Dr. DEER

BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL

NEW LIFE FOR OLD WOODS

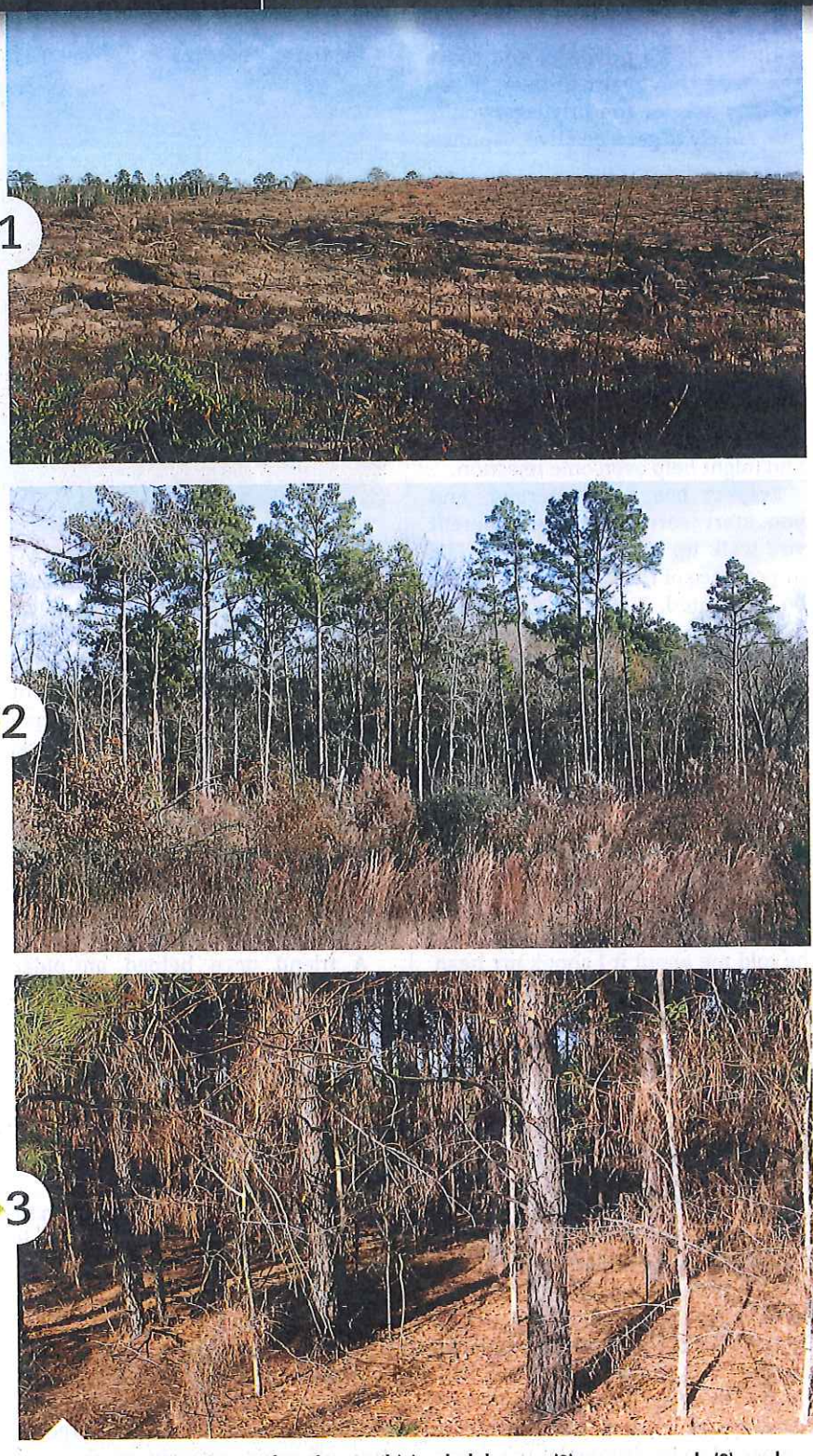
I remember the first time I ever saw a clearcutting operation. It was in 1974, a year after I'd arrived at Stephen F. Austin State University in East Texas to develop a wildlife program for the College of Forestry. I'd never seen such an operation, so I was keenly interested when the largest timber company in the region invited me to observe.

At that time, timber management focused primarily on selective harvest was thought to be the best way to regenerate forests. Timber companies were rapidly making the transition from family-owned enterprises to huge corporations. For almost a century management decisions had been made by the original "timber barons" and their heirs for individual landholdings exceeding a million acres. But the idea of selective timber harvest didn't fit well with corporate accountants and boards bent on maximizing return to stockholders.

Professional foresters and scientists eagerly provided the research data to justify conversion of uneven-aged stands to even-aged plantations. Although the uneven-aged stands supported large deer herds, good science clearly showed most forests were slowly being high-graded through selective timber harvest.

These were exciting times for foresters, as the restraints imposed by environmental restrictions and energy costs had not yet taken their toll. Each timber company had its own logging and road crews. The equipment was new and state-of-the-art!

