management Association and Texas Deer Association is proof enough; the "little guy" is taking matters into his own hands.

I have killed only a handful of bucks behind a high fence. Again, this is not because I don't like them. In many discussions I have heard, the perception of the average hunter is fenced properties are no different from "canned hunts." Yet, the average guy never has hunted behind wire.

Of course, there are places in which the hunting challenge is reduced, but for the most part mature bucks are no less easy to kill in a fenced property than one that is not provided there is: 1) quality habitat; 2) adequate cover; and 3) good nutrition.

I concede it may be easier to kill just any deer because there are more of them, but to kill a specific buck or type of buck is actually more difficult on a fenced ranch. Recently, a good friend hunted for the first time on a

blind. Yet, none of these folks ever considered their hunting technique might not be "fair chase."

Not long ago, I gave a talk in Ohio at a regional hunting show. I made one of my patented sarcastic comments, "I wish you guys would get out of those boxes and start really hunting deer." Afterwards, an 80-year-old man came up to speak with me about my comment. "I am an old man who cannot get around any more," he challenged. "Hunting in a heated blind is the only way I can keep hunting." In one sentence, he dressed me down and rightly so. I discovered I was an elitist of the worst kind.

Since I am relatively young, in good physical condition and have hunted deer all over the range with every legal weapon, I automatically assumed everyone should do so. Fact is, if I imposed my way of hunting on the general hunting public, we could hold a convention of all such hunters in a small building! And, that's where I have the greatest frustration with hunters today.

I do talks at shows around the country, mostly on deer management. I learned early on when I speaking at

nious hunters are those who appear as I do regularly on TV. That's the reason for the title of this article. A fellow will start his program out with that declaration. Then, over the course of the next 30 minutes, with five or six commercials, he will prove to me he could care less about the welfare of deer.

I spent two agonizing weeks recording the ages of bucks killed on TV. Believe it or not, the average age was less than 3 years. What is even more amazing, a guy who has killed Boone and Crockett bucks in his career can actually look at the camera and try to convince us the 2½-year-old, 120-inch buck he just arrowed is a real monster!

Also, how many shows have you watched where the star kills a doe? The opening declaration of this column about fences really is aimed at raising the star's image in your eyes. What it really means is: "I am so good and so much better than you, I don't have to hunt behind fences." He neglects to inform you he has exclusive access to some of the best hunting in North America. (Yes, I do too.)

When it comes to rules, the folks who

maintain record books view fair chase in simple terms. They are also among the first to criticize trophy hunting as an evil activity. Yet, who has done more to focus attention on what a buck has on his head than how difficult he was to kill? Again, hunting is viewed as sport by these organizations; and, as such, there must be rules of conduct to make it "fair" for all those who play the game. There have to be winners! Record books are for people, not animals.

If we are to make hunting a sport, rather than recreation, it is time to write the rules. But, I would be opposed to making it a sport. Animals should not be the object of sport. If, however, hunting is to be considered a ritualistic opportunity to retrace our past, and if we really care for the animals, the rules have to be written by each of us individually.

A good friend confided on a hunt in Mexico that when he was a young man, he firmly believed it would be unfair to kill a buck either coming back from or going to his stand. "I know that sounds dumb," he confessed, "but, I really believed that." He is anything but dumb. What he did was establish his own personal set of rules for how he would hunt. Not shooting a deer going to or coming from his stand made perfect sense to him, as good as any other rule.

If we establish written rules of hunting, who will write them? Who will be alienated and who will be left out? Who will be the keepers of the true faith? And, what tactics will be considered fair?

Bowhunters commonly use tree stands, yet are they fair? Yes, I too have been "made" by a deer when I was perched in a tree, and yes deer do look up, but you do have a marked advantage over a deer from an elevated position. Try shooting the same mature buck or doe from the ground.

As one famous criminal once said: "Why can't we all just get along?" And, that is my point. Stop this class warfare. It does our favorite recreational pastime no good. When you critically examine who raises the most Cane about fair chase, it is hunters, not non-hunters.

I firmly believe we each must develop our set of rules for hunting and rules governing our personal conduct in the field. These rules should arise from our own abilities and capabilities, not from

what we think will make others happy. Do you kill a deer for you or for your friends? If you do make you own rules, write them down and review them periodically. They are uniquely your own.

My personal rules of hunting are:

1. I will not take part in a canned hunt.
2. I will shoot only mature bucks.
3. When I kill a deer, there will be a good reason for it.
4. I will leave each deer herd I hunt in better shape than I found it.
5. I will try to avoid hunting over bait, excluding food plots.

6. I will avoid man-made stands and blinds.

Now, are these the rules I think you must follow? Absolutely not! They are only my rules. It would be unfair to impose them on anyone else. If you want to hunt over bait or from an enclosed blind—fine and dandy. The bottom-line criterion I used in establishing my own rules was the simple question: "Is it good for the deer?" If it keeps deer around and saves deer habitat, I have no problems with what you are doing. So, go hunting and have fun. 🦌