INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY

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We now are celebrating our 25th anniversary at North American WHITETAIL. A common cliché is, time passes fast! In my case, it seems like only yesterday I received a call from David Morris-- then a co-owner of magazine and a biologist in his own right—about writing for their new magazine. I had just returned from a meeting of a relatively new professional organization: The Southeast Deer Study Group. My wife answered the phone since I was outside planting something. "A fellow named David Morris wants to talk with you," she said, "apparently he was at the deer meeting." The man on the other end of the conversation had a deep southern drawl, and immediately I took to his kind ways. He explained about the new magazine, and that what wanted to publish sound information from scientists about whitetails. I had done some popular writing and certainly was interested. "What you guys are doing is unique," he added, "and, we want to get this new information out to those who need it."

That was twenty-five years ago, and things were very different then. Consider a world in which not one single thing is known about planting food plots for deer. Topics, concepts and products such as sanctuaries, travel corridors, staging areas, dominant and subordinate bucks, grunting, infrared-triggered cameras, landscaping for whitetails, patterning bucks, aging and judging bucks, size limits on buck harvest, etc. all were unknown to the general public. In this series of columns, I would like to take you through how these and other concepts and knowledge came to be. It is all part of what I call "institutional knowledge." Too often today, new folks come to a field not knowing how the commonly used techniques and concepts came to exist. They often take for granted the words and language used on a daily basis.

I came to Stephen F. Austin State University (Nacogdoches, TX) in 1973. My job was to develop a wildlife management program within that institution's School of Forestry. Although a hunter all my life, my training and primary research interest involved non-game and endangered species. My first frustration was no one was interested in managing for these animals. "Who cares about toads and frogs," was the usual comment. So, I decided to make a dramatic shift in my career. I would study deer. Deer would be the door through which I could gain access to landowners. Non-game would have to wait. I put together a 20 year plan to develop a new institute for scientific study of the most popular game animal.

I will never forget being summoned to the office of Dan Lay, one of the first biologists hired by Texas Parks & Wildlife. Dan was and still is one of my heroes, and role model. "I understand you are switching your work to deer," he said with a frown. I told he that I indeed had decided to do so. "I am really disappointed," he replied, "you have a great deal of potential, and we need more non-game

biologists. Besides, everything is known about deer." I left his office feeling like someone who had disappointed his mentor.

It did not take me long, in preparing my 20 year plan, to discover how much we really did not know about deer! Sure, all the "low hanging fruit" had been collected; simple stuff about food habits and native forage management. Yet, the really important stuff had not been developed. Being trained as a natural history biologist, I decided to treat the whitetail as if it was a newly discovered species.

If you review outdoor writing at that time, magazine articles focused primarily on ways to outwit the other hunters, rather than the deer. There also tended to be a lot of words written about various calibers and their merits for killing deer. My strategy was to learn as much as I could about what bucks were doing and why. And, emphasis would be placed on what mature bucks were about.

The Institute's research program was organized along logical lines of attack. First, we would have to find out about home ranges of bucks and how they compared to does. Most of the radio-telemetry work to that time was done on buck fawns and yearlings, since capturing older bucks was quite difficult. First of all, there were not many mature bucks out there; and, secondly they were too smart to be captured in a trap or drop-net. That is when I learned hunting with a tranquilizer gun from a tree stand is a challenging "sport." Growing up on a farm and ranch in central Texas, I already had some idea of the difficulty of killing a trophy buck, even with a rifle. From these studies, we would learn about the home range size of mature bucks, and their activity patterns.

Next, we would look at ways to obtain an accurate count of the number of deer on a property. At that time, techniques such as track counts, pellet group counts and walking census lines were in common practice; and, greatly criticized by hunters and landowners alike. Somehow, we would find a better way to obtain critical management data.

Allied with the above information, we needed to learn what data should be collected, and how, to effectively manage deer. How accurate were aging techniques? What could be learned from aging whitetails? Could you accurately assess the age of a buck, live in the field. How could we assess the productivity of the herd? Again, all of these now are commonly used concepts; yet, they did not exist at that time.

Some of the studies conducted before we started this research project certainly was useful. For example, my colleague and friend, Dr. John Stransky, and his colleagues in the US Forest Service had developed methodologies to estimate how much quality forage was on a piece of land. Dr. Don Dietz, another friend and colleague, had contributed significantly to what we needed to know about nutritional composition of deer foods. So, we decided to look into ways we could improve deer nutrition.

Along the way, we discovered deer would frequent various outcrops of soils; and, would eat the dirt! Why did they do this, and was this in response to some nutritional deficiency? Could these needs be satisfied with a supplement?

As we accumulated more and more data about what deer were doing and why, we also began offering management assistance to landowners and hunting clubs. Drs. Harry Jacobson and David Guynn at Mississippi State University became trusted colleagues about this time. They were developing ways to work with landowners and hunting clubs, primarily in relation to record-keeping. For the first time, deer biologists were going out into the general hunting public and extending their knowledge to them. I learned a great deal from these two friends, and worked to spread Deer Management Assistance Programs (DMAPs) across the country. This also was the time David Morris made his phone call to me. Together with another co-owner, Steve Vaughn, and the new executive editor, Gordon Whittington, we would forge another long-term plan; one that would be aimed at bringing the hunting/landowner public to the idea deer could be managed.

