A NEW WHITETAIL ETHIC

by Dr. James C. Kroll

Author's Note: As I enter into this two part series, I want to make two things perfectly clear. First, the problems and issues I will be discussing are ***not unique to Texas;*** *they are rangewide in scope. Second, and perhaps most important,* ***I am not setting myself up as the guardian and judge of whitetail ethics.*** *It is my intent to raise issues that the entire whitetail community--hunters, landowners and managers--eventually will have to resolve. ..JCK*

Each year, I am asked to speak to hunters and landowners about whitetail hunting and management, one of the most enjoyable aspects of my work with whitetails. However, last year I became alarmed by a growing attitude among the audience. At the beginning of each presentation, I asked the same question: "If, as a whitetail biologist, I were to develop a chemical which, if sprayed on a leaf, would make every mature buck within ten miles come running to you, would you use it?" To my horror, 65% of attenders answered in the affirmative! And, I will bet you that another 15-20% answered yes to themselves only.

What does this mean? My interpretation is that most hunters would take the easy way out. That may be why the purveyors of "magic bullets" are so popular.

One of the greatest problems facing whitetails today is the over-harvest of bucks, especially yearlings. In most areas, we annually are killing some 60-80% of our yearling bucks. I typically admonish my audience to "let them walk," with the idea that just letting a buck reach two years of age would greatly improve the quality both of bucks and the hunting experience. Yet, at every meeting, I hear the same old lame response. "Well, if I don't shoot him, somebody else will!"

We now are embroiled in a big mess here in east Texas regarding the whitetail bag limit. After many years of explosive population growth, and increasingly liberalized bag limits, the kill has been off both for the 1990-91 and 1991-92 seasons. The Texas Parks & Wildlife Department reported in the media that the deer herd had indeed declined, achieving the goal of herd control established by the Department. The public response to this news was awesome! Over the course of several months, petitions were circulated and halls of public meetings echoed with angry comments such as, "We have killed all the deer, stop shooting does!" Clearly, hunters and landowners think the deer herd has been negatively impacted by the increased bag limit of four deer, all of which could be does.

One of the individuals responsible for a particular petition approached a good friend of mine who manages the herd on his own land. The guy obviously wanted my friend to support the petition, as he is very prominent in the community. My friend refused,

indicating that he was more than happy with the bag limit and felt the herd was in good shape. "Yeh, but you take care of your deer," the petitioner retorted! My friend was astounded by this statement.

In several midwestern states, the exact opposite situation exists. Farmers are applying increased pressure to state DNRs and legislatures to liberalize the bag to reduce depredation on crops. Yet, agencies are not taking steps to assure that landowners receive benefits from their wildlife. Today 85% of the wildlife exists on 60% of the land, all of which is privately owned. Private landowners are doing a much better job of managing wildlife than state and federal agencies, yet what is being done to encourage and reward landowners for their efforts? As I arrived to speak at one midwestern whitetail trophy show, the Director of Wildlife met me at the door, admonishing me **not** to speak about hunting clubs and leasing! "We have things the way we want them here, and rather you didn't muddy the waters with all of this economics stuff!" he pressured. Well, what do you think I talked about?

Finally, I always begin my talks with the statement that the white-tailed deer is the greatest and most challenging game animal in the world. **It is the great equalizer in that it cannot be "hunted with a checkbook,"** meaning that a hunter must work for a trophy, no matter what his economic status. But, unfortunately, this no longer is the case. If you have the money, you can kill a monster buck at will. Some commercial operations virtually offer a "menu" of animals from which to choose!

These are but a few of the events that led me and some of my colleagues to seriously question the direction we are heading in the

whitetail world. In this three part series, I plan to explore these issues, hopefully stimulating discussion among the serious hunters and managers of the country; and, the development of a **New Whitetail Ethic.**

LET THEM WALK!

It is safe to say that every Boone and Crockett buck once was a yearling! I wonder how many B&C bucks have been taken off in the back of a pickup, without the hunter ever knowing it, because he never was allowed to realize his potential? The comment, "Well if I don't shoot him, somebody else will," is no different in my mind from saying, "Well if I don't rob the corner store, somebody else will!" Ethics are ethics, you either have them or you do not. A yearling buck is the equivalent of a teenager-- naive and the most easily killed deer in the herd. I have no idea the number of times I have described a certain behavior, only to have hunters say they never have seen such a thing. Unfortunately, the average hunter sees a buck only for about three seconds-- **deer, buck, boom!** In many areas, if it has antlers, it's dead. Sadly, hunters seldom take the time to observe deer, and learn truly how to hunt them.

