The Pros and Cons of Antler Restrictions

By Dr. James C. Kroll

A few years ago, I published an article in the TTHA Journal entitled, "Is Texas Falling Behind in Deer Management?" (Part I – September/October 1998 and Part II – November/December 1998) That article created quite a stir among folks, especially professional biologists. You would have thought I had called them communists or terrorists judging from their reaction, but the truth often hurts, even when it is offered in good faith.

Texas is and has been the leader in private lands wildlife management, particularly when it comes to deer, yet complacency tends to creep in when you take things for granted.

The tremendous success we have had in producing large numbers of quality bucks on large acreages has led some to believe this is the norm, rather than the exception across the Lone Star state. Fact is, the average parcel size (even in South Texas) continues to decline at an alarming rate.

At the same time, our deer herd continues to increase in many areas at a rate not commensurate with the harvest (see "Deer Management in the 21st Century," Parts 1-3).

In eastern Texas, my research partner Ben Koerth and I have maintained records on dozens of hunting clubs for almost two decades. Sadly, the average measurements and other metrics for deer harvested in the Pineywoods have not changed more than a tenth of a point during this time. The average buck harvested in the region sports an "impressive" 10.7-inch inside spread, seven points and is 2.4 years of age! This is anything but quality in my book.

To make things worse, the average harvest density for bucks is over 400 acres per buck killed. In other regions, such as the Post Oak Savanna and Hill Country, things are not much better. Fragmentation of the land has produced a landscape that is virtually unmanageable when it comes to quality deer.

So, I welcome this opportunity to comment on the controversy surrounding size limits on bucks.

Texas was slow in coming to the idea of quality deer management on small, private landholdings. This is an area where our state did indeed fall behind. A lot of the problem stems from the way professional biologists (me included), active private deer managers and even Texas Parks and Wildlife view the deer resource. You have only to take out your license to see what I mean. The back of each tag reads: "Ranch, Wildlife Area, etc."

So, in someone's mind, the two most important management units are ranches and wildlife management areas; yet, most of the property in this state is not a ranch or wildlife management area. This may seem a bit "picky," but it does illustrate a problematic way of thinking.

Most of the deer reside on small landholdings, not big ranches. And, managing deer on large tracts or ranches is easy! I know because I have done it. I have produced more Boone and Crockett bucks than anyone. The "rubber meets the road," however, on small properties, which are not easily managed.

When confronted by this fact, many proponents of deer management in Texas point to cooperatives as the answer to small property management. Again, some are living in a dream world. This "let them eat cake" mentality only works in a limited geographic region where landowners are residents on their land and know their neighbors.

In the Pineywoods and Post Oak Savanna, most landowners either are absentee or corporate. I own about 200 acres in Nacogdoches County and I know one of my neighbors! To my south is an estate operated out of Philadelphia, to my west is a property owned by almost 100 heirs, to my north are three small parcels (only one with a resident landowner) and to my east is a property owned by a lady in a retirement home.

Outside this circle of small landowners the pattern repeats again and again. So, don't tell me we need to form a cooperative! In the eastern half of our state, there is a need for a new way of thinking about deer management. Enter size limits on bucks.

The idea of size limits on bucks started with some of us more than two decades ago. The first folks to pick up on the idea were in Georgia where local individuals (not the state) came up with the idea of trying out this revolutionary idea.

In 1993, Dooly County, Georgia, became the first in the nation to have a countywide antler restriction regulation for hunting white-tailed deer, limiting legal harvest to bucks with 15 or more inches of outside spread. The critics of this experimental program predicted gloom and doom. "Folks will leave bucks in the woods," was the most common criticism. Yet, subsequent research failed to document this prediction.

Why did the Dooly County experiment work? There are many reasons, including a good genetic stock, large acreages of agriculture and the willingness of everyone concerned to work cooperatively. It was a grass roots effort, not dreamed up by the state or pushed on the public. Law enforcement adopted a cooperative attitude based on common sense and not strict rules. The result was what most considered a success.

