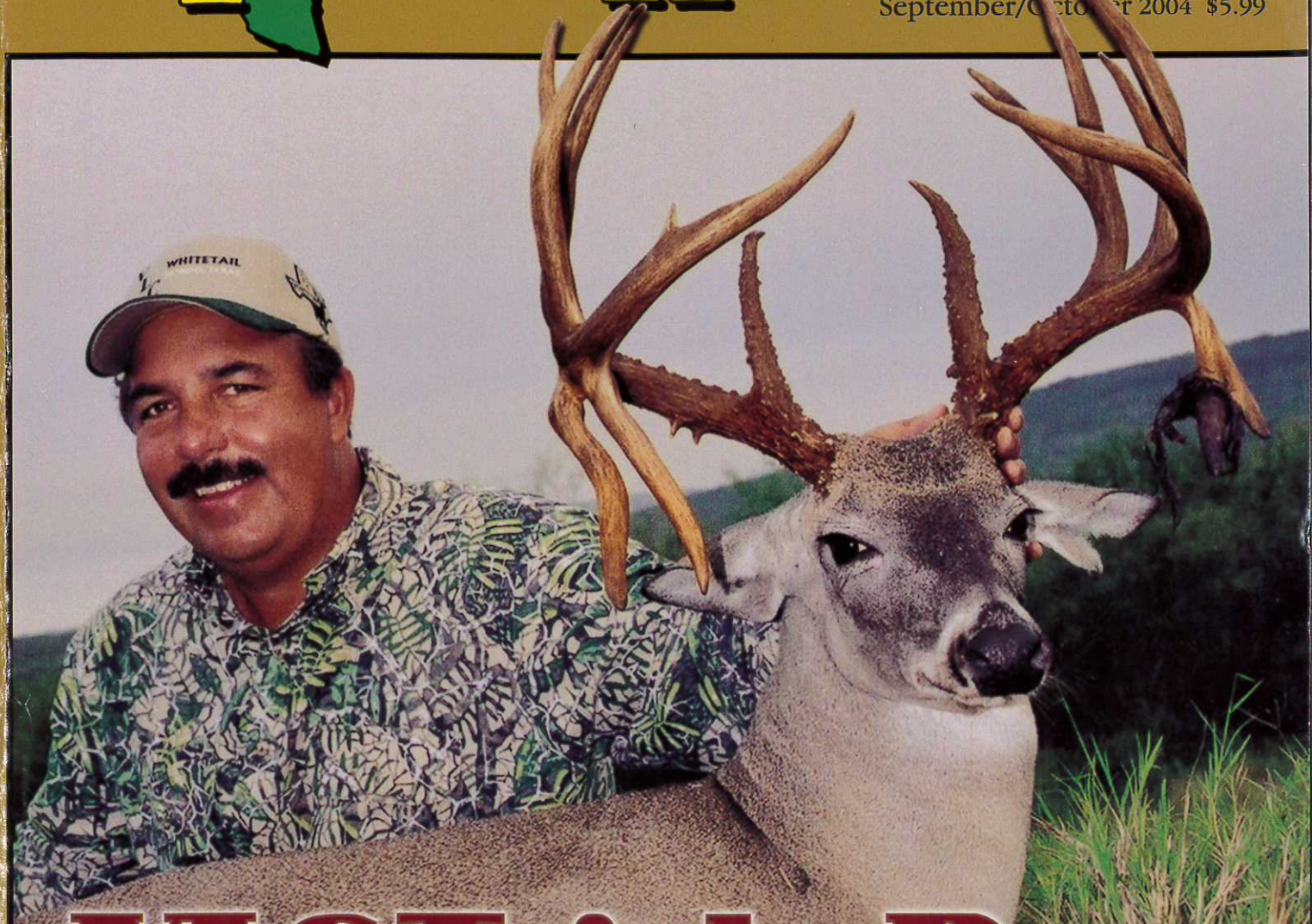
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Managing Whitetails in the 21st Century

Part III—What are the solutions?

By Dr. James C. Kroll

Author's Note: My wife and I were in the middle of a cemetery near San Antonio placing a stone at her younger brother's grave when my cell phone interrupted our work. It was my sister. The obvious emotion in her voice told me something was wrong. "You will never believe what some guy wrote about you in Texas Fish & Game Magazine," she sobbed. "He called you and some other guys thieves!" Since I was pretty busy at the time, I assured her folks in the public eye often had bad things written about them, and that I would look into it when I returned to East Texas.