Bass fishermen long ago developed a concept which, although I have some problems with it, is very effective. I am talking about **catch-and-release**. The catch-and-release philosophy is so well-entrenched that any fisherman who does not release a bass is considered something less than ethical! Whether or not you accept this philosophy really is not the point. We can learn from the success

of the program what a powerful force peer-group pressure is. Perhaps the same thing could be applied to deer hunting.

The ethical question revolves around the desirability of letting young bucks walk. Why would we want to? After all, the average hunter is happy with any buck. **In my opinion, if we are to survive the anti-hunting movement, we must begin to counteract what is being said about hunters.** "Hunters are cowards, only interested in killing something," chided one activist. Are we falling into their hands when the taking of game, especially an easily killed yearling, is the criterion for success? If we really **are** out there for the challenge and *re-creation* imparted by the hunt, wouldn't the older, more challenging bucks better satisfy this need? What will be the long-term impact on herd genetics of maintaining very young buck herds to support a heavier harvest?

For too long now, the trophy hunter has been the focus of animosity both from anti-hunters and hunters. At a recent talk, one participant during the question and answer session noted, "Why you are just a trophy hunter." But, is the trophy hunter to be looked down upon? The image of the fellow out there to get the last individual of the species is ludicrous! I submit that the vast majority of true trophy hunters are avid conservationists. My friend, Dick Idol, for example hunted most of the season in Canada and never shot a buck. Do you think a hunter of his caliber did not have many chances during that time?

My response to that fellow simply was that I was not a trophy hunter, rather a hunter of mature bucks, irrespective of what was on his head. I find the mature buck (5 years and up) to be the ultimate

challenge. If he also happens to have a fine set of antlers is just icing on the cake. But, **the point is, if we just let our yearling bucks live one more year, how much would the quality of the experience be improved?** Over-harvest of bucks, and associated population and genetics problems, is one of our most vulnerable areas.

THE HUNTER

It has been said that "clothes make the man." Well, I am not sure how true this is, but it certainly is true that how a man (woman) appears and behaves, tells you a great deal about that person. **A good friend once noted that he could tell more about a man by hunting with him one day, than by living around him for years!** Hunting brings out the best and the worst in humans. I have seen respected preachers and political figures arrested for poaching.

Brien Dunn, owner of the Fennessey Ranch along the Gulf Coast of Texas runs one of the highest quality hunting operations I know. Brien reports that he had a well-known trophy hunter shoot a young buck last season, because he "had to draw some blood."

Unfortunately, we have few spokesmen for the pastime of hunting. Perhaps the most eloquent was Aldo Leopold, who recently has been re-discovered by environmentalists. Leopold is credited with being both the father of wildlife management and wilderness. Concerning hunting, he noted:

"A peculiar virtue in wildlife ethics is that the hunter ordinarily has no gallery to applaud or disapprove of his conduct. Whatever his acts, they are dictated by his own conscience, rather than by a mob of onlookers. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this fact."

Yet our actions, as well as our appearance do have an impact on the image of hunters. Each year, I see the slob hunter becoming more the rule than the exception.

Americans have a natural aversion to camouflage. It denotes military or paramilitary. Yet, how many times have you seen a hunter enter a public place dressed in full camo? Add to this a very big knife, and you have the makings of extremely bad P.R. Should not the trappings of hunting be confined to the hunting camp?

Many states actually require hunters to display their kill prominently on their vehicle. But, does the sight of a dead deer, lashed to the front of a Chevrolet, blood running down the hood, produce positive images of the sport? Or for that matter, how about a blood covered hunter buying beer in a convenience store?

The behavior of hunters in the field often is questionable. In states where public hunting is a tradition, there is a growing incidence of poor behavior. In fact, **I know several landowners who are anti-hunter yet pro-hunting!** I recently saw a published picture of two fellows with their bucks, each buck firmly chained to a tree. What does it say when a guy has to protect his game from other hunters?

A good friend of mine produces what I believe to be the finest whitetail videos on the market today. I accompanied him to one of the sport shows a few years back. Hunter after hunter came up to his

booth and asked the same question: "How many kill scenes are in your video?" My friend patiently replied to each that there were none, as he did not think that it was the proper image for the hunting public. Rather, he preferred to include some of the finest footage of big bucks and of never-before-seen deer behavior. Guess how many copies he sold? Later, in frustration, he reluctantly added a couple of kills to get his money back. What does that say about many hunters?

