

Dr. Deer's PRESCRIPTION

The Future of Deer Hunting

By Dr. James C. Kroll

Experts say addiction results from an attempt to recreate a “high” that occurred sometime in your life; and unfortunately for addicts, they *never* can achieve their goal. I often ask deer hunters to tell me about the first buck they killed, and in most cases they can tell me with infinite detail everything about that day. They can tell me about

the weather conditions, what they were wearing and shooting, almost the exact time of day, and how it all came down. Ask the same person, however, about the fourth or tenth buck they’ve killed and they’re at a complete loss to recount details of the event. So, it’s safe to say deer hunting also is an addiction.

It certainly is for me! I shot my first

buck in 1963 near Hunt, Texas. It was a cold December afternoon and I was hunting with my biology teacher, Victor Rippey. I had borrowed an old M-1 carbine .30-06 with an open sight. I was sitting in a clump of Ashe juniper overlooking a sheep pasture with a slight depression angling across the field. I had found a deer trail at the bottom on the



According to the author, hunters are an aging group with little recruitment. More must be done to get young people interested in hunting.

depression and had concluded deer were traveling across the field using the slight dip to evade detection. The junipers were growing out of a slight rise, giving me not only cover, but an elevated view of the travel corridor.

The buck came shortly after 4 p.m., slipping along the depression among happily grazing sheep. I threw up the rifle, took aim and fired. The sheep went wild and scattered away from the scene. In my excitement I had forgotten to make sure there were no sheep in front of or behind the deer. A quick scan revealed—thankfully—no white bodies lying in the field, so I jumped up and ran to the spot. The buck had dropped dead without

moving an inch; hit high in the shoulder, breaking his spine. Deer were larger in the Hill Country in those days. This fine buck later weighed in at 168 pounds. The intense adrenaline rush gave me “super-human” strength. I threw the buck over my shoulder, carried him to the nearest live oak, threw a rope over a limb and jerked him high up into the tree! Later, it took me and Mr. Rippy to carry him to the truck.

Each detail—the light, the wind, the odors—will go with me to the grave. During my four-decade career, God has blessed me with countless successful hunts, but that one moment in 1963 made me a deer-hunting addict. I have been trying to recreate that adrenaline rush unsuccessfully since. I’m sure you have a similar story to tell, as well, with different circumstances and details. There currently are about 11 million men and women out there trying to recreate those great moments of deer hunting.

So, what is the future of deer hunting? What factors will determine the availability of quality hunting experiences in the coming decades? And what can we do to assure that our children and grandchildren will have the same addictive experiences we all share?

Deer population decline

In the 1960s, Texas deer herds either were recovering from the 1950s drought,

or beginning to respond to the screw worm program that eliminated one of the greatest mortality agents limiting deer population growth. The weight of my buck is significant because, since then,

after state became the new “hotspot” for trophy whitetails, until finally we arrived at the last “new” place—Kentucky—and no more will be found. Behind this wave lay increasingly devastated habitats and

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deer numbers have risen to very high levels and then crashed. The net effect in the Hill Country has been an adjustment in body size to compensate for less quality forage. By 1980, you would have to kill at least *two* bucks to get the venison provided by my buck. Throughout the country, deer herds repeated this phenomenon over the next two decades, with most herds reaching their peak by 2000. During the first 15 years of the 21st century, deer harvests declined by 18.8 percent nationally, with over 30 states reporting herd declines.

I began warning about the possible decline of deer herds in the early 1980s. Needless to say, my prophesies were not met with enthusiasm by hunters or game managers. These were the days of record harvests. Each year, game agencies happily reported yet another record harvest, clearly documenting the “success” of traditional deer management. The reality was we all were just “riding the wave” of rapid deer population growth. Land-use was changing with growing urbanization, and the human population converted from 95 percent rural to only five percent of Americans depending on farms and ranches for a living. Fields and pastures quickly reverted to the early successional communities favored by deer. After a century of predator control throughout the range, there were few impediments to population growth. State

declining quality of life for deer.