Other counties have followed suit as the popularity and public acceptance of the program amazed the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. What followed was a stir among the professional wildlife community. I personally heard state biologists from many areas proclaim the idea of quality deer management and size restrictions on bucks to be the death of deer hunting. "The average hunter is not a trophy hunter," exclaimed one biologist at

the Southeast Deer Study Group Meeting, "All they want is to bag a deer."

This fellow was so far behind in knowing what the consumer wanted, he joined a growing number of professionals running down the track chasing a speeding train of hunters and landowners yelling, "Wait for us, we are your leaders!"

I grow weary of the litany of biologists who point to public opinion polls, which conclude hunters do not support trophy management. It is hypocritical for hunters to claim they are out there to feed their families. Come on! How much venison sits at home as I write this with freezer burn?

No one, save a handful of Native Americans, depends on game for sustenance nowadays. We are out there for recreation (pronounced "ree-creation"), and bagging a fine buck is an important part of it. To prove my point, why is the Texas Deer Association growing in leaps and bounds? Why are magazines devoted to quality bucks so popular? Why are those maligning trophy hunting dying on the vine?

But, there is an even more important question. Why should quality bucks and quality hunting be limited to those who own "ranches?" What can be done to provide these experiences to those who do not have the money to own 10,000 acres or who are not lucky enough to be drawn for the pitifully small number of wildlife management areas?

An interesting sidebar: Why does the state have high-fenced properties? And, why is the state so infatuated with genetics (spikes) if all the average hunter supposedly wants is venison in the pot?

You can see why this may be a time to consider new ways to improve the quality of our bucks for everyone.

In the remainder of my allotted space, I will discuss why limiting buck harvest is a good thing, why size limits can work and the pitfalls of using size limits.

First of all, I firmly believe limiting the harvest of young bucks is a good thing, and I believe so for two reasons:

First, and most importantly, the American public will continue supporting deer hunting as long as they feel hunters are an important component to wildlife management.

For years, I have promoted the idea c changing those in the hunting communit from consumers to hunter-managers There is a big difference.

As consumers, for too many year hunters have "mined" the resource. Th justification under such thinking revolve around "I want my fair share." The earl outdoor articles I read as a youth centere not on outsmarting the animal, bu outsmarting the other hunters.

My first exposure to public huntin came in West Virginia. I looked forward t opening day with the anticipation of Texas boy who finally would get to hun the woods in snow. I spent a montl patterning bucks in a "holler" near m home. On opening morning, I drove ou to the site, donned my warm huntin camouflage and slipped into the place knew was the perfect ambush spot. Th air was crisp and full of promise for m first eastern hunt.

Just as there was enough light to see th woods around me, I heard a frightenin sound. It was the sound of dozens of rifle being loaded! Within a few moments, th air was filled with bullets as these nimrod shot at everything that moved. I slippe out, grateful to still be alive.

At a check station, hunters bega arriving with their bounty. To m amazement, dropping the tailgate eac time revealed a spike or fork-horne yearling. The big hero that day was fellow who had bagged an eight-point 2 year-old. That was the last time I hunte in West Virginia.

So, what's wrong with that? I do no have enough space to tell you all th reasons. So, I will limit my response These same folks, even today, violentl oppose leasing. They think it is their God given right to pursue game on anyone land. I have known folks to be run of their own property because it had bee the ancestral hunting territory of som hillbilly hunter.

On the surface, you may sympathiz with the hunter, but consider this: The never had put anything back into the dee herd. They paid no taxes, nurtured n forests and planted no food plots. The

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just showed up on opening day and "mined" the resource they considered to be free. Someone else paid the bills: the landowner.

The result was a deer herd, which even today in West Virginia, is grossly over-populated and skewed in age structure. These folks would have strung me up from the nearest tree had I been stupid enough to propose harvesting does!

Again, it could be argued that a skewed age structure is not all that bad. After all, the does get bred each season. Again, however, the critics are myopic. God meant for deer to have close to a balanced age and sex structure.

Recent DNA studies confirmed what I said two decades ago about who actually does the breeding in natural herds—the older guys, who have fought their way up through the years to join the breeding pool.

