Dr Deer's™ PRESCRIPTION

Management

The people component of the three-legged management stool.

By Dr. James C. Kroll

I spent almost a half century in higher education, training future wildlife and forest managers. Although wildlife biologists represent a great variety of people and interests, I learned early on they almost universally share one common trait, best expressed by an old colleague who was not a wildlife biologist: "You know what is wrong with YOU wildlife biologists?" he chided. "You think you are on a mission from God and you hate people!" At first I was offended by his statement, and then it occurred to me he was dead on correct in his judgment.

Looking back on my career, I have lost count of the number of students coming to meet with me to discuss careers in wildlife biology and management. "First of all, why do you want to be a wildlife biologist?" I would ask. The answer universally was, "I don't like people!" I then would explain it probably would be better to get some other degree, one that would generate a large enough income to permit enjoying the out-of-doors without having to do it for a living. Fact is the average wildlife biologist is an introvert.



Marty Berry Photos

Wildlife management IS about people, and ignoring the people aspects of managing wildlife more often than not is the No. 1 cause for failure. My duties as Deer Trustee for Wisconsin clearly identified that the real issues leading to lack of success (they don't like me using the word, failure) by the Wisconsin DNR in deer management fell primarily on ignoring the people component of the equation. The WDNR had retreated behind the institutional walls at Madison, from which indefensible annual computer estimates of deer population size and an increasingly confusing array of regulations rained down on the hunters and landowners. All of this was done under the guise of "scientific deer management," which turned out not to be so scientific after all. Our recommendations to Gov. Scott Walker on how to fix the situation focused mostly on putting biologists back into the woods, and more important, back into the local communities working with the people.

The immediate response to our recommendations from the scientific and academic communities was anger and condemnation! Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—that purportedly represented the best interests of the whitetail and deer hunting—circled their wagons around state game agencies to defend the indefensible! It turned out the wildlife establishment cared more about protecting ballooning bureaucracies and the profession than they did the natural resources to which society had entrusted.

What they **did not** comprehend was that, yes, scientific management based on good data is the cornerstone of wildlife management, but wildlife is a crop of the land and we manage them to benefit people. They also ignored that 80 percent of wildlife species in the U.S. live on 60 percent of the land base—the private property. Wisconsin is the land of Aldo Leopold, the acknowledged father of modern American wildlife management. In recent times, Leopold has emerged as a "deity" among wildlife professionals, and he would be shocked to hear this! In the late 1930s, Leopold pointed out an important point about the history of wildlife management:

"Actually game administration in this country has so far concerned itself almost entirely with two things: regulating abuses by the exercise of its police powers, and attempting to practice management on private lands without the co-operation of the owner. The latter attempt is bound to fail in the long run, because government cannot control environment on lands which it does not own." Leopold was a master of people management.

When deer populations reached dangerous levels in Wisconsin, he organized field days, where the public and the press were shown the terrible impact too many deer was having on the landscape. He even went so far as to have winter-killed deer piled high to underscore the toll lack of population control was having on the deer themselves. He also learned the importance of the outdoor literature in shaping public opinion and support of sound management. He also taught a young biologist in eastern Texas that there was far more to being a good scientist than journal publications.

"Actually game administration in this country has so far concerned itself almost entirely with two things: regulating abuses by the exercise of its police powers, and attempting to practice management on private lands without the co-operation of the owner. The latter attempt is bound to fail in the long run, because government cannot control environment on lands which it does not own."—Aldo Leopold

Deer management IS people management

It is safe to say that deer management involves both public and private land management; you cannot separate the two. Yes, in Texas and a few other states, some landowners have retreated behind high fences (mostly due to frustration) to gain control of deer herds; yet, in the majority of the deer landscape is a patchwork of intermingled private and public lands. The future of whitetails and whitetail hunting lies in integration

of these two often-conflicting interests. Unfortunately, I was shocked to learn that most state and federal agencies do not even consider the private landowner in management decisions. There are a few "shining stars" among mostly southern states that offer Deer Management Assistance Programs (DMAPs) to private landowners, but there are few that consider such programs on public lands. Our recommendation for Wisconsin was to do just that, implement a DMAP system that integrated these two interests.