Through all this, hunters and biologists were living life like the alcoholic drinking his wine with a sack around the bottle so he can’t see the end coming. Yet, the end has been coming for some time. In rapid succession, Ohio, Iowa, Illinois, and Kansas are losing their reputation as THE place to kill big whitetail bucks. Texas is one of the rare exceptions, since we were the folks who “invented” deer management, have been doing it longer than anyone, and in Texas, the vast majority of deer range is privately owned. It’s factual to say the majority of tried-and-true deer management techniques were developed, not by professionals, but by private Texas landowners.

Disease

Higher deer densities promote disease and other maladies. If you’re a deer hunter and do not know about chronic wasting disease (CWD), you must have been in a coma for the last 20 years. It’s impossible to pick up a newspaper or magazine lately without reading about the latest case of CWD. Yet, for the 30 or more states reporting herd decline, not a single one has been able to attribute the problem to CWD. Habitat deterioration, changing land-use, predators and hemorrhagic diseases are universally listed as causal factors. Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD) and Bluetongue (BT) have

killed millions of deer over the last decade; yet, how often do you hear concern from professional biologists?

We often hear CWD has the potential to devastate deer herds and destroy deer hunting as we have known it forever. And, I am inclined to agree. HOWEVER, the devastation is not to the deer herd, rather to *deer hunting*. As "Deer Trustee" of Wisconsin, I was shocked to find out media hype about CWD in 2002 ultimately led to loss of thousands of Badger

Changing lifestyles and demographics

As I noted earlier, the vast majority of Americans now live in an urban setting. For many of us, going hunting was an easy thing to do. All I had to do was walk out my back door and go hunting. I began with small game, then progressed to deer hunting as deer appeared in our part of Texas. Today, how on Earth is a young person going to do this?

I often hear the price of hunting is

heading for the edge of a cliff. The only hope is increasing female and minority participation, as well as recruitment of young people of all groups.

"Antler disease"

I did not tell you about the size of my first buck on purpose. Although I have spent a part of my career learning how to grow bigger bucks, I think too much attention has been given to trophies. I have been a part of Texas Trophy Hunters Association and North American Whitetail for almost 40 years; and I am proud of my association with both. If it had not been for TTHA and NAWT, deer management would not have developed to where it is today. However, I think it is time to take the next step in the evolution of deer hunting.

For some time, I have been concerned about what I call "antler disease." I remember when we first started the Hunters Extravanzas, folks would walk down the aisles in wonder of the big bucks being displayed in booths. Yet, those bucks were probably in the 150 Boone

and Crockett class, with a few going into the 160s. A booth with a really big buck would attract a large crowd of admirers taking photographs. Today, people walk nonchalantly past world-class bucks without a glance.

For some time, I have been frustrated with the criticism waged against deer breeding. One of the accusations is that it's "cheapening" trophy hunting. It may well be, but I assert that this would have happened even if deer breeding had never developed. The deer boom of the 20th century, plus all the press trophy bucks received, probably did more to dull the senses of deer hunters than anything. Demand for higher scoring bucks probably created deer breeding in the first place.

I once guided a fellow who wanted to kill a trophy buck. I wanted the man to have a memorable experience, so I involved him in developing a hunting strategy based on what was happening with the herd at that point in time. We found

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state deer hunters. There was an immediate decline of 12 percent in license sales, mostly among casual hunters. Estimates of the total economic impact were \$1.5 billion. Even more shocking was the impact of the hysteria on recruitment of young hunters. Young people who normally would have been recruited into the hunting community looked to other recreational activities; and, many never have become hunters. We saw the same thing recently with the appearance of CWD here in Texas.

