Dr. Deer's™ PRESCRIPTION

Do I Need A Fence? Part 2 of 2

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

In the March/April 2009 issue of *The Journal*, I discussed some of the important considerations you should take before you make the significant step of building a high fence around your property. Considerations included cost, motivation, habitat quality, your neighbors, your resources, genetics, and management goals. Building a high fence is a serious commitment, especially in regard to the welfare of your deer; and one that should not be taken lightly. Consider, too, that once you decide to build the fence, you may find yourself considered as Public Enemy No. 1, not only by the usual critics, but a surprising coalition of folks you once considered friends!

So just what *are* the issues and facts about high fences? In this issue, I'll provide you with the answers. In so doing, I'm going to adhere to Williams' Law—"Many a beautiful theory has been murdered by a ruthless gang of facts."

In 2002, The Wildlife Society published a special booklet for distribution to state and federal agencies, as well as wildlife professionals and policy makers. It was entitled: *Biological and Social Issues Related to Confined Wild Ungulates* (The Wildl. Soc. Technical Review 02-3, 29 pp). It had been preceeded (2001) by another bombshell publication by the Wildlife Management Institute, which was a cartoon-format booklet entitled *Feeding Wildlife...Just Say No!* (Wild. Manage. Inst., Washington, DC). Both publications were exactly what the critics of intensive deer management wanted—"scientific proof" that practices such as feeding, food plots, and high fences were detrimental to the health and well-being of wildlife. For a short time, these two publications became hammers to suppress the growing trend in private deer management around the country.

It is appropriate to point out both publications deviated greatly from the normal scientific approach to wildlife management, even in their formats. The TWS publication had a rather seedy looking man on the front cover, staring at a poor old elk bull with its antlers cut off behind a poorly constructed wire fence. As I said, the WMI pub was nothing more than a cartoon book, punctuated by so-called facts; if you were a Texan, you would have been particularly insulted by the way we were depicted—big cowboy hats feeding big bucks out of our hands, hammers hidden behind our backs!

You might ask why you didn't see these publications. Well, after reading them, three professional biologists, myself included, decided to investigate if the facts put forward in the publications held water. After months of reading and research, we concluded the materials were poorly conceived and the purported "facts" were anything *but* documented by science.

As one of the founders of Earth Day, I consider myself to be an environmentalist. However, in those days (1969-'70), we were scientists dedicated to rooting out the truth behind environmental issues. We were not like the people who, at that time, were polluting the earth and lying about dangerous chemicals and supporting these lies with junk science. Unfortunately, today the roles have pretty much reversed. The end justifies the means in many cases. One of the primary proponents of human-caused global warming recently was quoted as saying distortion of the facts about climate change was justified by the benefits. I prefer to go with what Gandhi once said, and that is, "A good end is not justified by poor means."

So, just one year after the appearance of the TWS and WMI publications, Lyle A. Renecker, Harry W. "Pete" Squibb, and I published a 20-page paper entitled "The Response—The Wildlife Society's Position on Captive Cervidae." The paper was supported by a host of organizations, including the Texas Deer Association. (And here I might add we were not beyond using the tactics of the two anti-publications. Whereas, the

TWS publication had a seedy character on the cover, we used a young child bottle-feeding an elk calf.) "If you want to eat bacon, you have to root with the hogs!" we said. The result was quick and swift, and you'd be hard-pressed to find copies of the two anti-intensive management publications today.

At this point, it's proper to point out I am neither for nor against high fences. I have several Boone and Crockett-qualifying bucks on my walls, all but one of which did not come from behind wire. I am a wilderness hunter who prefers the challenge of wild places. Yet at the same time, I have no problems with someone fencing their property. As far as I'm concerned, that is a private property rights issue. Now, let's proceed to analyzing the issues.

The TWS publication presented information about nine policy statements. Space does not permit me to list them in detail, but suffice it to say they generally urge opposition to fencing and private ownership of wildlife. As a philosophical position, I have no problems with that stance, but the organization's justification wasn't limited to just philosophy. Time and again, the tome presented an issue, then "substantiated" it with "scientific facts." Our scrutiny revealed these "facts" either were used in a misleading manner or were downright lacking in the scientific literature. Let me examine just one.

The TWS pub cited, as a primary concern, that "confinement of deer behind fences leads to ecological damage." To support this position, the authors cited a paper by Miller et al. (1992), which supposedly studied the impacts of whitetail deer on endangered plants. Now there is quite a bit of literature on the subject of the impact of too many deer, but the really good papers were not included. The Miller et al. paper was not a scientific study, rather a literature review and phone survey. There were no scientific data included, only the concluding quote: "Vegetative diversity and ecological health decline in areas where ungulate populations are allowed to exceed carrying capacity."

This work, no matter how shoddy, did not involve fences. The TWS continued this report by citing numerous articles dealing with impacts of high deer populations on other species such as song birds. Again, *none* of these related to high fences, but rather to free-ranging populations of deer managed by professional wildlife managers.