A recent article by Glynn Harris in *The Signpost*, a publication of the Quality Deer Management Association, referred to these videos as "more like hunting porn." Joe Hamilton, founder of the organization, noted that,

> *"I recently had the opportunity to review a dozen new hunting videos, many that claimed to have been done astefully. I didn't find a single one that I thought was tastefully done. For example, one particular bow hunting video that boasted of being done in good taste showed six kill scenes-- make that 12 scenes because each kill was shown at regular speed, then shown again in slow motion to allow the viewer to follow the flight of the arrow."*

I wonder what Barbara Walters would do with some of this footage on *20-20* ?

I am conducting a content analysis of outdoor publications. It concerns me to see the number of articles aimed, not at how to outsmart the game, rather the other hunters! This is not too unexpected, since during a recent trip to a midwestern state, the woods looked like an army of orange-clad ants were afoot!

Another area of concern revolves around the level of knowledge and skill of hunters. The same urbanization that has created the

ecologically ignorant anti-hunter, has spawned a generation of equally ignorant "weekend warriors," who know very little about whitetails or the proper methods of hunting them. **Each year those of us who manage deer are in the unenviable situation of observing many hunters in the field. And, each year we see an increase in the number of poor hunters.** Just last season, I saw fine animals crippled and lost as a direct result of the ineptness of hunters. Ray Sasser, one of the premier outdoor writers in the country, recently noted: "Hunting is a privilege, not a right. I feel that the hunter should have to pass a proficiency test, just as he does to drive an automobile." Yet, how many hunters would view such a requirement as an infringement on his/her rights?

A recent paper published by Dr. Tom Heberlein in the Bulletin of The Wildlife Society is an excellent treatise on the future of the hunter. Dr. Heberlein agrees in spirit with Ray. "The current [hunting] license is a misnomer; in most places, it is little more than a tax stamp," he asserts.

But, many question the sanity of making it tougher for hunters to practice their pursuit. More than once I have heard hunters and professionals alike warn that anything that restricts hunters' rights will reduce the number of hunters; weakening our position. Dr. Heberlein and I agree that this is not true. Actually, a smaller number of highly trained and ecologically aware hunters, who are willing to continue to pay most of the bills, will do a great deal for the image of hunting. Yet, many view this as an "elitist" attitude.

Lastly, how about the way we treat the animal itself? One of the most ethical hunters I know is Dave Bzawy of Alberta Wilderness

Outfitters. Dave is a pleasure to hunt with. Last fall, Dave and I hunted the fringe habitat of central Alberta for trophy whitetails. Believe me, Dave knows what constitutes a "quality" experience. "For an animal as magnificent as the whitetail buck, an animal that braves harsh winters and short food, you have to treat him with respect," insists Dave. "He deserves to be hunted on **his** level and treated respectfully, even after he is dead."

Dave told me this as we sat in the snow along a Canadian cutline through the forest. I had my back to Dave, busying myself preparing my photographic equipment to document the monster buck we had just taken. As I glanced back over my shoulder, Dave was sitting there with my buck's head cradled in his lap-- absentmindedly hugging my buck! Now, that is respect.

Hunters often are maligned because they mount the heads of bucks. This is not a demonstration of "macho" ability, rather a sign of respect to the animal. Unfortunately, I see too many hunters kill a young buck, only to throw its antlers in the corner to collect dust. "I have to have some venison," one hunter excused his actions. If venison is the goal, why not shoot a doe? It is time to be honest with ourselves, why is it important to kill an buck, any buck?

Respect transcends sex. I too often hear even noted whitetail authorities refer to does as "mallet heads, mulies and slick heads." To some folks, a doe is nothing more than a lower-class citizen to be slaughtered to make room for more bucks. Yet, who is responsible for making those bucks? Yet, on the other side of that coin, too many hunters look upon the doe as something sacred. "No real man would kill a doe," one fellow challenged. "We leave that to the women and

children!" However, that same fellow would not hesitate to shoot a yearling buck-- nothing more than a naive teenager. To love deer often means to kill deer, something difficult to communicate to the non-hunting public. **But, even when we have to reduce deer numbers, every deer deserves respect.**

