DR. DEER'S PRESCRIPTION

WHAT ABOUT "THE LITTLE GUY?"

By Dr. James C. Kroll, Ph.D.

Some of the most common statements you hear from people at deer meetings concern what is commonly known as "the little guy," and they're referencing hunters with less means that are being priced out of hunting. Sometimes the small landowner also is included in this group. Although I have been critical of this attitude, there is some merit to this concern.

We are in the midst of a boom in deer management. Interest in producing quality, if not trophy, whitetails is at an all-time high. The Quality Deer Management Association is, in fact, devoted solely to supporting the production and hunting of older bucks.

At the same time we're seeing a hot real estate market spearheaded by the baby boomers, (a group to which I belong), and we are seeing the greatest exchange of wealth in the history of the U.S. as our parents are passing away in record numbers. Further, although boomers have often shunned material values, we've now turned into hyper-versions of our parents. Facing our own mortality and having spent a fast-paced life of overachievement, we are moving back to the land.

Figuring in this mix, at least for hunters, is a lifetime of frustration with one failed hunting lease after another and, in many areas of the country, aggravation with public hunting. Undeveloped land is now at a premium as a result of such dissatisfaction. It's been pointed out that 95 percent of the unimproved land being sold in the U.S. now goes for recreational use. Give a piece of property a pretty view, and the price skyrockets! For example, land around Marfa, Texas, sold for less than $100 per acre only a few years ago—now it sells for $700 to as much as $2,850 per acre. Pretty expensive for land that often will support only a single animal unit to the section.

The recreational land boom has, admittedly, saved a great deal of land from fragmentation. But are there downsides to this high-stakes business? I think so. I've been involved in intensive deer management for more than 35 years, developing several high-profile operations around the country. Lately, though, I've become increasingly disillusioned by some of them. What I am discovering is that owners consider their property a luxury commodity, not a legitimate commercial operation. So the first time the economy takes a dive, what do you think will be the first thing sacrificed? The business that generated all that wealth, or the rural playground purchased from all that income?

Unfortunately, I know the answer. I'm seeing an increasing trend of rich landowners dumping land out of their fears of an economic downturn. In many cases, the large property initially purchased is split into two or more



DR. JAMES C. KROLL PHOTO

WHAT ABOUT THE "LITTLE GUY?"

pieces to allow other rich guys to afford the higher price. This kind of defeats the fragmentation argument, eh?

But, what if the economy stays strong? Does this not continue to protect the large land holdings? There are indeed large ranches, farms, and forests that serve a valuable function in combating fragmentation. The pride and joy of Texas, the King Ranch, is without a doubt one of our most precious assets. The King Ranch has stood between the losses of valuable habitats for many years, and it has every indication of retaining this function. Although maybe not a popular opinion, I feel the state should give special consideration to historic properties to help them maintain such integrity. Still, such places have special reasons for hanging on to their land heritage, so I don't worry about the old family lands all that much.

The sad truth is we are facing a future of smaller and smaller properties.

The little man cannot afford to purchase enough land to really manage deer.

But what about the new recreation-based properties and owners? I view these properties as short-term stopgaps to fragmentation. Ultimately, ranches containing 5,000 or more acres will be subdivided as their per-acre worth escalates.

I've worked with Mustang Creek Ranch near Salado for many years. When I first began the deer management program, the 2,500 acre property was surrounded by equally-sized ranches. Today, Mustang Creek is a virtual island surrounded by *ranchitos*. Only the profitable hunting and deer breeding operations there keep the Grace family from following suit (that and the fact the ranch has a high fence). My greatest fear is someday they will have to face high land taxes and the ever-threatening death tax.

The sad truth is we are facing a future of smaller and smaller properties. The "little man" cannot afford to purchase enough land to really manage deer. Our landmark antler development research in South Texas clearly proved that even a 9,000-acre ranch does not control all its deer. So faced with having to purchase less land, what is the fellow wanting to grow big deer to do?

There currently are two options. If the goal is to produce quality bucks—those 3.5-plus years of age—recent changes in harvest regulations for bucks should help. For years I fought to place size limits on bucks in the areas of Texas where landholdings were small. Yet such regulations only protect the young bucks, so often the best you can expect is to produce a slightly older buck. If, on the other hand, the goal is to manage for trophies, then the option is to fence your property. This brings up all sorts of issues, usually raised either by the rich, large landowners on one end of the spectrum or the non-landowning hunting public at the other. Fact is, if a small landowner is truly interested in growing large-antlered bucks, he will have to bear the cost of a high fence.

It is my prediction that private land deer management in the future will be heavily weighted towards fenced properties. Indeed, we already are seeing this trend, even outside Texas. I don't like this trend, but I'm realistic enough to admit we're going to have to swallow our elitist pride and accept new ideas and ways of saving land—requiring people to own 2,000 acres to produce big bucks is not one of these ways!

