Dr. Deer's™ PRESCRIPTION

Trophy Hunters Are Evil!

By Dr. James C. Kroll

Editor's note: We believe this previous column from Dr. Deer bears repeating because it still rings true today. Enjoy!

That's right, if you hunt trophy whitetails, you are indeed evil! I hear that more and more nowadays from folks who ought to know better. Recently, a member of the state's Whitetail Advisory Committee held up a copy of *The Journal of the Texas Trophy Hunters* and assigned all our woes to this magazine. At another gathering, a speaker presented the same old, tired, 20-year-old data showing Americans will support deer hunting only if it is for meat or management, but not for trophies.

Frankly, I am tired of hearing this claptrap, especially when it comes from the very folks benefiting most from the "whitetail boom" spreading across the nation. All this brought me recently to ponder the issues at hand. I have been blessed to be a part of this great industry, almost from the very beginning and in my own way to help guide it.

Back in the early '70s, there was little interest in deer management. The first deer management talk I ever gave had only seven people in attendance and they viewed me as a strange bird, indeed. After publication of Al Brothers and Murphy Ray's book "Producing Quality Whitetails," we began to see the first efforts at improving the quality of bucks.

By 1980, *The Journal* and North American Whitetail (NAWT) magazines brought their readers news about monster bucks that were being taken around North America. Up to that time, the average guy was happy taking the same yearling or 2-year-old buck season after season. I remember one fellow in a hunting club here in eastern Texas whose claim to fame was he had limited out on bucks opening weekend for 50 years. It did not seem to matter to him that they were all yearlings, however!

The '70s represented the end to what I call the "Restoration Phase" in the history of white-tailed deer management. It was pretty easy to be a "hero" in those days because biologists were out there restocking areas where deer had been killed out. Private landowners had a lot to do with restoring whitetails to their original range and beyond. I have a treasured copy of Texas' stocking records, and most of these deer came from private ranches.

Working with both the Texas Trophy Hunters and NAWT, I helped formulate plans to bring landowners and hunters to a new way of looking at whitetails. First of all, you did not have to run off to some far away place to take a good buck; they could be grown right there at home. Second, it was time for traditional whitetail management, which had enjoyed such popularity, to evolve to quality deer management.

There are those who prefer to use the term "quality" over "trophy," but they still cannot tell me the difference. It just makes them feel better about themselves, I guess. Yet, you seldom see a small-antlered buck on the covers of their publications.

I was a "founding father" of the Southeast Deer Study Group, which is an annual meeting of deer biologists across the southeast. Year after year, we would attend the meetings to hear someone rail against trophy hunting, with a huge array of the state's biggest bucks proudly displayed at the back of the room. In my book, something is bad if the net result is not good for white-tailed deer. If it is good for them, then I support it, even if I do not like it. That's my bottom line.

So, let's examine the criticisms and issues involved in managing for trophy bucks and answer the question: Is it good for the deer?

Here are the criticisms concerning trophy management:

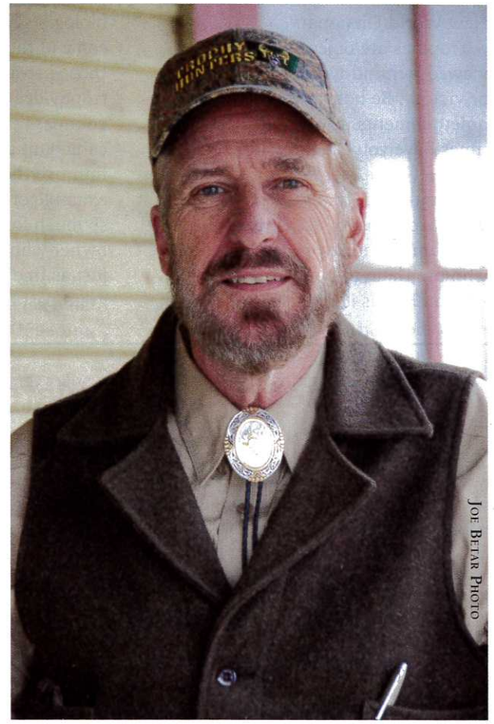
- It puts too much emphasis on what a buck has on his head, rather than the hunt.
- Intensive management for trophies damages habitat; it is ecologically unsound.
- It produces "unnatural" deer herds.
- It has a negative genetic impact on the species, since there is no selective advantage to a buck having large antlers.

Well, let's take these one at a time.