The image of the deer hunter probably is poorer than any hunting group, a recent study by wildlife management professionals at the Izaak Walton League clearly demonstrated that. We obviously need to clean up our act. If we conduct ourselves in an ethical and responsible manner, the non-hunting public has been shown to support our sport. In the next installment, I will discuss the role the hunter and his equipment play in developing **A New Whitetail Ethic.**

A NEW WHITETAIL ETHIC: PART II, The Hunter and His Equipment

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In the first installment of this series, I discussed the growing need for **A New Whitetail Ethic**, developed cooperatively by hunters, landowners, state and federal agencies and the wildlife management profession. Some how we have departed from the natural role man played prior to urbanization. The highly synthesized, urban anti-

hunter represents a disease permeating our society-- loss of contact with the natural world. In the second part of the series, I will discuss the impact of hunters and their actions, game agencies and managers on public attitudes about deer hunting.

THE ROLE OF THE HUNTER

There is little doubt among professionals that the modern hunter is an integral part of whitetail management. Even with all of the rhetoric about birth control and relocation, no more effective means is available to control deer populations than the hunter. But, what role should the hunter play in the management process? And, what role does he now play?

Growing up in Texas, I took for granted the attitudes of hunters toward management. Now that I work throughout the range of the species, I have had a dose of reality therapy! In most areas, the hunter actually plays a very small role in deer management. He often either is not involved by the state DNR or he does not care enough to become involved. Again, we return to the hunting license.

Is the act of buying a licence to hunt deer the only obligation you owe the species? Do wildlife management agencies exist to provide what one professional referred to as "wildlife welfare?" Are game species simply resources to be "mined" from the land, without putting something back?

In spite of what agencies may report, there only are two factors that regulate the quality of life for whitetails-- landowners and hunters. Landowners control the vast majority of whitetail habitat,

and we depend on hunters to manage populations. Every time a hunter pulls the trigger, he is making a management decision. But, how willing are hunters to support sound whitetail management? Policy in any society is evidenced by where it spends its money. So it is with hunting. Where do the vast majority of hunters' dollars go? Studies have shown that only a minute portion of the hunting dollar goes into management. The vast majority goes into equipment, travel and entertainment.

Since Leopold's time, many hunters have refused to support population control. It is sad to say, that many hunters want to see lots of deer, perhaps in their mind making it easier to harvest a buck. Poor old Leopold got "eaten alive" by Wisconsin's hunters in the 30's and 40's because he dared to propose herd reductions! Yet, today those same attitudes are the rule rather than the exception, not only in Wisconsin, but throughout the range. The "more deer is better" attitude pervades much of the whitetail hunting public.

There clearly are costs to the private landowner for allowing whitetails to co-exist. Whether it be leaving forest or brush for cover, or allowing deer to benefit from his crops, the modern farmer and rancher is responsible for the welfare of our deer. Yet, how many hunters are willing pay for the right to hunt on private land; or, contribute their time or money to help the landowner? **There is an old ecological law: There's no such thing as a free lunch.** Unless landowners receive just compensation for their deer, there will be no deer to hunt! One Texas rancher recently told me, "If I didn't make money off of whitetails, there wouldn't be a deer on my

place." What should be the future role of the hunter in habitat management?

EQUIPMENT

Aldo Leopold, more than forty years ago, raised questions concerning the equipment of hunting:

> *"The pioneer period gave birth to two ideas that are the essence of split-rail value in outdoor sports. One is the 'go-light' idea, the other the 'one-bullet-one-buck' idea....In their later evolution, however, they became a code of sportsmanship, a self-imposed limitation on sport. On them is based a distinctively American tradition of self-reliance, hardihood, woodcraft, and marksmanship. ...Then came the gadgeteer, otherwise known as the sporting-goods dealer. He has draped the American outdoorsman with an infinity of contraptions, all offered as aids to self-reliance, hardihood, woodcraft, or marksmanship, but too often functioning as substitutes for them."*A. Leopold, **A Sand County Almanac**

Although these words were written in 1949. never have they been more timely. I travel a great deal, giving talks at various hunting and fishing shows. You no doubt have been to many of these. The array of gadgets, all touted to make you a better hunter, is impressive. As I noted earlier, apparently the consumer wants "magic bullets."

No where has the proliferation of gadgets been more apparent than with "primitive weapons." The interest in primitive weapons hunting over the last decade even has out-stripped deer hunting. Yet, what constitutes a primitive weapon? Too often, in response to consumer demand, manufacturers offer products designed to perform like the

modern centerfire rifle! Is the chance of a misfire, for example, an important part of blackpowder shooting?