The next day, my mother called in a similar temperament. "Several of my friends called telling me some guy called you a bastard," she said. Then, she assured me there was no worry about my legitimacy.

Over the next several days, a host of folks—ranging from state senators to deer hunters—called with similar concerns. I was getting pretty upset! By the time Texas Fish & Game publisher Roy Neves called, I was in no mood to be nice. Yet, his concern for the damage this commentary article had caused impressed me. He genuinely wanted to do what was right.

We agreed the "right" approach would be for me to develop a series of articles objectively discussing the issues around modern deer management. This series is the result of that conversation, and I appreciate his honesty.—JCK

In the first two installments of this series, I discussed the issues in deer management and hunting as we proceed in the 21st century. Land is being fragmented at an alarming rate as more and more farmers and ranchers cannot operate economically, and taxes escalate.

At the same time, deer herds are growing exponentially and the number of hunters is declining. Clearly, the old ways of managing deer no longer apply. What we need is a new way of looking at our favorite animal and sport. In the final installment, I will provide some insight into possible solutions.

There are two clear issues dominating the problem.

The first, of course, is the private landowner. What is to be his/her role in the future? If landowners no longer can afford to operate, a tremendous amount of deer habitat will be removed from hunting. Faced with inheritance and property taxes, more and more landowners are dividing their land into smaller and smaller units.

Researchers at Texas A&M inform us most of this land is being sold for recreational use. On the surface that may seem good, but is it really? How much of this land will be