The greatest impact of CWD has been to the image of deer themselves. Hunters and non-hunters have always considered whitetails majestic creatures of the forest. In spite of no scientific evidence in support, many people now view deer as carriers of a disease that can infect humans. These fantastic creatures are approaching "vermin" status. Yet, venison remains one of the best sources of healthy protein in the world.

reducing hunter opportunity. To the contrary, the price is not the real issue. Recreation professionals tell us there are three types of recreational experiences: short-term, mid-term, and long-term. Short-term recreation is what you can do in the afternoons or weekends. Mid-term is during holidays; and, long-term requires discretionary vacation time. Well, consider the modern urban lifestyle. How far do you have to travel just to hunt rabbits?

The average hunter is a white male, 41.8 years of age, and has a family income over \$50,000 annually. That pretty well leaves out most women—11 percent hunt—and minorities. Demographically, we are an aging recreational group with little recruitment. Every time a survey is conducted, all you have to do to predict the average age of hunters is add the number of years since the last survey. Studies indicate that hunter participation drops off rapidly past 65; meaning, without recruitment, we hunters are

a great spot where bucks were coming regularly to mark sign posts and stage to intercept does on their way to feed. We rattled in a mature buck with 10 points. The buck came in fast and jumped right over the hunter. He shot the buck behind us as it turned for another charge.

Afterwards, we celebrated the incredible memory and the hunter was riding high as we entered camp. Unfortunately, his buddy was waiting there with a much larger buck he had shot from a high rack. My hunter's face dropped and he went straight to the lodge, without telling our story. Yet, of the two, which one had the most memorable experience?

The Texas Model works

If you're not completely depressed by now, let me talk about my vision of the future of deer hunting. First of all, the future of the white-tailed deer lies

with private landowners. Yet, agencies and professional biologists often do not recognize the role the private landowner plays in deer management. When I began my stint in Wisconsin, one of the DNR biologists told me, "Considering the private landowner in deer management is a violation of the North American Wildlife Model!" Eighty percent of the wildlife lives on 60 percent of the land—the privately-owned land. Of the 11.8 million deer hunters, 8.4 million hunt only on private land; 1.7 million hunt only on public land; and, 3.2 million hunt on public and private land. The two reasons for most deer hunting on private land: most whitetail habitat is privately owned, and the best hunting is on private land.

The real trick for the professional wildlife manager is to find ways to encourage private landowners to management deer habitats and provide incentives to

allow deer hunting on their land. The only workable incentives are income, tax reductions, and liability protection. Another incentive is technical guidance, rather than government regulation.

The future of deer hunting?

I have been thinking about this question for years. If deer hunting has a sustainable future, the following things must happen. First, private landowners have to be involved directly in the management and decision-making related to the deer on their property. This does not mean privatization, only more control given to the landowner in the public trust. Second, as professional biologists, outdoor writers and educators, we must begin NOW to instill a new ethic in deer hunting; one that takes us to the next level of hunting. Unfortunately, America has never developed a uniquely American hunting tradition. We seemed to be locked in the pioneer days of exploitation. We have to make the transition from hunter-consumers to hunter-managers. Deer hunting must become a lifestyle, rather than merely recreation.

The CWD scare will run its course, and people will discover it was not as big a deal as first portrayed by sensationalist press and government agencies. I have faith in the whitetail to adapt genetically to the disease in the not too distant future. There already is evidence of this happening.

More women and minorities will be attracted to deer hunting. Numbers of rifle hunters will remain stable or decline, while bowhunters will increase. In the future the majority of deer hunting will take place on private lands, while quality of hunting on public lands deteriorates.

Unfortunately, habitats on public lands will continue to deteriorate due to lack of funds and interest by government agencies in providing quality-hunting experiences. These lands will be managed more for "wilderness" than game production. I would like to see wildlife management areas established in easy driving distance to urban areas, with emphasis placed on producing quality deer and quality experiences for families. This also means that access to such areas is limited, rather than a "come one, come all" approach.

This is how I see the future of deer hunting. 🦌



More must also be done to increase female participation into hunting to ensure its future.