Neither I nor Leopold can say where the transition point lies between gadget and true hunting aid. **Moderation is the key, yet I have no idea what constitutes moderation.** I think the dividing line should come between those aids that improve the quality of the experience and those that serve as substitutes for skill. Some aids truly improve the quality of the experience. For example, there is no doubt that the invention of the grunt call has enhanced the aesthetics of deer hunting.

Other aids are important to improve the efficiency of the hunter and/or the cleanness of the kill. Last fall, I hunted New Brunswick with my friends, Gordon Whittington and George Chase. George and I discussed these issues, especially those relating to bowhunting. "I think the ethical bowhunter should use a release," he offered. At the time, I quietly disagreed to myself. However, hours of stand-sitting later, and a great deal of thinking, brought me to fully agree. The release allows for a more efficient kill, and reduces the chances of crippling a deer; hence, it should be considered as a **good aid**. In my opinion, it is all right to handicap yourself, as long as the animal does not suffer for it. A misfiring blackpowder gun does little harm to the animal. Now we arrive at a rather touchy topic-- **bowhunting.**

THE QUESTION OF BOWHUNTING

No issue can create more heated debate both among hunters and non-hunters as bowhunting. **No matter what your opinion, you**

cannot deny that bowhunting is the prime target of the anti-hunting forces. Also, no matter what your opinion, bowhunting happens to be our "Achilles' heel." The very nature of the sport dictates that the animals dies in a manner quite different from the gun.

Now, before you get your dander up, I fully support bowhunting. **It only is some bowhunters I do not support!** Since bowhunting carries with a great deal of imotionalism, bowhunters should be more sensitive to their image than any other hunting group. Yet, I commonly hear one bowhunter ask another in public, "Did you get a deer? No, but I sure bloodied one!" Or, "I stuck a buck today."

Bowhunting has changed since my childhood. When I started bowhunting, there were only a couple of brand names, and you had to assemble your own arrows. There were no compound bows, no graphite arrows or high-tech broadheads. Yet today, the consumer is baffled by an ever-increasing array of gadgets, many of which are designed, again, to make a primitive weapon behave like a centerfire rifle! But, as I mentioned above, many of these devices could be classified justifiably as a **good aid**; i.e., one that adds to the quality of the experience and reduces the suffering of the animal. Again, I only have problems with the aids that serve to substitute for skill.

What about the kind of animal harvested? How many times have you heard the phrase: "That's a good buck for a bow kill?" If the hunter chooses to handicap himself by using primitive hunting tools, does it justify the killing of yearling bucks? Do the same rules apply, no matter what equipment is being used? Some of the best deer

hunters I know are bowhunters, and they regularly kill mature bucks. Should bowhunters be allowed to have different standards from gun hunters?

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Recently I was invited to give a talk to the state wildlife commission of an Atlantic Coast state. Seems the local hunters association was tired of poor quality hunting experiences. That state has only had two Boone & Crockett bucks in its entire history!

The state has a limit of five deer, four bucks and a doe by permit. They keep no records on their hunters, so they have no idea as to the success of their hunters, their attitudes or the number of deer killed. In talking with many hunters in the area, no one ever has killed four bucks. The state is playing a rather dangerous game. They are giving the elusion of success. In the absence of population control, the average hunter sees many deer when afield, often assuming the reason he has seen no buck is a poor choice of location. Yet, hunters are killing 80% of their bucks!

The Director of Whitetail Management for another eastern state recently confided in me that their goal was to produce a deer for the gun. They could care less if it had anything on its head. The "name-of-the-game" was to make the hunters happy, not to do what is right for the deer. But, for how long will the hunters remain happy? How long will it be before hunters and landowners figure out they have been duped?

Are state and federal agencies truly doing what is right for the deer? A recent **Good Morning America** program highlighted the growing deer problem in the East. "Why they are nothing more than Norway rats or raccoons with antlers," chided one environmentalist. "They are destroying the habitat for other non-game species!"

In an effort to justify population control, after the fact, some agencies now are putting out media materials that point to the whitetail as the culprit for Lyme Disease-- totally fallacious information. Mice and raccoons carry more "deer ticks" than whitetails. There is a growing hysteria in urban and suburban areas about whitetails. Even here in Texas, citizens groups in San Antonio are pressing to "do something about the whitetail problem." Some agencies view Lyme as a way out of the deer dilemma. Why not blame the deer for years of mismanagement?

