BUILDING YOUR OWN
'DEER FACTORY'

Pulling Together For A Better Herd

What separates success from failure in managing whitetails on private land? Often, it's not so much the animals but the people involved. These real-life examples show just how critical it is to have everyone on the same page.

by Ben Koerth

If everything were free, what would you wish for? A new truck? A yacht? A trillion dollars? Put it into a deer-hunting context and what would it be?

Now that you're thinking of all the great things you've always dreamed of while sitting on a deer stand, consider this: If everything really *were* free, the reality is you'd probably have nothing! Why not? Because there'd be no reason for anyone else to make whatever you want. In most cases, to get those things, you'd be resigned to creating them yourself. That's hardly my idea of free!

The same concept applies to deer management on private land. Putting yourself into position to have a better herd and more enjoyable hunting has costs. It takes commitment and effort from everyone involved to make a management program successful.

For years, those of us at the Institute for White-tailed Deer Management and Research have worked with land-owners and hunting clubs to help them find success in their operations. Some have failed to reach their goals, but on the bright side, the majority have found ways to improve their situations.

Because every case is unique, the keys to success aren't the same every time. However, as we've gone back and studied why some folks reached their management goals and others didn't, the one factor that kept surfacing was the people involved and their resolution to solving problems.

To illustrate how each situation is different, let's examine a few private-land management examples and try to figure out why each effort succeeded or failed. By looking into the specifics of different situations, perhaps we can help you learn to identify problems and develop ideas to further your own management efforts.

It's important to note that these are real-life examples. Also, in each case we were able to measure the results; we had at least five years of harvest data to determine what happened to the herd as a result of decisions made by the manager and his hunters.

THE WEAK LINK

Let's assume you're providing all of the habitat management your herd needs, based on advice we've offered in this long-running ***WHITETAIL*** series. Habitat is one area in which you can exercise a high degree of control over your herd's welfare. But the one thing that can throw a monkey wrench into a management program is hunters who keep shooting the "wrong" deer.

You can call it greed, inexperience, impatience or whatever else you want, but the fact remains that when a deer is harvested, an irreversible management decision has been made. The herd and its future have been changed forever. Thus, one of the keys to maintaining and improving a herd is helping hunters make the right harvest decisions.

How do you do that? In hunting, as in anything else, there are two ways to get people to do something. One is to make them want to. The other is to make them wish they had!

As a biologist, I believe the first option is far better. If deer are managed properly from the start, potential herd and habitat damage are avoided, and there are no hard feelings. However, making people want to do something is hard. It takes a lot of educating and, more importantly, a lot of time.

A BAD EXAMPLE

Although democracy is a great idea in government, it doesn't always work well in managing deer on private land. For instance, consider the following example of poor herd management.

Members of the large hunting club leased land from a timber company. Because timber was the primary land use, the hunters had no input into overall native-habitat management; however, they could plant food plots in nontimbered areas and did so, using both cool- and warm-season plantings. The only other variable the club controlled was deer harvest (not just how many to shoot, but which ones). The timber company did exercise some control over deer harvest, by limiting the number of hunters on the land.

As part of a research project for our institute, several years ago we spent several nights spotlighting deer on this lease. On our first trip there, two of the board members of the club joined us in the truck. Their agenda was obvious, as for the next five hours they plied us with questions about how to manage

Getting full cooperation from every person who has an impact on a piece of land is one of the key steps to improving the herd. It helps to know as much about managing people as you do about managing deer. Photo by Nick Gilmore.

their harvest. This was somewhat surprising, as we knew they'd been "managing" their land for some time.

As we learned, the club's goals were modest: They wanted a more balanced ratio of bucks to does, a healthy fawn crop and bigger bucks than they'd been producing. By the end of the night, we'd outlined a complete management plan for them, including the number of does and restrictions on the age of bucks to be harvested. The plan was designed to let more of their bucks make it to the ages at which antler growth really begins to be manifested.

These two members excitedly took the plan back to the rest of the hunters for a vote. Unfortunately, democracy backfired on the idea. The members liked the idea of continuing the food plots, as that allowed them to see deer more readily, but by a narrow margin they voted down any restraints on the number or age of deer to be taken. Also, they didn't like our idea of an increase in doe harvest. In fact, not only did they reject our plan, they even voted to drop all restrictions on harvest that had been in place *previously*!

Six years later, what was the result of this choice? Actually, about the same number of deer continued to be taken each year. At first, that doesn't sound so bad. However, the doe harvest dropped, and buck harvest increased.