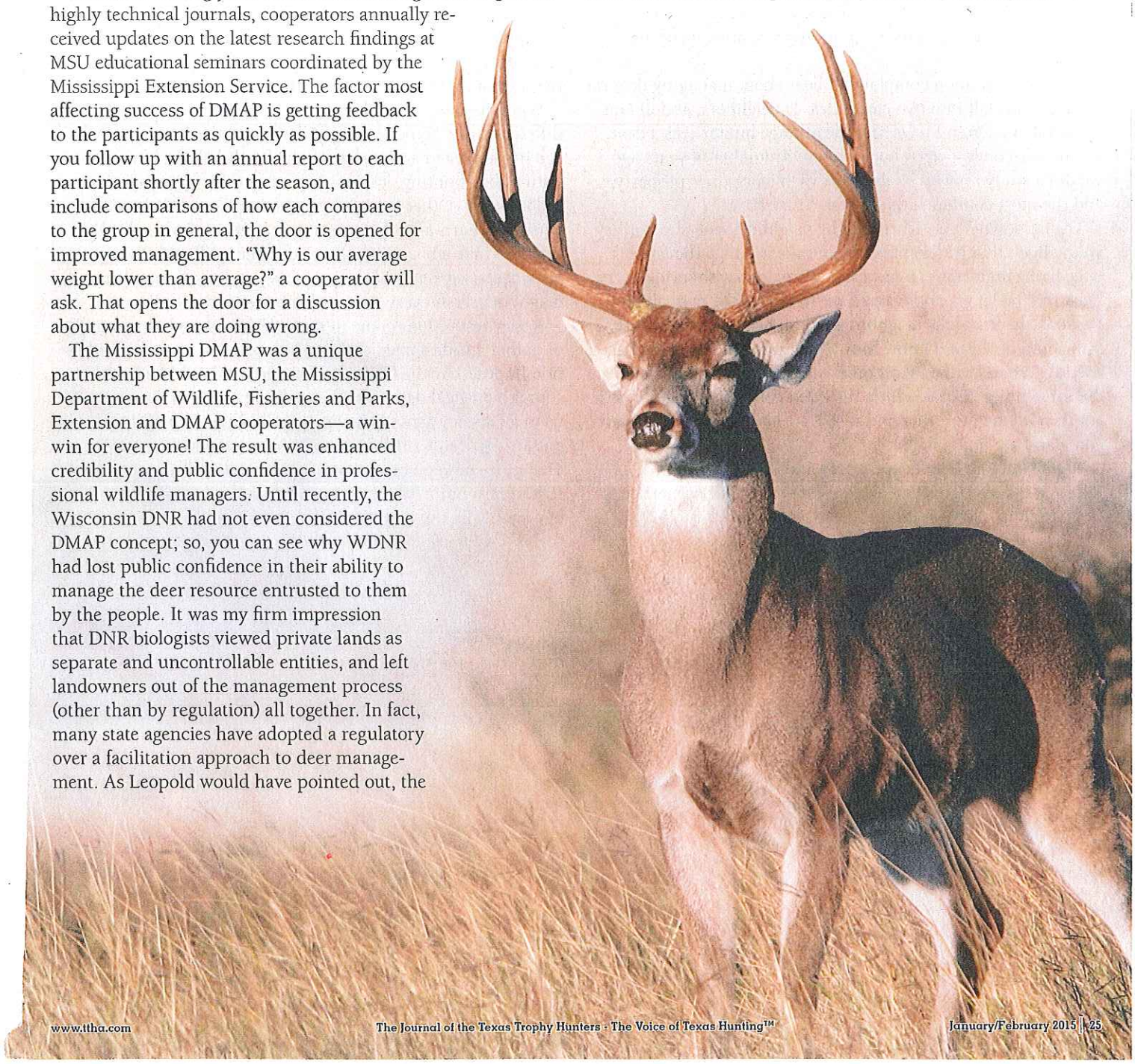
Dr. David Guynn, then at Mississippi State University, is credited with developing the DMAP concept. The genius of Dr. Guynn's idea lay in the involvement of people in the management process, creating the concept of "citizen scientists" collecting data and information about deer herds and habitats. It is difficult for people to criticize findings from data they helped collect! Information needs and management techniques identified by landowners and hunters became the focus of the research arm of DMAP, headed up by Dr. Harry Jacobson.

Instead of waiting years for research findings to emerge from highly technical journals, cooperators annually received updates on the latest research findings at MSU educational seminars coordinated by the Mississippi Extension Service. The factor most affecting success of DMAP is getting feedback to the participants as quickly as possible. If you follow up with an annual report to each participant shortly after the season, and include comparisons of how each compares to the group in general, the door is opened for improved management. "Why is our average weight lower than average?" a cooperator will ask. That opens the door for a discussion about what they are doing wrong.