Finally, what about the agency-landowner relationship? Clearly, many state agencies do not want to work with landowners to develop an economically rewarding program for private management. Beaurocrats do not want to relinquish any power to the landowner. Some states even tout themselves as standing between the sportsman and the landowner, a dangerous stance to take. Since the private landowner obviously is doing a better job of deer management, should agencies do more to encourage and help him? Should technical assistance be given to those who rather would raise deer than soybeans as a crop?

THE WHITETAIL MANAGER-LANDOWNER

If you think I was going to leave out the manager, you are mistaken. We have our own skeletons to purge! After all, we are the fellows who give in to the demands of hunters and landowners, often in detriment to the species and the experience.

To many of us, recent demands for trophy-class bucks have led to some serious ethical problems. As I noted above, I once taught that the whitetail was the great equalizer. Anybody could kill a B&C buck, and fortunately that often is the case. But, the demand for bigger and bigger bucks has led some managers to take shortcuts, often degrading the experience.

We now have the technology to produce record-book bucks. I know how to literally shape antlers to the desired non-typical configuration (But, I will never tell anyone how to do it). We have perfected embryo transplants, and artificial insemination. One B&C buck has fathered several offspring, in spite of the fact that he has been dead for ten years!

My native Texas now looks like a large prison, with eight feet tall deer fences lining the highways. Deer-proof fence proliferation has crepted into many states. But, is a deer-proof fence good or bad? Why have so many fences appeared recently?

Well, there are two basic reasons to fence a deer herd. First, many landowners and managers are tired of dealing with the mismanagement and unethical behavior of their neighbors. **Frankly, fences appeared first in Texas to keep deer out, rather than in!** Landowners who honestly cared about the quality of a deer's life, could not control the population without fencing their land. Second, and most recently, fences have appeared in order to maintain

abnormally high densities of deer. This allows for the taking of large numbers of trophy bucks. Is this ethical conduct?

Developing a **Whitetail Ethic** cannot be accomplished without involving the landowner. But, unfortunately, landowners either have been excluded by hunters and game agencies, or are not willing to participate. Leopold wrote a great deal about a Land Ethic. Landownership is a right guaranteed by the Constitution, and an important right at that. However, ownership of land carries with it responsibilities. After all, we own land in the public trust. The resources on the land are under the control of the landowner. What he/she does on the land greatly impacts those resources.

A New Whitetail Ethic involves many factors-- hunters, agencies, professionals and landowners all influence what happens to deer. In the final installment, I will attempt to put all this together, hopefully to effect some changes in the way we do business.

A NEW WHITETAIL ETHIC: Part III, Some Proposals

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In the first two installments of this series, I presented a discussion concerning many factors that influence how the non-hunting and anti-hunting public view whitetail hunting. It is sad to say that many hunters present a poor image and do little to foster good will toward the sport. A side-effect of increased urbanization is over-dependence on gadgets as substitutes for skill. It also has led many to look for the "easy way out" in deer hunting; pressuring state agencies and

professional managers to provide the easy kill and the trophy buck at no cost in effort or skill. Managers have responded with intensive management programs that maximize harvest, instead of experience; while agencies tend to respond with a "venison in every pot" approach to deer management, in which the quality of the experience means far less than the taking of game.

The Achilles' heel of deer hunting is bowhunting, like it or not. Anti-hunting forces have centered on this aspect of our sport as their prime target. Yet, we continue to give them amunition to use against us. The behavior of hunters in public often is deplorable! Demand for hunting videos with kill scenes shown repeatedly in slow-motion has escalated.

Clearly, there is a need for a **New Whitetail Ethic**. Hopefully, the last installment in this series will aid in developing a dialogue among hunters, landowners and managers to accomplish just that.

THINKING THROUGH A NEW WHITETAIL ETHIC

If by this point I have not made you so angry that you have thrown your copy of **Whitetail** in the trash, we need to proceed to a resolution to the many questions I have raised. But, before we do, please don't think everything is bad in the world of whitetails. There only are adjustments that have to be made in the long evolution of deer hunting and management. Let's take the questions in logical order.

Why are we out there hunting whitetails? There may be no way ever to justify our actions to the anti-hunter, but they are justifiable.