The herd wasn't producing any more bucks than before, because there were still too many deer for the habitat to support in good health, resulting in a continuation of poor fawn survival rates. Thus, to harvest more bucks, the hunters had to dip into younger age-classes. After six years, over 40 percent of the bucks being taken were 1 1/2 years old. As a result, antler size in the harvest suffered drastically.

Also, while one of the club's goals was a more balanced buck:doe ratio, the ratio actually got worse, with far more does than bucks. And the fawn crop fell to under 50 percent, meaning that on average, fewer than half of the does were able to raise fawns annually.

Most of these hunters didn't want to do all of the things necessary to improve the herd. They wanted to be free to pursue their individual goals. The price of that freedom was smaller and fewer bucks than they'd had before.

A HAPPIER ENDING

The next example involves a slightly smaller hunting club whose members leased land from the same timber company. Thus, land-use restrictions were identical. This club also practiced good food-plot management, and deer nutrition also was about equal to that of the other land. But the results were hardly the same.

What made the difference? This club, by majority vote, decided on a restricted harvest plan to allow the buck segment of the herd to become a little older while continuing the food plots and aggressive doe harvest.

Initially, the buck harvest was limited to deer with 8 or more points, in contrast to the "hunter's choice" option used previously. (As my colleague, Dr. James C. Kroll, notes elsewhere in this issue, point restrictions aren't the best way to go. However, in this case, the 8-point plan was far more restrictive than the one that had been in place, so it was at least a step in the right direction.)

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The first year under the new plan, the club's buck harvest dropped. But by the third year, the bucks taken by members exceeded in both number and size those of any previous year.

On their own, club members then decided to up the ante on harvest restrictions, going to a minimum antler-spread rule similar to the experimental regulations implemented in Dooly County, Georgia, a few years ago. This was intended to protect yearling bucks, which can have a high number of points but almost never display the antler spread of older bucks.

As with the first restriction put into place, the club's buck harvest dropped the year after going to antler spread as a harvest criterion. But by the next year, the buck harvest again increased, with bigger antlers being the payoff.

Encouraged by this, the club again toughened its requirements, going to a minimum Boone and Crockett score for "legal" bucks. As before, during the first year of the tighter restriction, buck harvest declined. However, by the next year it was increasing, and members were seeing and harvesting some of the biggest bucks of their lives. Plus, with increased doe harvest they went from 3.5 to 1.5 does per buck, and the fawn crop rose to over 90 percent!

The difference was that this club managed the deer herd from the ground up. With the production of more fawns, there were more animals coming into the young age-classes. With the restriction of the harvest of young bucks, more of these animals had the chance to reach prime age. More and bigger bucks than ever before were being grown and taken, and the overall herd and habitat were in better shape.

Why did the first club fail and the second succeed, given almost identical management situations at the start? The answer is simply the people involved. The first group was divided on how to manage the herd. Some wanted to do one thing, the rest something else.

The second group, on the other hand, formed a unified front. They did what they could regarding the management factors within their control; food plots provided the needed benefits of added nutrition, and club members harvested the right numbers of the right deer, helping the herd approach its potential. Everyone had the same agenda.

STRONG LEADERSHIP

In my experience, it's normally the leaders of a group who have the most influence on the success of the whole. The more credibility a leader has, the better the chances of convincing other members to want to do the right thing.

Building and maintaining credibility in deer management takes time and experience, and often proof that you've made the right decisions. This is where keeping detailed records on harvest results and deer counts (as you've read about in previous articles) really comes into play. Being able to show the skeptics hard numbers on management success goes a long way toward getting them to stay the course.

While building credibility might take a long time, it can be lost quickly. Take the case of another group with whom I was involved. The members formed a wildlife-management committee. Along with being responsible for keeping records, the charge of the committee was to seek advice from

wildlife professionals and to come back with recommendations for the harvest.

When the group started, deer were overabundant in the area (relative to the food supply), and the sex ratio was badly out of balance. The committee recommended drastically curtailing buck harvest while increasing doe harvest substantially.

The members accepted this idea on faith for one season, and that first year they did a pretty good job of shooting the right numbers of the right deer. But then a credibility problem arose for the committee. Many of the members assumed that it would take only a single year of shooting does and passing up bucks to repair all of the damage done by years of improper harvest. When the herd showed no dramatic improvement after that first year, members quickly grew apathetic and made little effort to meet harvest goals in the future. As a result, only once in 13 years had the committee's recommended harvest goals even been approached. The kill still was far too high on bucks and far too low on does.