There may also be another option. I have often pointed out that state agencies should come into the 21st Century and recognize hunters want to kill better bucks. Why not have state-owned areas where management is for trophy bucks? We already have some of these in Texas, such as the Kerr and Chaparral Wildlife Management areas. This is not to say *all* deer management should be for trophies, but it does say killing a trophy buck, or even growing big bucks, shouldn't be the exclusive enclave of the rich. There is a "little man" to be considered, but it includes both the hunter and the landowner.

visit us at
WWW.WHITETAILBUCK.COM



UPLAND GAME BIRD
Half & Full Day Quail & Combo Packages
European Style Driven Hunts for Pheasants & Chuckar
Includes Lunch, Handler, Dogs and Trap Shooting
Corporate Packages Available - Includes Food & Lodging

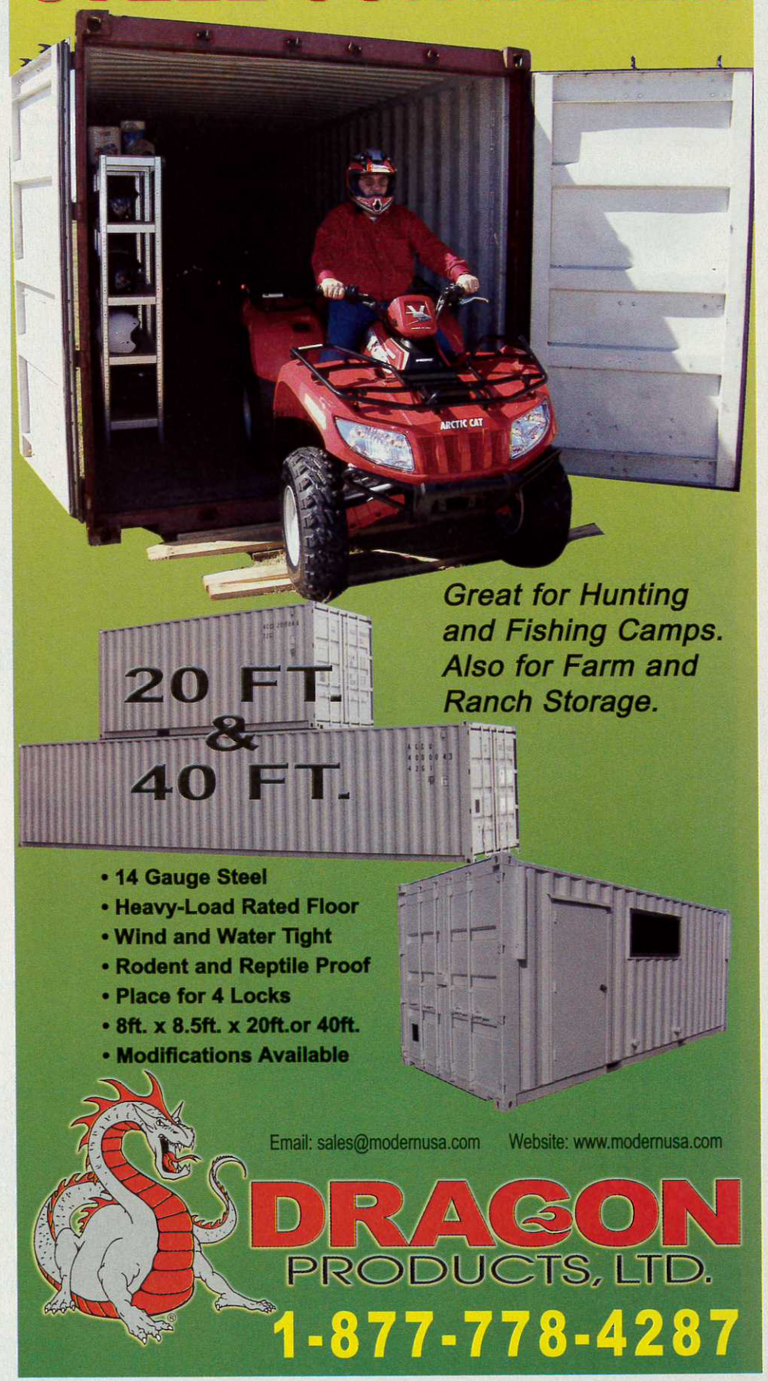
MUSTANG CREEK RANCH
IS TEXAS HUNTING AT ITS BEST!

- 2500 acres under high-fence with natural mineral licks, springs, ponds, food plots, supplemental high protein feed
- Under intensive game management since 1992 with Dr. James C. Kroll (Dr. Deer) as our biologist
- SUPERIOR WHITETAIL GENETICS improved annually through MUSTANG CREEK RANCH BREEDING PROGRAM
- Hunt our PREMIUM Exotics: Fallow, Axis, Black Buck and Elk.

Bill Grace - O: (254) 947.0026 C: (254) 718.5084 - Email: wtgrace@aol.com



THE SECURITY AND DURABILITY OF A
STEEL CONTAINER



Great for Hunting and Fishing Camps. Also for Farm and Ranch Storage.

- 14 Gauge Steel
- Heavy-Load Rated Floor
- Wind and Water Tight
- Rodent and Reptile Proof
- Place for 4 Locks
- 8ft. x 8.5ft. x 20ft.or 40ft.
- Modifications Available

Email: sales@modernusa.com Website: www.modernusa.com

DRAGON PRODUCTS, LTD.
1-877-778-4287