Hunting is our natural heritage. Dr. Bill Morrill, wildlife biologist and writer, asserts, "We have lost of our hunting heritage, and now look upon hunting no differently than we do business." Bill feels that urbanization has caused many problems, environmentally, as well as ethically. He feels that **man desperately needs to maintain his connection to hunting as an experience that celebrates our natural heritage and our connection to nature.** We are predators, and should not apologize for it! "You are no closer to nature than when you consummate your hunt with a kill," asserts Morrill. But, he is the first to acknowledge that hunting is an experience in which killing something may or may not be a part. He refers to anti-hunters as an aberrant element in society who want nature to function as they perceive it to be, not the way it is. These "modern-day Druids" view the world from the synthetic surroundings of the city and its environs. They are a lost cause, but the non-hunter is not! It is he who watches every move we make, trying to decide if what we do is right.

It is the experience, not the kill, which must become important. Hunters are known to go through many steps in their development, most falling out along the way. First, there is the need to kill something, anything (Phase I). The young lad who kills a songbird with a BB gun typifies this level. This is followed by the need to kill a limit (Phase II). Unfortunately, many hunters fall out at this level. "Did you have a good hunt? No, I didn't even kill a limit!"

Next comes the need to kill more game or a bigger animal than the other hunters (Phase III). The competitiveness of man rears its ugly head in Phase III. Yet, hunting is **not** a competitive sport, except

between the hunter and the animal. There are those who take advantage of this by trying to make hunting a competitive sport, complete with high-dollar prizes. The "kill for pay" approach simply will not fly with the public. It is one thing to catch and release a fish for pay, yet quite another to kill an animal for profit.

Fourth comes the technologist, to whom it is as important **how** he takes game as how many (Phase IV). Many bowhunters fall out at this level. Bowhunting even has fragmented into interest groups. There are longbow, recurve bow, and compound groups, to name a few.

Fifth is the trophy hunter (Phase V). He must harvest the mature animal, primarily because it is a personal challenge. He shuns the help of the outfitter, opting to succeed or fail on his own merit. He is not to be confused with those that refer to themselves as trophy hunters. These folks really belong to the, "I'm going to shoot a bigger one than you, even if I have to cheat," crowd.

And lastly, there is the guy who really does not care one way or another if he kills anything (Phase VI). It is the experience that counts. If we are to survive as a sport, we have to focus on the experience, rather than the kill. Few of us really need the venison, but we sure need the experience!

What will serve to intensify the experience? First of all, the hunting community has to resolve what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the field. The use of gadgets must be limited to only those that, 1) increase the quality of the experience, and/or 2) ensure a humane, more efficient kill. No one, especially me,

can tell you what is a gadget and what is a good aid. You have to be honest with yourself.

In many areas, baiting of deer is legal. The drive and competition of the Phase III hunter leads to less than a quality experience. What kind of experience is obtained when a fellow sits in a box and shoots a buck over corn or apples? Again, it is not so much **what** as **how**. Yet, is there a place for baiting? I think there is a place for baiting, but only for management purposes. In most management programs, the manager faces a situation of controlling the herd under archaic regulations. Baiting often offers an efficient means of removing antlerless deer-- sportsmanship is not the goal, rather doing what is best for the deer. But, baiting in the hands of the average hunter degrades to whose apple pile is tallest!

What is the difference between a pile of apples and a food plot? There is a difference between a food plot and a bait pile, however. The food plot is out there after the season, while the bait pile is long disappeared. There are no black-and-white areas, what is ethical must be weighed by what is good for hunters and what is good for deer. In the end, it is my opinion that we would be better served by making certain techniques unethical-- shunned by the hunting community-- rather than to make them illegal.

Next, the hunter has to take an active role in the welfare of the species. Hunters, as well as landowners, must realize that they are responsible for, 1) the welfare of animals (the anti's sure are not going to take that responsibility), 2) the future of hunting, and 3) the environment. Hunters must support the wildlife management profession, both in population control and in reducing the buck

harvest. Pressing state game agencies to hold deer populations at abnormally high levels shows little concern for the environment.

A stigma needs to be placed on the individual who must kill a buck, no matter its age. The "let them walk" program needs to gain the same acceptance as the catch and release program.