The operation was going full tilt when we arrived. The crew was using a whole-tree chipper, an



The progression of a clearcut from bare soil (1) to lush browse (2) to open woods (3) can be quick, even in the North. Each stage offers deer a different amount of food. It takes a sound timber management plan to keep such land productive. PHOTOS BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL

livestock. Conversely, if you don't respect them or their land, that also will come through loud and clear.

The words you use mean a lot. I learned early on never to ask for the "right" to hunt someone else's property. Hunting their land isn't a right — it's a privilege. And that's the word they want to hear. If you politely ask for the privilege, you're more likely to get a positive response.

3 CLEAN UP

A big part of earning a landowner's respect and showing your own respect is found in your appearance. Look respectable in both your dress and overall appearance. Look the person in the eye and listen carefully to what he or she says; it will give you clues that will help you understand any concerns and might help overcome rejection.

Respect has to be earned, and you start earning it the moment you walk up and start talking. The importance of the way you look can't be overstated. A perfect example is a friend of mine who went to ask permission on a place where he'd seen a few bucks feeding in the soybeans. He headed out after he got of his work as a mechanic, all grubby with a three-day beard. He walked up to the house, and the farmer's wife answered the door. He bluntly asked if he could go out and try to kill one of those bucks. She turned him down flat, of course. I think she might have been genuinely scared of him. When he told me about it I shook my head because it's basically a case study in how to do it wrong at *every* level.

Cleaning up includes your vehicle. A truck with mud all over it screams, *This guy is going to be doing donuts in my fields!* A bad impression can begin before you ever turn off the engine.

4 OFFER TO HELP OUT

One reason I got permission to trap on all of those farms was that I presented myself as offering a service. My typical approach would be something like, "I see the beavers are knocking down a lot of corn and the muskrats are causing the sides of the drainage ditch to collapse." Or, "I happened to be driving by the other day and saw a coyote out in your sheep pasture." Of course, you have to be honest in what you say.



Chris Dunkin has parlayed a "handshake" access agreement into several big bucks. Of course, getting permission is one thing — you then must do what it takes to maintain such privileges.
PHOTO BY BERNIE BARRINGER

A deer hunter has something to offer as well. Deer depredation on crops is a serious problem for some farmers, so offering something of value might be found in taking out some of the deer. Offer to fill a couple doe tags in addition to taking a buck.

Help of course also extends to actual labor. I've helped load bales of hay onto a conveyor, fed chickens while the farmer was on vacation and even helped get some cattle back through a broken fence when I happened upon that situation.

A friend once helped an older woman carry in her groceries from the car. He then offered to shovel snow off her sidewalk. He didn't get hunting permission that day, but he did when he came back.

5 BUILD A RELATIONSHIP

Of course, getting permission to hunt is just half the battle. Keeping it takes work, too.

I like to send a Christmas card with a personal "thank you" note inside. If it's a piece of property I really value and want to keep hunting, I might include a $50 gift card for a nice local steakhouse. I've also offered to drop off venison steaks or sausage, and that offer often is met with a positive response.

If you treat the land and the landowner well, the person usually will become loyal to you. Look at the relationship as mutually beneficial and treat it that way. I once was very surprised to hear one of my landowners had turned down a lease offer from an outfitter. His rationale? With me hunting there, he knew what he had. He trusted me. And in the end, he chose that over taking money for the unknown. That's how important the right relationship can be.

The worst thing that can happen when you ask for hunting permission is the person will say, "No." I consider myself to be that salesman who looks at the first rejection as just one more step toward the next, "Yes." If rejected, I respectfully ask for their reasons and go from there. Sometimes it's obviously a dead end, but often there's a simple objection that can be overcome.

IN CONCLUSION

There are fewer places to hunt on a handshake these days, but for the DIY whitetail hunter willing to look for them, such opportunities still exist. And some of them are real gems. Follow my strategy, and you could end up with a great new hunting spot for the 2015 season — and perhaps even far beyond.

incredible machine that "ate" trees. It reminded me of the Star Trek spaceship that ate planets, spitting out debris behind. Rubber-tired tree shears dropped each tree, sheared it and then stacked it neatly with 8-10 others for transport to the "tree eater." It was mind boggling to see an 80-foot pine disappear almost instantly into the chipper, with bark, limbs and debris neatly spit into piles. In no time, 100 acres of forest had disappeared.

Moving in behind the cutting were giant tree crushers standing over 12 feet tall and every bit as big as an Abrams tank! Perched atop the machine, a driver would manipulate it through a maze of tree "whips" and cull trees and other debris, leaving behind a smooth landscape of mulch.

I went away both awed and concerned. I'd just witnessed the total destruction of a forest stand.

Here at SFASU, research on the wildlife impacts of clearcutting has generated some interesting initial findings. My graduate student Monty Whiting showed that the practice actually has positive benefits to songbirds. Meanwhile, graduate student and colleague John Stransky produced impressive data on clearcuts' deer food production.