The Mississippi DMAP was a unique partnership between MSU, the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks, Extension and DMAP cooperators—a win-win for everyone! The result was enhanced credibility and public confidence in professional wildlife managers. Until recently, the Wisconsin DNR had not even considered the DMAP concept; so, you can see why WDNR had lost public confidence in their ability to manage the deer resource entrusted to them by the people. It was my firm impression that DNR biologists viewed private lands as separate and uncontrollable entities, and left landowners out of the management process (other than by regulation) all together. In fact, many state agencies have adopted a regulatory over a facilitation approach to deer management. As Leopold would have pointed out, the only thing game agencies control is harvest, one leg of the stool.

There is a general attitude among professional deer biologists that the public is not capable of managing deer without them! Yet, I must admit many of the tried-and-true management techniques in use today did not come from professionals; they came from private landowners and citizens. My friend and colleague, Dr. Guynn, taught me long ago that the public often is as smart or smarter than me, and fully capable of making the right decisions about deer management, **provided** they have sound information. Recently, I issued a press release warning about declining deer harvests in at least 30 states. Although causal factors vary by state, the unfortunately truth is most agencies were caught by surprise! My Wisconsin experience led me to investigate the quality of data and information being collected by state agencies. To my dismay, I discovered the average agency lacks sufficient data to make sound management decisions!

Basic information on critical topics such as impacts of predators, disease and herd productivity are sorely lacking. Again,



public involvement is the solution. Wisconsin now is involved in a landmark research project on deer mortality and predation; in which volunteers are providing much of the labor and support. Although predator management can be highly controversial, data collected in this study will lead to public support of research findings and recommendations.

People management on private lands?

Up to this point, I have painted with a pretty broad brush covering deer management across the range of the species; but what does all this have to do with managing deer on YOUR property or hunting lease? Deer management is site-specific, meaning each piece of property has unique qualities, potential, and challenges. This includes the people who are involved in the management process. Deer management on private property often is easier from the people perspective than for public lands or broad geographic areas. However, if you are a landowner or involved in a hunting lease, you probably are quite aware of the problems involved even at the local level. If you are the landowner, it should follow that there is only one person who needs to be consulted prior to implementing a specific activity.

The most common complaints I hear about managing deer on private lands fall into two categories: 1) neighbors, and 2) family/members. Often I have said the average hunter sees a deer for three seconds—deer, buck, boom! A number of years ago, we did a study on why landowners high fence their property, and the most common answer was "frustration!"

The landowner gets frustrated by neighbors who shoot every young buck that he lets pass, the minute it jumps the fence. I once had a man come to see about his neighbor shooting every buck that he let go, and wanted me to talk to the man about it. I asked if he knew his neighbor and had he tried to talk with him about it. "Sure, I know him," he responded, "He's my best friend!" When I talked with his friend, he told me he thought the same thing. It took a little time and coffee shop visits, but I got the two men together and they now have a mini-cooperative going and are much happier.

You hear a lot about cooperatives and their success in improving deer management on areas with small properties. Cooperatives often are used as good examples for such areas, but they are not always the solution. Much of the good reputation enjoyed by cooperatives has come from geographic regions, such as the Texas Hill Country, where there are fewer absentee landowners. It has been my experience in areas where owners do not live on their land, a cooperative is a lot less likely to succeed. I pushed for over a decade to get TPWD to adopt antler restrictions in counties where holdings are small, owners are not residents, or there is a large amount of public land. North American Whitetail magazine (and its parent company Game & Fish Publications) deserves a great deal of credit for the first implementation of antler restrictions in Dooly County, Georgia; since they supported the project financially. It was a grass roots effort on the part of landowners to protect yearling bucks. The effort turned out to be a great success, with high public acceptance.

At first, a lot of professional biologists did not want any part of it; yet, it is amusing now how much credit these folks take today after the fact! The only way for antler restrictions to work is from the grass roots level. Wisconsin implemented "Earn-a-Buck" which required hunters to take an antlerless deer before they could shoot a buck. The program did protect young bucks, but the public was very much against it; and, the Wisconsin legislature had to act. People do not like for agencies to tell them what to do, even if it is for their own good.

When it comes to landowners or cooperatives, it may be a different story. Some of the smaller properties I manage long ago implemented antler restrictions for their lease hunters. As with public hunting, lessees often resent this approach, but it does work. Other landowners also implement their own version of Earn-a-Buck, requiring hunters to shoot a doe before they can take a buck. Yet, there are issues still with hunters in such cases, especially if the property is relatively small and the neighbors shoot every deer with a bone on its head!

