



LIP IN A STUMP

It May Be Legal, But Is It Ethical?

By Dr. James C. Kroll, Ph.D.

Many of us fought long and hard for the creation of the Managed Lands Deer Permit program. In particular, I remember a meeting with senior Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) personnel at a restaurant in Nacogdoches. The topic of discussion was what the southeastern states were doing to support private lands deer management. Generally offered under the name Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP), these programs were proving very successful in aiding hunting clubs and private landowners in managing their deer.

The DMAP was the brainchild of two men—Drs. Harry Jacobson and David Guynn—who instituted this innovative program in Mississippi. In return for the collection of data and legitimate efforts to control deer populations, the department allowed more flexibility in the harvest and offered technical assistance. The program was a success and quickly spread throughout the Southeast—but not in Texas.

The meeting in Nacogdoches was the result of an article I wrote in *The Journal* entitled, “Is Texas Falling Behind in Deer Management?” We Texans are proud of our historic contributions to deer management, so my article didn’t set well with these gentlemen, and the meeting didn’t end in the immediate adoption of a DMAP program for Texas (that would take some time to come up with a way for it to look like it was a Texas idea!).

For whatever reasons, we eventually got our wish. Adopted as the Managed Lands Deer Permit Program (MLDP), landowners ultimately ended up with tremendous flexibility in managing their herds. Today this flexibility far exceeds

my expectations, and I strongly commend TPWD for its development and implementation of the program. Even with some high-visibility disagreements over requirements for inclusion in the program, no one can say Texas landowners don’t have the tools they need to manage whitetails; at the MLDP III level, a landowner enjoys a greatly expanded season and liberal bag limits that allow hunters to shoot, technically, all the deer they want. So what’s the beef? Did I not get what I wanted?

The perfect program sets broad parameters that define a management playing field in which the manager can operate at any level they desire. Under current MLDP regulations, a landowner can start the deer season around the first of October and end it the last of February, a pretty good thing in my book. Further, the early start to the season allows landowners with fenced properties to cull bucks that normally would have bred before or just after opening day. In my opinion, we have the best deer management program in North America, so obviously I have no issues with the Department in this regard.

Freedom, though, usually comes with a price. There still are conditions for acceptance and maintenance of the program, and there have been many battles fought over these in the last few years. Although I still would like to see departmental bias out of the mix, adhering to these requirements is a small price to pay. So again, what’s the beef?

This time it’s with some landowners. Just because something is legal doesn’t make it the right thing to do! The intent of the MLDP program, as I see it, is to provide the means to manage the herd.

Flexibility in the season is, in my opinion, aimed at two management strategies: 1) getting does off the range before damage can occur; and 2) removing cull bucks. In Texas, most of our deer herds breed either around the first of November or the middle of December. That means inferior antlered bucks should be removed prior to these times, leaving the better bucks to do the breeding. What has happened, though, is that the early season is being used to take mature, trophy bucks while they still are relatively easy to kill and before they break their antlers. I am seeing more and more bucks show up in big buck contests during October.

Intricately tied to this is the legal use of helicopters for “census.” Aerial census has become a mandatory activity for many biologists, especially in South and West Texas. I believe aerial census is a huge waste of time and money. Published studies show huge rates of error (and earlier I wrote an article for TTHA called “Irrational Numbers”), demonstrating just how useless these counts are. Yet biologists cling to the practice like a safety harness.

Of course, aerial surveys do serve one important function for some managers—they allow for the locating of big bucks on the ranch. During pre-rut, bucks are about as predictable as they can be. So if you combine an aerial location of a monster buck with an early start to the season, you have what it takes to kill that buck you’ve been after for years. And yet some of the folks doing this are the very people I hear in meetings, railing on and on about how we need to protect their “fair chase.”

Should steps be taken to make these activities illegal? Absolutely and unequivocally, no! I am, however, suggesting each of you look at what you are doing. As private deer management matures, we each need to develop and subscribe to standards that promote good resource stewardship and true fair chase. 



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