By the mid-1980s, almost none of the region's second-growth forests remained. They had grown back after the first great clearcutting, which had begun in the late 1800s. In only a decade, the 13 million acres of pine and hardwood forests then standing had been completely cut by men using axes, saws and draft animals.

TIMBER & WHITETAILS

The cut-over, burned-out landscape of 1905 (when my own land housed a sawmill) supported quail but little else. As timber barons moved in and bought land for pennies on the dollar, modern forestry education came to the U.S. by way of Germany.

Fire prevention, plus massive Depression-era government tree plantings, led to a boom. By the end of World War II, forest education and foresters were enjoying a lot of public support. Original old-growth forests were quickly and efficiently being replaced with even-aged pine plantations. Surviving bottomland forests and upland hardwoods also were benefitting from protection.

Deer numbers, which had been held low or non-existent for a half-century, were increasing in response to restocking and protection by private landowners. The tremendous growth in forage also helped boost numbers. By the time I arrived in the early 1970s, populations were exploding.

But those days soon would end. In 1987, the harsh reality of more deer to feed and less forage with which to feed them came crashing down on us. Combined with disease, a harsh and prolonged winter and a subsequent drought, the good old days were over in East Texas.

What happened here wasn't unique, though. Over the next two decades, one region after another began showing the same symptoms: loss of the land's capacity to support large numbers of whitetails.

FRIEND OR FOE?

Prior to the arrival of western man, whitetail populations ebbed and flowed in response to natural disasters such as wildfires, high winds and ice storms. Although never predictable in regard to exactly when or where such disturbances would occur, periodically there would be disturbances. In the process, old-growth, closed-canopy forests would be leveled, and succession would begin anew.

After disturbances, increased light, nutrients and water quickly produce a lush growth of deer foods within the "deer zone." Depending on where you are geographically, these positive benefits lasts only a short time, however: 5-7 years in the South and 7-10 years in the North. Whitetail reproductive biology is designed to saturate the range under such conditions in this length of time. Once foods grow above the deer zone, herds decline to low densities until another disturbance occurs.

The result of early clearcutting, then, was a patchwork of high-density deer populations distributed randomly among "deer deserts." So is clearcutting our friend or a foe? To answer that, we have to consider how the practice is employed.

In East Texas, clearcutting mania in the early days gave little consideration to the acreage being cut. Four decades of research now has taught us, whether it be conifers or hardwoods, clearcutting should most closely mimic the way nature manages the landscape.

Can you tell me where the next wildfire or tornado will occur in a given place? Of course not. But under sound management, we can decide exactly where and how much land will be treated at any one time, making it possible to produce a sustained, predictable yield of deer forage.

Our research clearly showed timber harvests of 10-40 acres are best for producing wood fiber and deer forage. If we don't cut adjacent stands any more often than every 7 years in the South or 10 years in the North, we can ensure a continued supply of deer food. A timber stand's ability to support deer changes dramatically over the life a timber rotation. By dividing the number of acres we have available to produce timber and deer by 7, that's how much we can cut each 7-year period in the South (or every 10 in the North).

CLEARCUT CONFLICTS

If we have this ability to grow deer food in the forest, why have we seen significant declines in numbers over the last decade?

Several factors are preventing us from applying the simple logic discussed above. In many cases, the environmental movement has turned public sentiment away from foresters being the heroes they were during forest-restoration days. The Wilderness Act, passed the year I came to East Texas, removed countless acres from forest management. Every-increasing fragmentation of the land and increasing "gentrification" took more acres out of management.

The impact of these and other conflicting factors has recently become apparent. In the Great Lakes states, deer numbers are declining rapidly as forests age — especially on public lands. Lower deer densities increase impacts of predators and disease, normally minimal in healthy herds. Old oak stands, while beautiful, now support burgeoning numbers of black bears, the most efficient fawn predators we have.

Private landowners are learning that sound timber management

optimizing timber and deer foods is a win-win for hunters, landowners and even non-consumptive users. Today, I say confidently that deer management on private lands is of higher quality than that on public lands. That's largely because there are fewer people to satisfy on private lands.

Hunters on public lands often benefit from habitat-management activities of adjacent private landowners. In Wisconsin, we recommended implementation of a public/private lands deer management assistance program bringing together landowners, public hunters and resource managers. When the goal is to increase deer, both public and private stakeholders must support sound timber management. To regenerate oaks and other deer-sensitive species requires a brief reduction in deer numbers — benefiting not only forests but also deer in the long run.

IN CONCLUSION

Whether it's conifers or hardwoods, I've never seen any scientific proof that any system is better than clearcutting for regenerating the forest. Mother Nature essentially has been doing this for millions of years, so why can't we sustain forest and wildlife resources in the same way?

We need to adopt a new (old) philosophy of actually managing the deer-forest-man ecosystem, not the deer ecosystem or the man ecosystem alone. If we don't, I'm convinced the boom-bust excesses of the past will only increase in the future. The result of not taking action would be degraded forests, degraded deer herds and low-quality hunting experiences: all problems we simply can't afford.

PROSHOP