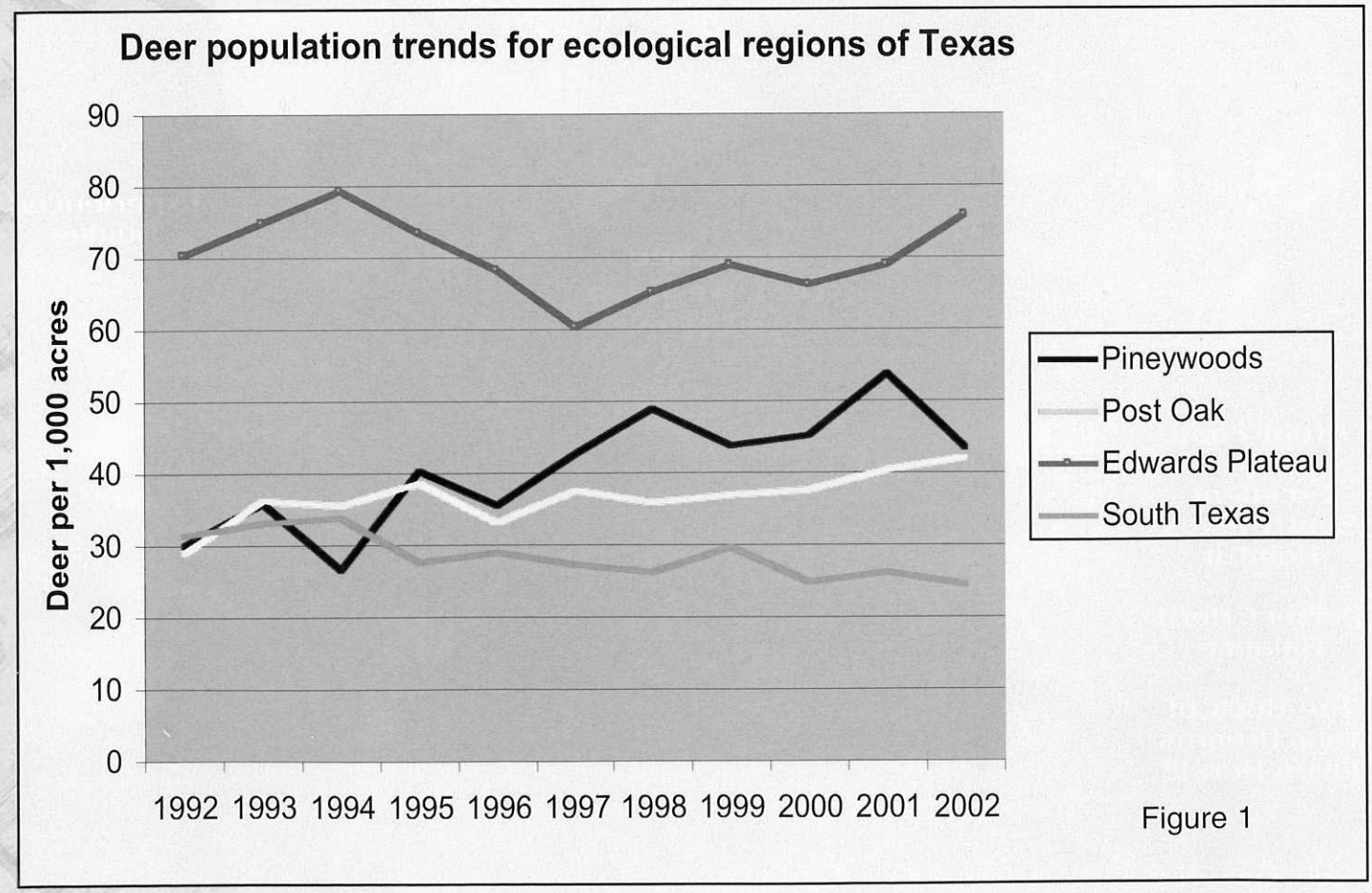


Figure 1

managed for deer? In many cases, this new generation of property owner wants to hold the land for investment or for their own private use.

We have discovered most landowners are not anti-hunting, they are anti-hunter! What this means is, they have nothing against hunting, they just do not want hunters on their property. In many cases, they have purchased the land to get away from the pressures of urban existence, and the last thing they want is to have to deal with more people.

A commonly held myth is most of the Texas deer range is leased. The facts indicate, however, less than 18 percent actually is leased. Why then do so few landowners allow the public to hunt their lands? Certainly, concerns for liability and privacy dominate the answer.

The deer populations in many areas of Texas (except South Texas) continue to increase (Fig. 1). This is the second problem. We are not really controlling our herd. More often than not, nature is, and she's brutal!

East Texas in particular has seen a rollercoaster population over the last three decades. The Pineywoods herd has fluctuated by as much as 30 deer per 1,000 acres. That means a periodic loss or gain of as many as 390,00 animals. Clearly, the herd is not being managed, in spite of the best efforts of Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TP&WD) and many of us in deer management. It is not fair to blame the TP&WD since they are forced to manage deer indirectly on private lands.

In reality, this results from three basic problems. First, there are not enough hunters. The number of hunters continues to decline in our state (Fig. 3). Next, the distribution of hunters is skewed by geographic area. For example, the Pineywoods has on average 16 percent of the hunters, but only 14 percent of the deer. The Post Oak Savanna region has 12 percent of the hunters and nine percent of the deer, while South Texas has 20 percent of the deer and only 15 percent of the hunters. Even the famous Edwards Plateau has the same problem (31 percent hunters vs. 29 percent deer).

Since most hunters expect to harvest a buck, this produces a correspondingly skewed male age structure (Fig. 4) over much of the state. Buck:doe ratios in these same regions are 1:4 (Pineywoods), 1:5 (Post Oak Savanna), 1:2.5 (Edwards Plateau) and 1:2 (South Texas).

Calculating a "manageability score" (deer/hunters) for the four most popular regions yields only one region (South Texas) with more hunters than deer. Hence, in most of the state a hunter's expectations of harvesting a quality buck are fairly low. In fact, less than 10 percent of the bucks taken in the Pineywoods and Post Oak Savanna regions are mature.

Lastly, most private landowners do not manage their deer. We have to develop a way to encourage them. What incentives are there for the private landowner to manage his deer, and then make this resource available to the public? The most obvious solution involves economics. If we want landowners to consider the welfare of deer and deer hunting, we will have to give them financial incentives to do so.

Texas leads the nation in economic development of hunting—good or bad. In the past, however, hunting revenues have represented a supplement to primary agricultural income. Today, however, profit from agriculture is no longer feasible. Hence, the landowner must garner more and more income from wildlife or sell out.

This is partly the reason behind the recent rush to develop deer hunting on private lands. Yet, hunting income is not the only answer. There are other ways to give landowners incentives to maintain undeveloped land.

The tax load on private landowners, in my opinion, is beyond excessive! It is easy for urban dwellers, many of whom live in apartments, to vote for tax increases. Likewise, it often is politically correct to "tax the rich." Yet, most of the landowners in the U.S. are not rich. They have come to own their land after years, perhaps generations, of hard work. Reducing at least the inheritance tax burden on these individuals could reduce the amount of land being fragmented.

At the same time, why not give landowners who choose to keep their land undeveloped lower ad valorem tax rates?