Although somewhat crass to say, I often have likened NAWT magazine to Playboy. Each month, we would show the hunting public something they never would attain! Seriously, I cannot over-state the impact NAWT had on where we are today. And, I also would be remiss to ignore the concomitant impact of The Journal of the Texas Trophy Hunter, which came into existence shortly before our magazine.

The impact of these two publications—one national, one regional—was related primarily to showing hunters there were bucks out there far bigger than anything they were seeing. Of course, the reason behind the lack of trophy bucks was the way they were being managed. At that time, state agencies were operating on a "hunter opportunity model." Under this model, the goal was to give as many hunters as possible access to harvesting a deer; no matter what its age was. The average hunter then saw a buck for three seconds: deer, buck, boom!

The immediate response was for those who could afford it to grab their checkbooks and head off to the places we were writing about. Canada, Texas, Montana and Mexico were the beneficiaries of this movement. But, unknown to most of you, we bringing our readers to a new idea: trophy bucks could be produced at home. At a historic meeting at Ft. Perry, GA (the NAWT research facility at that time), Gordon, Steve, David and myself hatched a plan. We would introduce a new section in the magazine; one devoted to producing better bucks on almost any property. We called this new section, **Building Your Own Deer Factory**. The impact of this new information was incredible! "Deer management mania" spread like wildfire across the country.

Now, we did not invent quality deer management. Two men in Texas, Al Brothers and Murphy Ray, were the first to write anything about the topic. They did not invent quality deer management, but their book, Producing Quality Whitetails, was the first ever published. I am proud to say Al Brothers and I have been friends for most of my career. On rare occasions (too rare now days), Al and I get together and talk over new ideas and concepts. These are times I shall cherish the rest of my life!

Texas ranchers had been managing their deer for many years, some as early as the 1940s. When Al and Murphy went to work for Texas Parks & Wildlife, they saw the need for working with ranchers to achieve their goals. It was a two-way street, each learning from the other. By the 1980s, the foundation was laid for ways to produce quality whitetails on private lands.

I was fortunate enough to produce the next in a series of books on producing big bucks. *A Practical Guide to Producing and Harvesting White-tailed Deer* (about 700 pages long) was published in 1991. For the first time, both management and harvesting were offered in the same publication. What I had learned in assisting landowners and hunters, was the average hunter really did not know a great deal about his "prey." I could produce mature, trophy bucks on a property, all right. But, getting them killed was another thing!

By the time we had completed our first 20-year study plan, it was obvious there was a need to educate hunters about mature buck behavior. Our telemetry research had taught us a great deal about mature buck behavior. The first thing I discovered was that bucks tend find a place where hunting pressure is limited or non-existent. This even is true in heavily pressured herds. I decided to give such areas the name, **Sanctuaries**. Other terms such as travel corridors and staging areas would come later.

In spite of trying to "hammer home" the idea a buck will not ever reach trophy class, if you kill him as a immature buck, he never will achieve his true genetic potential. How could we bring hunters to the idea of letting young bucks walk? Steve called me up one day and told be about a study NAWT was going to support financially (and through the powers of NAWT) in Georgia. A young graduate student, Micah Goldstein, would be supported for a landmark study on placing size limits on bucks. Dooly county today is a common location to many hunters, yet in those days it just was a rural county in Georgia. Using data collected from DMAP-style management support, researchers learned placing a 14-inch outside spread limit would protect the vast majority of young bucks. The trick was to sell this idea to the local hunting public.

Fortunately, what turned out to be a grass-roots movement, supported by local landowners and hunters, was a resounding success! Size limits on bucks quickly became a popular, yet controversial topic around the campfires of countless

hunting camps. We predicted the idea would spread quickly, and it did. Today, there are various versions of these strategies in play in many areas.

It was our idea, size limits on bucks would be a stop-gap measure, while the education of hunters would be the long-term solution. Emphasis would someday would shift from the spread of a buck to his age. But, learning how to age a live deer seemed like an impossible task. In 1996, we decided to publish yet another book on that very topic. ***Aging and Judging Trophy Whitetails*** quickly became a best-seller, and now is going into its third printing. It would be followed shortly by a one-hour video by the same name. To date, we have sold more than 50,000 copies of that video; telling you just how timely the topic was. [The money generated by this and the other publications by the Institute go to support our research.] Today, it is not uncommon for me to go to a meeting of deer hunters, and hear someone refer to a buck he saw on his property, giving the age along with a description of its antlers. You have no idea how gratifying this is!

During these same times, we were doing research on more than mineral supplements. It was quite irritating to me hunters referred to areas planted for deer as, **oat patches**. In eastern Texas, I referred to these plantings as the 50-50 method of deer supplementation. The hunter would plant 50 pounds of feed oat seed, and put 50 pounds of fertilizer (if we were lucky) on an acre of ground! They honestly thought they were doing some good for their deer. So, we decided to change the name of these plantings. That is when the term "food plot' was born. It was more appropriate in my book. The idea was to increase the amount and quality of food available. I remember the first time we talked a landowner into adding clover to this mix. I went home that night and had an "adult beverage" to celebrate the event.

This is just a sampling of the various events and milestones throughout the 25 years of NAWT. In the coming issues, I will tell you about what we were thinking and how we and other researchers came up with these and other topics related to deer management and hunting. Hopefully in the process, you will gain some "institutional memory."