First of all, the 20-year-old argument that the people will support hunting only if it's for meat or management is unsound. Of course, I would expect these results from surveys. If you are a non-hunter, all you have ever seen on TV and the movies is some greedy fellow trying to kill the last member of a species so he can hang the trophy on his wall.

Today, all hunters read or hear about is how trophy hunters are driving up the cost of hunting. Yet, as I noted in an earlier column, there are thousands of pounds of venison slowly freezer-burning as you read this article. Yes, my family has eaten mostly venison for at least 30 years, but the average hunter and his family do not rely on game as their primary source of sustenance. Venison is a wonderful side benefit to hunting, but that's not why we hunt.

I would like to think hunters are such altruists they hunt because controlling deer populations is good for nature, but they do not. They hunt because it's a recreational pastime, which reconnects us to our hunting/gathering past. There is also no evidence to support trophy emphasis has priced folks out of hunting.



The good doctor says that these are the good old days of whitetail trophy hunting. The reason? Magazines like ours prove there's a big demand.

Recent studies show only 17 percent of folks quitting hunting give the price of the sport as a reason.

Our ancestors appreciated not only the fine meat, but also the trophy. In fact, the definition of trophy comes from the Latin word, *tropaeum*, or the Greek word, *tropaion*. Both words relate to the primary definition, "...something gained or given in victory or conquest especially when preserved or mounted as a memorial," according to Webster's

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New World Dictionary.

Trophies are objects which, when viewed, remind us of some past event or victory. Be honest with me, in those quiet moments in your den, how many times have you caught yourself staring at one of your deer heads and re-lived the hunt? And, that's the purpose of a trophy for most of us. Of course, as with any human endeavor, there are those who use them to build up their self-esteem. But, is it not the same for any human endeavor?

Our ancestors appreciated not only the fine meat, but also the trophy. In fact, the definition of trophy comes from the Latin word, tropaeum, or the Greek word, tropaion. Both words relate to the primary definition, "...something gained or given in victory or conquest especially when preserved or mounted as a memorial."

The American Indian also seemed to appreciate a fine set of deer antlers. Examination of middens (in effect, garbage dumps) of North American natives shows they seemed to have selected both for males and older males. Antlers figured significantly in their costumes, as well.

However, I will be the first to concede we have over-emphasized what a buck scores. I personally equate a trophy buck with his age, irrespective of what he has on his head. Yet, this is all part of the evolution of the American deer hunter.

After writing about how to age deer, live on the hoof, in both magazines, it's gratifying to hear more and more hunters talking about the age of a buck they saw. Hunters know far better than biologists what it takes to produce bucks with larger antlers and is to properly thin the herd. So, a new hunting ethic is appearing, one which focuses hunters on being managers rather than mere takers or consumers.

The next argument involves the strange idea that managing for quality bucks somehow will degrade the habitat. Some of our most respected biologists have said in writing that some of the best-managed habitats are those private properties managed for trophy deer. Landowners are spending countless thousands of dollars, and who can count the man-hours annually to improve their land for deer? Give me an example of another land use that does so much for habitat? The same landowner who manages for trophy deer is just as free to manage for pure Bermuda grass pastures and fence-to-fence, white-faced cattle!

He can even divide his property into little "*ranchitos*," and sell these on 30-year time payments. Fragmentation is the greatest enemy nature faces today. Properties are getting smaller and smaller, until one day they will become unmanageable. If focusing on trophy deer saves wild land, then so be it!

I have yet to see a property managed intensively for deer where the habitat has been destroyed. What I have seen, though, is seriously degraded habitats resulting from traditional deer management.

I once drove over 600 miles around Michigan where the deer herds have been managed traditionally for almost a 100 years. What I drove through was 600-plus miles of eight-foot-high browse line! There are plants, such as Canadian yew, that can only be found on islands where there are no deer. It was traditional, not trophy management that produced this devastation.

The third argument is trophy management produces "unnatural" deer herds. Now, that is a silly statement. You mean to tell me the deer herds spread across this nation, the ones with 1:4 buck/doe ratios, low fawn recruitment and poor age structure, are natural? You also want to tell me a yearling buck being able to breed at will is also natural?

Here in East Texas, we have been monitoring deer harvests on hunting clubs for three decades. Today, the average buck killed in the Pineywoods is less than 2½ years of age, has less than a 10-inch spread, and only seven points! We're harvesting a buck to about 400 acres. Is that natural?

Now, let's turn to the fourth point. Biologists often assert trophy hunting will degrade the genetics of the herd. Trophy or quality management became so popular in response to a general rarity of quality bucks. It was traditional management that created this demand. Further, where is the scientific evidence intensive management leads to genetic degradation?