Every deer hunter must become aware of his/her appearance and behavior. Camouflage is not for the streets, or even for the sporting show. **At every talk I present, half the audience shows up in camouflage!** Hunters also have to learn to respect each other, and the landowner's feelings. We must be willing to police our ranks when problems arise. Outdoor writer, Mike Leggett, was the guy who blew the whistle on the so-called "canned hunts" in Texas. Guys were letting leopards out of cages and shooting them. One even had to be dragged from under a truck so the "hunter" could shoot it. Do you think he received accolades from hunters groups for his actions? No, he received hate mail and threatening letters and phone calls from reputable sportsmen's organizations! When someone behaves in an unethical manner, we need to be the first to "call for his head."

We desperately need a Code of Ethics for hunting videos; however, who is to develop such a code? There was a weak attempt a couple of years ago by video producers, but little came of it. It is far better if we, the hunters, dictate what is ethical and what is not. Should we support producers of hunting porn?

Thanks to magazines such as **North American Whitetail,** hunters are becoming more and more knowledgeable about whitetail biology and management. Every hunter owes it to the species and the pastime to know more about deer, and to develop the technical

expertise to efficiently hunt and humanely kill them. Unfortunately, the need for some hunters to kill a monster buck creates a demand that leads to ethical problems for the manager. For example, some biologists regularly conduct aerial "censuses" just prior to the season, ostensibly to make harvest recommendations. But, when a big buck is sighted, the landowner moves a stand in on the buck.

Hunters also should be more willing to pay. Wildlife is an agricultural crop, and costs money to produce. The idea that wildlife is a free commodity to be "mined" from the land is ludicrous. State government is less and less able to provide quality hunting. That job will fall to the private landowner. More and more private landowners, faced with increasing costs and liability are opting either to close their lands or seek a profit from their wildlife. Hunting clubs are cropping up all over America. What should be the ethical restraints for these clubs and the private landowner?

Dr. Morrill, an avid proponent of ethical management, recently discussed the growing deer fence situation. "I have no problem with deer-proof fences," he offers, "as long as they are not used to maintain an abnormal deer density." In thinking this out, I fully agree. Believe it or not, it is as much a challenge to kill a deer in a 640 acre enclosure as it is in a 640 acre non-enclosed area, **provided** the deer are maintained at a normal density. The word "normal" is important. In many ranges, a quality habitat will support a deer to 10-15 acres. A section-sized enclosure should, therefore, have no more than 40-60 deer. Doubling that number would degrade the experience and substantially weight the outcome of the hunt in favor of the hunter.

Yet, I am not faulting the landowner who offers high density hunting opportunities, rather the consumer. If there were no demand, there obviously would not be a market. Most individuals who have deer enclosures really are not operating to make a profit, rather because they love deer and sell bucks to pay the bills.

In the long run, fenced areas will remain the exception. In most cases, landowners will lease lands to hunters' organizations and clubs. A partnership should be developed between committed sportsmen and landowners to assure quality deer hunting at an affordable price.

Unfortunately, most of our game laws relating to whitetails were placed on the books at a time when there were very few deer. Today, this certainly is not the case, with some 20+ million deer in the country. There is a need to better utilize the resource while maintaining the integrity of the ecosystem. The bag limits and rules in operation in many states are archaic at best and need to be revamped. For example, Texas has a real deer problem-- we have too many deer. Managers under the current system are being forced to make a ethical decision between what is right for the resource and what is legal; and, more and more of them are making decisions that violate the law. Most recently, some biologists were caught by a warden with several does. Now, these guys needed to kill a deer like we need another Tse Tse fly in the world. They had resorted to killing those does in an attempt to control the population, when legal means failed! Now, don't get me wrong, I never would condone the breaking of the law. But, managers have to be given more leadway in management.

State agencies also are operating under the old set of rules in regard to bag limits and seasons. The goal too often is to "put a deer in every pot," rather than provide a quality experience. **Bag limits have to be adjusted to reduce pressure on the buck segment of the population.** Sadly, we are over-protecting the does and leaving bucks open to over-exploitation! Opportunities for quality hunting experiences must be increased on state-owned lands. Agencies must care more about the resource and the "sportsman" than in playing to the masses.

Working together-- state agencies, hunters and landowners-- we can develop a workable system that can be supported even by non-hunters. You may not agree with everything I have said in this series, but hopefully, it has led you to think and to evaluate your own feelings about the road we travel. As Leopold said, "There is value in any experience that reminds us of our dependency on the soil-plant-animal-man food chain, and of the fundamental organization of the biota...there is value in any experience that exercises those ethical restraints collectively called 'sportsmanship.'"