We always seem to criticize what is perceived to be an over-emphasis on trophy antlers because it might have a negative genetic effect. Yet, we never seem to realize young bucks doing most of the breeding may have an even greater negative genetic effect.

The reason many states have resisted trying size limits is purely economic. Although many DNR biologists criticize putting a dollar value on a buck, they receive much of their funding from licenses, fines and fees.

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I truly believe some biologists each morning bow down to a huge bronze statue depicting the "hunter opportunity god." Every decision is based supposedly on hunter opportunity; yet, the real truth is that it's about funding. There is a fear that any new action will reduce the number of hunters, thereby reducing income. "It's the economy, stupid!"

It is time we all face the idea that continuing down this road of worrying about hunter opportunity will lead to ruin, not quality deer management.

The modern hunter must be a manager, as well. Every decision he/she makes affects the herd. I live by one rule: When I leave a property, I want the herd to be better than when I arrived. That means putting my own personal ego aside. It means passing up that young buck and taking a doe. It means having a reason for harvesting a buck, rather than "I want it!"

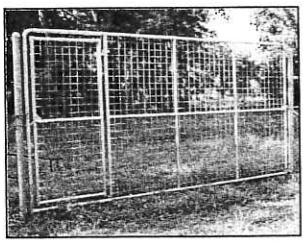
So, a well-managed herd must have an age and sex structure as close to natural as possible. But, how do we do that when the land is so fragmented? Human nature is such that education alone will not suffice to achieve this goal. That's where a place for size limits arises.

How do we limit the harvest of young bucks without taking away the joy of the hunt and reducing "hunter opportunity?" Several schemes have been tried since the Dooly County experiment, some with success and others not so successful. The idea is to implement a system that assures only a small number of yearling bucks and fewer 2-year-olds show up in the harvest.

Ben Koerth and I have pondered this question for many years. As with other biologists, we have let the deer tell us the answer. Basically, there are two measurements that have a reasonable relationship to age: points and spread. Of the two, outside spread indeed more accurately reflects a buck's age, but this is often geographically unique.

East Texas bucks, for example, seem to have more narrow spreads than the ones in South Texas. Points, perhaps, is the poorest indicator of age. A yearling buck

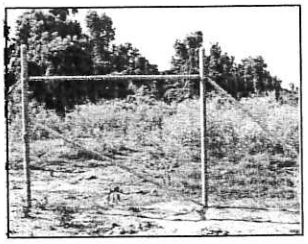
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can have eight or more points, and a 2-year-old certainly averages eight points. Here in East Texas some of the timber company biologists have imposed a combination of the two.

We often hear about what are called 14-8 rules, meaning a buck must have a 14-inch outside spread and eight points to be "legal." These rules seem to work OK, but do place a burden on the hunter.

The rules for the experimental program for Austin, Colorado, Fayette, Lavaca, Lee and Washington Counties in Texas take this concept to a new level of extreme. You might come to the conclusion that you would need a lawyer and a spotter in your stand to make a decision on a buck!

In order for a buck to be legal, it must be:

- A deer having a hardened antler protruding through the skin and at least one unbranched antler (or)
- A deer having one antler with six or more points (or)
- A deer having an inside spread measurement between the main beams of 13 inches or greater.

Although I have publicly supported the experiment, I really do not like the above scheme. A simple outside spread rule, based on local deer metrics, would be a lot more hunter friendly and make more biological sense. Some of the requirements are simply politically correct, i.e. the inclusion of spikes. It seems we inject that old, tired issue into every move the Department makes, in spite of these facts.

First, no one will dispute a spike-antlered yearling will seldom grow into a spike-antlered, mature deer. Most become pretty reasonable bucks at 3 or 4 years of age. Second, the whole spike controversy is based on a flawed study, which has not stood up to scientific scrutiny. (That's another issue and I will leave it at that for now.)

If we don't care about trophies, why are we imposing a system that seems to concern itself more with genetics than age structure? Simply impose an outside spread, depending on geography, ranging 14-15 inches.