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Many states have done this by lowering tax rates for property owners who manage wildlife. Indeed, Texas has given a similar reduction for wildlife management activities. Unfortunately, however, many county appraisal districts are reluctant to give such deductions. We clearly need more, not fewer, incentives.

Other innovative incentive ideas include "ranching for wildlife" programs. Several western states have implemented such programs, wherein the landowner is given certain privileges for wildlife management. Texas Parks & Wildlife has attempted something similar through its Managed Lands Deer Permit system.

Much of the recent controversy stemming from landowners wanting more control over their herds originated from this program. TP&WD is responding to landowner need by considering even more flexible programs. I think game ranching does indeed have a place in the future of deer hunting.

My personal epiphany came from several trips to Africa, where game ranching has meant the difference between extinction and huntable populations of game. In South Africa, government plays a critical role in aiding landowners who want to ranch game animals rather than cattle or goats. A unique partnership has arisen between landowners and the government, rather than the adversarial relationship so common in the U.S.

All of this will require a change in attitude among hunters. Consider hunting and fishing as the only recreational activities considered to be "free" in America! More and more, hunters are going to have to be willing to invest dollars in wildlife management.

I once saw an interesting cartoon. It showed two hunters carrying a limit of pheasants, with a farmer watching them over their shoulders. "Boy, it sure is nice to live free off the land," says one of the hunters. The farmer is surrounded by tractors and equipment. His pockets are turned inside out.

Wildlife is no longer free. Every head of game taken from the land costs someone. It's time for the hunter to pay the bill. But, does every hunter have to be rich to hunt? We have a diverse society, with many economic levels. Hunting opportunity must represent these same levels, provided society is willing to pay.

Remember, only about nine percent of Americans hunt. We soon will have to make the decision as to whether or not hunting and fishing are to be a welfare commodity. Please understand what I am saying here. My intent is not to be demeaning in any way. What I am saying is: Should we provide inexpensive or free hunting for those who cannot afford it? This certainly is a legitimate question, and I think the answer may be "yes."

The problem is, how do we pay for it? The white-tailed deer lives pretty much in the eastern U.S., and most of the land is privately owned. So, in addition to finding the funds to support public hunting, we have to convince landowners it is to their advantage.

In Texas, we have a wildlife management area system, but we need even more land in the system. However, rather than purchase land with tax funds, which in turn has to be managed (more tax money), why not involve the private landowner? This can be accomplished in two ways.