Antler restrictions come in many fashions, including number of points, inside spread and outside spread. Any antler restriction imposed by the landowner or agency should be based on sound biological data from that specific region. This returns us to an agency actually having good data from both harvested and living deer. Criticism of antler restrictions can be valid. The most common one involves antler restrictions using a spread minimum, which can create a situation in which narrow mature bucks can never be killed. In some geographic areas, this is a valid criticism for spread limitations.



If, however, the landowner includes two criteria, the effectiveness increases. For example, in eastern Texas I recommend a 15-inch outside spread or 18 inch main beam length. Using these two measurements, it tends to allow removal of narrow, older bucks. An important caveat to antler restrictions is that they DO NOT work if there is low recruitment in the herd. If you do not have at least 40 percent recruitment, it is mathematically impossible to have mature bucks.

It is my dream that someday antler restrictions will not be necessary. That brings us to one of the most effective people management tools I ever have used—peer group pressure. Now, I am not a big fan of catch-and-release fishing, but I am amazed how effective that concept has been in producing trophy fish! The concept began long before states imposed such rules on public waters, and was promoted by TV fishermen. In no time at all, fishermen in some areas did not dare keep a fish of a certain size, for fear of being ostracized by his/her fishing buddies! It is an excellent example of how peer-group pressure works, especially when celebrities practice it.

There is a general attitude among professional deer biologists that the public is not capable of managing deer without them! Yet, I must admit many of the tried-and-true management techniques in use today did not come from professionals; they came from private landowners and citizens.

In my 1991 book, "A Practical Guide to Producing & Harvesting White-tailed Deer," I included a chapter on people management. I discussed what I had learned managing a large South Texas ranch, near Catarina, Texas. The owner had been a very wealthy man who had purchased the ranch for entertaining his friends, colleagues and business associates. Guests included movie stars, politicians and even higher court judges.

Sadly, the owner had lost both his wife and son prior to his death, so he had no one to inherit the property, except his favorite charities. Since, he did not want his hunting buddies to be out of a place to hunt on his passing, he placed the ranch into an estate. The property would continue to operate for an additional 20 years, at which time it would be sold and the



money distributed to his charities. He figured they all would either be dead by then or so old they would not be interested in hunting. One of my wildlife students who was the son of the appointed executor approached me about helping manage the ranch. The goal was to increase the value of the property through trophy deer management.

I jumped at the opportunity, and we began the program. We ran into a bit of a snag at the outset, when we learned that the one stipulation was that we could not tell hunters what they could or could not shoot! In spite of being in the "Golden Triangle" of Texas trophy whitetails, the herd had been pretty much turned into mostly young bucks. Other than not being able to restrict harvest, we were allowed to impose any other regulation. We decided on just two things: all deer killed on the property had to be aged, weighed and measured; and each successful hunter had to be photographed with his buck before leaving the property.

The first year was extremely frustrating! Hunters came in as they always had with immature bucks. We never said a word, but insisted on having the data and photograph taken. The average age of bucks that year was 2.6 years. The second season came and our first group of hunters showed up anticipating yet another good year. When they walked into the lodge, however, we had placed all the photographs of hunters with their deer on the wall beneath two signs; one marked "These are the bucks we do not want to shoot," the other "These are the bucks we want to shoot." Since most of the hunters' photographs were under the do not shoot sign, the group became very quiet. Again, we never said a word.

That season the average age of bucks taken was about 4½ years! The herd had not changed, only the attitudes of the hunters. One hunter who came in with a young buck told me he wished he had a shovel so he could have buried the buck rather than end up on the wall again! Over the next 20 years, those guys quickly learned how to age live bucks, and killed many trophy class bucks. Peer group pressure truly works, and illustrates the importance of knowing how to manage people without being a dictator.

We did the same thing many times over the last 30 years in many geographic areas and situations. Since my initial experience at Catarina, I added new tricks to my book. At a very large club in northern Michigan, we not only used the shoot-don't shoot approach, but we also included in the management plan, strategies to help hunters become better shots, more skilled hunters and be able to age live deer, both bucks and does. We not only achieved our goals for the deer herd, but our members have expanded use of the property and have become true conservationists and evangelists for deer management.

Deer management is all about people and helping them have an enjoyable hunting experience. Learning to work with people to facilitate achieving their hopes and desires is a critical skill for deer managers. Hunters have grown dramatically over my career, yet many professional biologists have not! Yes, we have an obligation to the deer resource, but if there are fewer and fewer hunters each year, what will be the fate of the whitetail? In this series, I have presented the lessons learned over almost five decades of work with deer. Management indeed IS a three-legged stool; one stands for population, another for habitat, and the third for people management. Neglect one leg of the stool and you fall on your rear.