In East Texas, our data suggest a 14-inch spread limit will protect about 95 percent or yearlings and almost 70 percent of 2-year-olds. Although none have expressed displeasure, I suspect law enforcement really is troubled by the Texas criteria. The secret to Dooly County's success was an early involvement with law enforcement so that rules could be easily enforced.

You might be saying, "But Dr. Kroll, you supported a points restriction in Arkansas. Aren't you being a hypocrite yourself?" Maybe, but let me explain.

Just as with my support for the Texas Parks and Wildlife initiative in Austin, Colorado, Fayette, Lavaca, Lee and Washington Counties, it was based on the concept "half a loaf is better than no loaf." Since Arkansas imposed a three point to one side restriction, they have enjoyed high public support, yet a point restriction is not the way to go.

Hugh Durham, ex-agency head in Arkansas, correctly pointed out, "...everyone involved needs to understand that antler restrictions, including the so-called three-point rule, are not the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. What they are is one step in the right direction. They are designed to quickly push a lot of bucks into an older age bracket and, in conjunction with other methods, including doe harvest, they can produce dramatic results in a fairly short period of time. They are not, in themselves, a long-term management plan."

What are the pitfalls of antler restriction schemes? Hugh hit the heart of the issue when he said, "...in conjunction with other methods, including doe harvest..."

When I worked with the folks in Arkansas to get public support for the antler restriction, the first thing I told the agency, and anyone else who would listen, was size restrictions would produce zero results unless they are coupled with population control. This is especially true in areas where there are nutrition problems, such as with the Texas experimental counties. When you factor in emigration (those leaving the area), natural mortality can defeat your goal of

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having more mature bucks.

The key to all this is RECRUITMENT, or the number of new bucks that enter the population each year. Having a high fawn crop in the fall may or may not mean a whole lot. Too often, I hear biologists base decisions on the so-called fawn crop—the number of fawns around in late summer/early fall as a percentage of females.

A 70 percent fawn crop means there are 70 fawns for every 100 does. Yet, our research repeatedly shows this is meaningless unless it is compared to the proportions that are still around on the first of June! That's true recruitment.

You would be hard pressed to convince me the Columbus, Texas, area recruits more than 15-20 percent under present management. Unless adequate doe harvest and nutrition are considered, we will see little long-term improvement in age structure or antler quality.

The one-year results currently being reported don't mean a great deal and may even be deceptive. Someone has to "bite the bullet" on increasing doe harvest in an area where this important management tactic remains unpopular.

So, what do I support and what should we be doing? In a perfect world, the true answer is education. With time, I do believe education and peer group pressure will eventually change the way we manage deer. In the meantime, however, we cannot rely on small landowners to do the right thing. That means some regulation has to be imposed (hopefully through a grass roots effort), which attempts to protect yearling bucks—and as many of them as possible.

This has to be coupled with increased doe harvest and encouraging landowners to both manage their habitat and provide supplementation. The latter is something unpopular with biologists, in spite of being critical. We need more demonstration areas on private lands to show folks how food source management is the key to success. We also need to be recruiting at least 40 percent in order to see results from antler restrictions.

In regard to antler restriction schemes, I continue to support Texas Parks and Wildlife, in spite of the fact I firmly disagree with their criteria for buck harvest. I do so because it is better than nothing.

Basically, I view antler restrictions as the first step in a long evolution of deer management. It begins with the recognition that deer hunters are the primary managers of the resource, and ends with an educated hunter who does not even think about taking a yearling buck. That is best accomplished in the long haul through peer group pressure.

Look what we have done with catch-and-release fishing? It has gone so far as a person who keeps a fish is viewed as a "low life" that is depleting the resource. That's going a bit too far in my book, but it does show how easily a few notable sportsmen, outdoor writers and publications, such as *The Journal of the Texas Trophy Hunters*, can manipulate public opinion.

I once worked with a hunting club here in East Texas where an old hunter was highly respected because he had harvested two bucks every opening weekend for 50 years. Of the 20 years I was around, they were all yearlings. Hopefully, the day will come when guys like him are not heroes.