First, the state could lease land just as

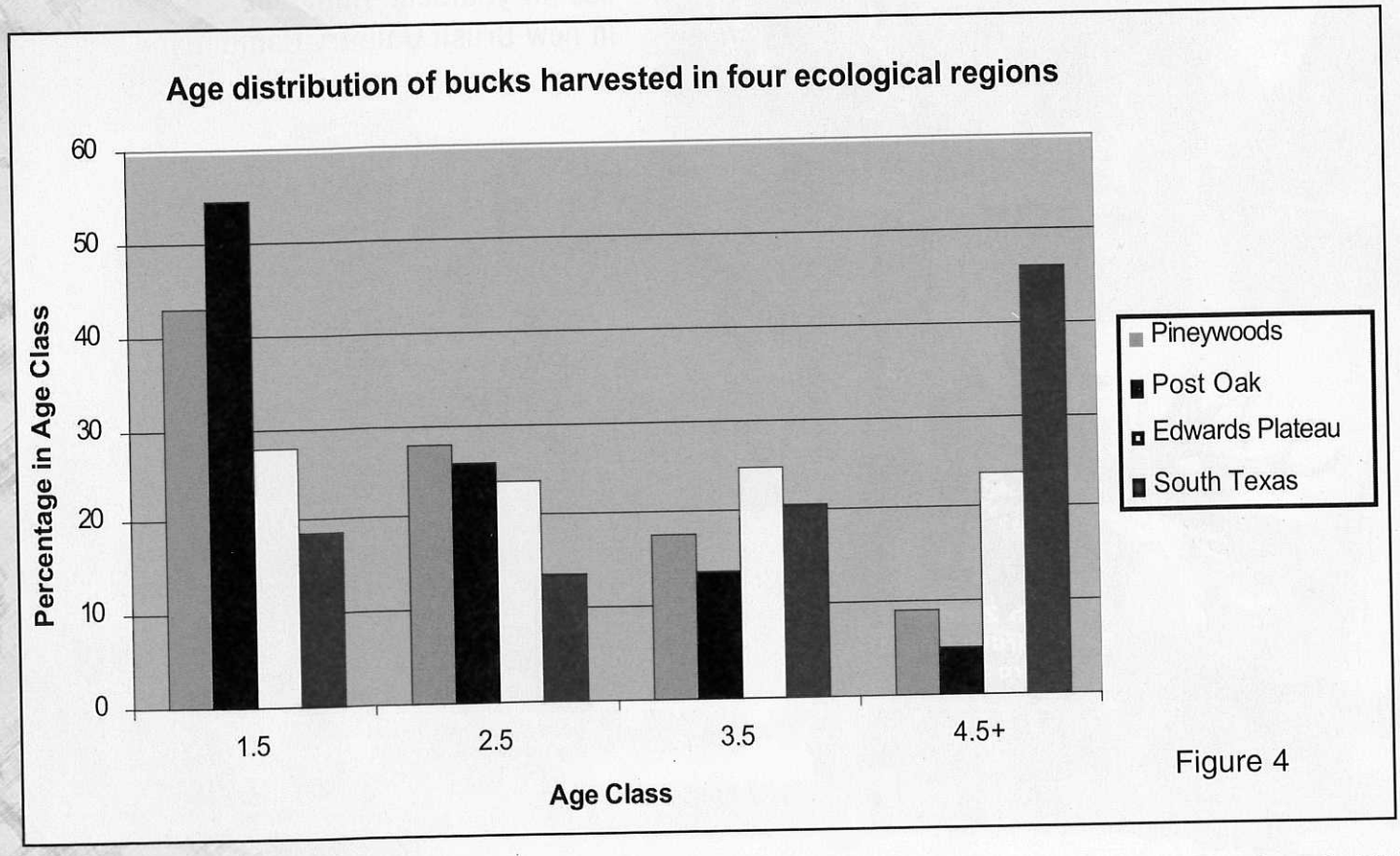


Figure 4

hunters now are doing. Long-term leases, similar to private hunting organizations, would add a great deal to our public hunting programs. Or, why not purchase package hunts from the landowners as part of a ranching for wildlife program. Landowners could be given the option of making it a donation, as well.

These hunts could then be added to a low-cost or raffle program similar to those already in operation by TP&WD. It would be a win-win for deer, deer hunters and landowners. At the same time, the landowner should be given relief from liability by legislative action.

Another important point involves the location of wildlife management areas. Most are far from urban areas. Since loss of leisure time is a primary cause for loss of hunters, does it not make sense to provide public hunting closer to metropolitan areas? Some innovative ideas recently have come forward, including the state high-fencing smaller areas and moving surplus deer to them for hunting.

Although this may smack of "put and take" hunting by the state, it does have merit, provided quality habitat and experiences are the goal. This does have precedence in the Type II program, where the state initially relocated deer to these areas.

What about increasing quality for the folks who already have a place to hunt? Recently, some states have adopted size limits on bucks to protect the younger age classes. TP&WD has also implemented an experimental program in the southern Post Oak Savanna. Early indications are the program is working.

So, why not expand the program throughout many of the over-exploited portions of our deer range? Studies show the non-hunting public will support our sport, provided they feel we are important to the management of the resource. If the public comes to the opinion we are raising animals to kill, instead of helping to maintain the ecological integrity of the deer woods, they will turn against us.

If we managed our deer more effectively for a natural age and sex structure, I contend there would be a lot less high fences and the public would look more favorably on our favorite pastime. Our studies indicate the number one reason for building a high fence is frustration over not being able to protect young bucks.

I hope by now you have come to the conclusion the issues of deer management are not simply the rich guys against the poor guys—or even privatization! We are seeing dramatic changes in rural Texas, ones that will continue to make deer management and hunting more difficult.

The land is becoming more and more fragmented and unmanageable. Hunter numbers are declining as lifestyles change. Golf is replacing hunting as the man's sport. Hunting pressure is disproportionate, yielding skewed sex ratios and ages. If we are to have quality deer and quality hunting in the 21st century and beyond, we all will have to change the way we think.

Deer management and hunting represent a broad spectrum, ranging from intensively managed, high-fenced operations to public hunting grounds offering quality experiences to those who cannot afford the high price of hunting.

The role of government in all this, I believe, is to assure deer and deer hunting remain an important part of our heritage. This can only be done by supporting private land management and public hunting. It is time for all of us to work together—rather than calling names—to assure this important goal.