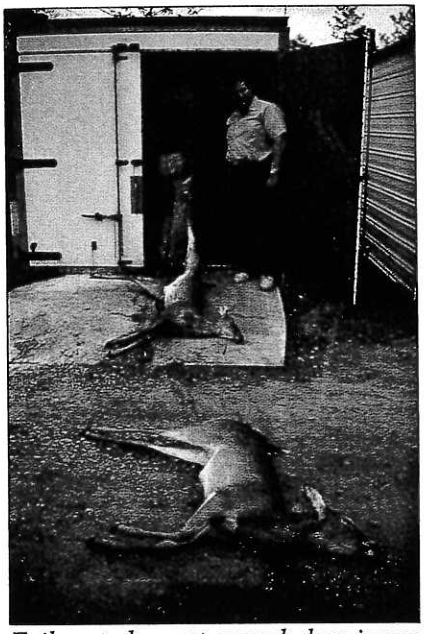
When I got involved, the first job facing us was to rebuild respect for the committee's decisions. We eased up on the doe-harvest recommendation to a level we felt reasonably certain would be met. By keeping meticulous harvest records, the following year we were able to show the rest of the group a small step toward improvement in herd health. With that modest victory, the committee began to regain the trust of the rest of the hunters.

Since then, incremental increases in doe harvest while holding buck harvest steady have continued to improve the situation. The herd *and* hunters were fine-tuned over time, with steady progress toward the ultimate goal.

GET EVERYONE INVOLVED

Even if you have full participation from everyone you think is involved in your management program, you still can run into stumbling blocks.

For example, take the case of a hunting property owned by a person intensely interested in management. His land was leased by a small group of hunters also intensely interested in having a great herd. The landowner conducted deer counts and set harvest quotas, while the lease money was put into improving habitat. Lease members volunteered their labor and followed harvest guidelines religiously.



Failure to harvest enough does is one of the most common problems in many management programs, the author says. Photo by Gordon Whittington.

Everyone seemed to be on the same page in the playbook: exactly the kind of situation you'd think would be tailor-made for successful management. Yet the herd remained static, not showing the expected improvements. If people management is the key, how could this situation *not* have succeeded?

The biggest problem was that the property was almost totally surrounded by smaller tracts. These properties didn't hold many resident deer of their own. Deer would leave or be lured from the managed tract and harvested by hunters on those surrounding tracts, putting a tremendous drain on the founding population. These outside hunters definitely were benefiting from the management program without putting anything into it themselves.

The solution to the problem could have taken one of several forms. The hunters on the managed land could have disrupted neighbors' hunts by driving boundary roads and getting into arguments with them during the season in an effort to save a few deer. Or, at even greater expense, the managed property could have been high-fenced, effectively slamming the door on most of the neighbors' hunting recreation.

Fortunately, the landowner with whom we were working believed in the good-neighbor policy. He tried to bring everyone under the deer-management umbrella by making them *want* to do the right thing. With the help of the Agriculture Extension Service and other leading area landowners, a deer-management co-op was formed, and all of the neighbors were invited to join. The idea was to make everyone feel part of a group with the same goals.

I'm not going to claim that this co-op idea was universally accepted at first. There's always a degree of mistrust about something new. Also, even rural landowners seldom know each other very well. They often have jobs and activities away from their land or are absentee owners, so they lack the time to socialize much with neighbors.

The first step in organizing the co-op thus was to host a couple of meetings to provide some educational programs on deer management and let folks get to know each other. Once they realized the potential benefits, most of the neighbors readily joined. The few holdouts then came under peer pressure from the whole to join the program.

Everyone benefitted from this idea, because now the entire herd was under one management program. With co-op management, it was no longer "my" deer and "your" deer. It became "our" deer. Even landowners with limited acreage found new ways to make their land better for whitetails, and everyone learned just how important harvest management is to overall herd health.

If you give people enough of the right information, they'll make the right decision most of the time. That's just what happened in this case. Not only did the herd improve, but neighbors became more neighborly, keeping a sharper eye out for poachers and other trespassers on adjoining lands.

CONCLUSION

It's incumbent upon whitetail hunters, managers and biologists to become adept at managing people. An informed hunter who feels part of the decision-making process is far more likely to make the right management choices, and that will benefit both humans *and* deer in the long run.