We once conducted a study in which we compared the genetic diversity of deer inside and outside high fences. Although some of these herds had been confined and "culled" for as much as 20 years, there was no statistical difference in genetic diversity between these populations and those immediately outside the fence. (This may also say something about the relative ineffectiveness of most culling programs.)

In 2005, NAWT editor Gordon Whittington and I traveled to New Zealand to commemorate the 100th anniversary of stocking whitetails in two regions of that country. As part of this work, we examined the top trophies taken since the release of only two bucks and seven does in each of two areas, Stewart Island and the Alpine region of the South Island. Believe it or not, these bucks exhibited all the phenotypic (outwardly visible) diversity we see here in Texas! The whitetail is just that genetically diverse.

There is another consideration. Although the white-tailed deer is probably the most studied animal in North America, most of the real knowledge about them has come from research conducted since hunters really became enamored with them (viz., the last 30 years). Yet, we really still do not know all that much about them.

For example, it seems to evade many researchers that a doe also pays attention to what a buck has on his head. (This is not surprising, since many researchers are university professors who often do research by "remote control" through graduate students. By not being out there, they miss a great deal.)

We have been watching seriously the interactions between bucks and does for some time. Try it yourself the next time you see a buck approach a doe. Often, he will stand erect and posture, similar to the behavior of an axis buck or blackbuck.

Filming a television episode for Texas Trophy Hunters one winter, we videotaped just such an encounter. The buck would stamp his foot at the doe, which was feeding contentedly nearby. Each time, she would look up and he would respond with a head-up display posture. He was trying to impress her with, guess what, his antlers!

If you spend time watching bucks interact, you will see a similar behavior. Size really does matter if you're a buck. Of course, so does his willingness to fight and his combat experience, but antler size does not go unnoticed.

I have often noted the average whitetail buck "wants" to have eight points and score 130 inches. And, I still believe that (especially after our landmark antler development study) to be true. But, who can prove over 100 years of over-harvesting bucks hasn't led to smaller antlers? Who's to say deer already have been genetically altered, and what we see is a degraded animal?

Finally, what physiological factors lead to large antlers? Well, a buck must possess the ability to efficiently acquire and use protein, calcium and phosphorus to grow a large set of antlers. What other deer in the herd needs this same ability?

During gestation and nursing, a doe must be able to do the same thing. I am one of those who believes the buck's ability to use nutrients is passed on to his daughters, enabling them to produce larger, healthier offspring. That is what makes the doe so important to genetics.

When it is all said and done, scientists one day will discover a genetic link between the ability of a doe to produce milk and that of her son to produce large antlers. There are those scientists who have reported the remarkable similarity between the mass of the fawn's skeleton and a buck's antlers. I do not know how true it is, but it merits research.

My point is, interest in trophy whitetail hunting has led to predominately "good" things for the species, while traditional management has not. Just appreciating a fine set of trophy antlers raises the whitetail to a respected position.

Trophies are objects which, when viewed, remind us of some past event or victory. Be honest with me, in those quiet moments in your den, how many times have you caught yourself staring at one of your deer heads and re-lived the hunt? And, that's the purpose of a trophy for most of us.

The tenets to trophy management are these:

- Maintain control of herd size to recruit the most fawns into the population.
- Keep sex ratios in a natural (1:2 or 1:1) state.
- Manage habitats to maximize nutrition.
- Develop a balanced age structure, especially among bucks.
- Shoot mostly bucks with smaller antlers, taking trophy bucks only after their breeding contribution diminishes.

Let's compare these with traditional deer management. The basic tenets have been:

- Place harvest emphasis on the buck segment.
- Measure success by the "body count" (the hunter opportunity model).
- Care more about the political ramifications than the ecological.
- Keep the herd at or near "carrying capacity."
- As a result, lower recruitment in the herd.

Now, with which one of these groups do you want to be associated? I prefer to be linked to the "evil" trophy (quality) management group.

I have been pretty hard on some folks in this column, and for that I am somewhat sorry. Understand, it's not that one group cares more about deer than another, rather old ways die hard.

Deer biologists and hunters are, by their nature, conservative folks. There is the ever-present fear of new ideas and new ways of doing things. I do not think anyone can claim deer are being managed well over much of the landscape. There are too many dead deer in the grills of Chevrolets to support that argument.

There is a perfectly good reason why magazines such as *The Journal* and North American Whitetail have been so successful. There is a demand! Take away demand and all the great hunting we now are enjoying also goes away. These are the good ol' days.