Dr. Harry Jacobson and I long ago documented the negative impacts too many deer can have on the landscape, in a paper published in the 3rd International Congress on the Biology of Deer. In this article, entitled "The Whitetailed deer, the Most Managed and Mismanaged Species," we pointed out how the "hunter opportunity" model followed by most state agencies at that time had led to over-population in most states. Not a single state was harvesting enough does to control populations. Ironically, in our paper we predicted the appearance of one or more diseases in the near future among wild deer. Not long after, chronic wasting disease (CWD) showed up among Colorado deer and elk. I could go on and on, but suffice it to say the TWS position paper literally dripped with misrepresentations and junk science references. We ended the response publication with the conclusion that the TWS publication had not achieved its goal of presenting the facts on confined deer, primarily due to failure to adhere to the scientific method.

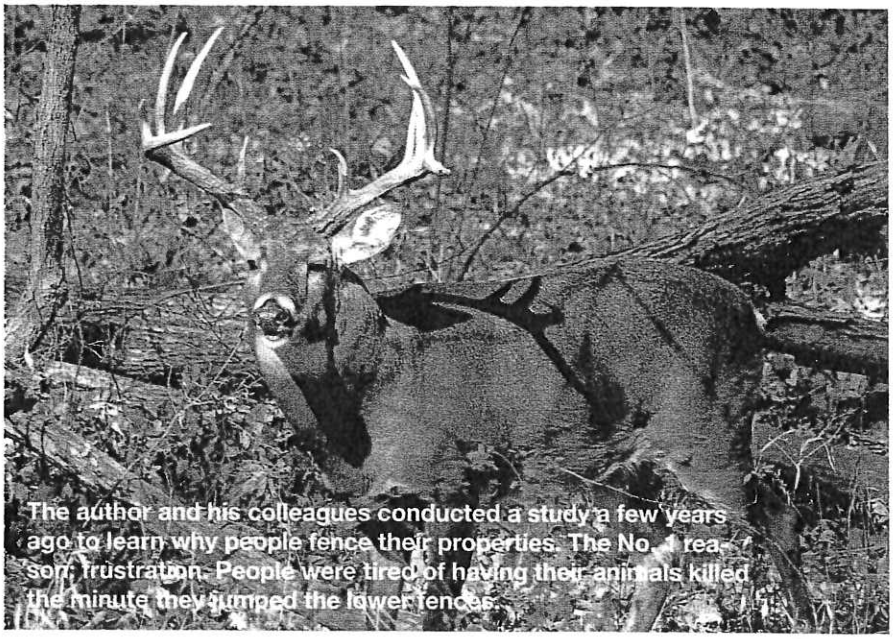
Are High Fences Bad?

The answer to the question is very complicated. First you have to consider if you're asking the question from a point of science and fact, or are you looking for an answer based on philosophical belief? I have no problem with either view, as long as the person taking a position is not *confusing* science with philosophy. We did a study a number of years ago on why people fence their properties. The No. 1 reason: frustration. Respondents were tired of trying to manage their animals, only to have the young buck they let walk killed the minute it crossed their barbed wire fence.

The second most popular reason given involved the scale of their properties. Many of the critics of fencing, unfortunately, come off as elitists. One notable person said, "I don't see all the fuss about high fences, they really aren't necessary since there are plenty of large ranches for folks to hunt!" Often those who sell themselves as "conservationists" enjoy access to quality hunting only the privileged can access. One prominent TV hunting show personality touts he only hunts 100 percent free-range deer; yet he has never set foot in a national forest or hunted other public land. Turns out he owns a large Iowa farm, intensively managed for big whitetails.

A high fence can allow a small landowner to manage for trophy deer. Cooperatives also can accomplish the same goal, but as I've noted in earlier columns, they only work in certain geographic areas. Further, it takes at least 10,000 acres to "control" a herd, and in that you're also limited to places where people actually live on their land, and where you can put together a sizeable tract of land.

Asking if high fences are bad is like asking if guns are bad. In the wrong



The author and his colleagues conducted a study a few years ago to learn why people fence their properties. The No. 1 reason: frustration. People were tired of having their animals killed the minute they jumped the lower fences.

hands, yes, a gun can be used for bad purposes. In discovering the answer to this question about fences, it's logically empirical that, if fences were bad, then large numbers of landowners would tear them down! But this rarely is the case. I know of only a few folks who have done so, and one of these did it just to qualify for Boone and Crockett recognition.

I believe there are two ways to look at fences. First, you must consider the ecological consequences of confining deer. Second, you may consider the ethical issues. As to the first, there are no data supporting the idea that fencing deer is any more damaging ecologically than what we see in many areas with open range. Over-population is our biggest problem nationwide, in regards to deer management. I can show you more tracts of open land with heavy, high-choice deer food browsing than I can fenced properties with the same problem.

When it comes to ethics, that's a more fuzzy issue. The bulk of studies I'm aware of indicate most of the criticism of high-fencing comes from within the hunting community. There is a class warfare going on among hunters. Many want to return to the "good ol' days," when a fellow could hunt on any land without paying a cent. But consider this: less than 25 percent of Texas deer habitat is leased, yet hunters are convinced you have to be rich to hunt deer in the Lone Star State. High-fenced properties provide a focus for such discord.

I've discovered that the often discussed "boogey man" of public sentiment does not exist. Opponents to fencing like to confuse a high-fenced ranch with a "canned hunt." Hunter ethics is something that needs to be an individual decision, rather than legislated. As I noted above, although I have nothing against high fences, all but one of my nine B&C qualifying bucks came from wilderness hunting

But keep in mind that game ranching is growing in popularity, they are here to stay, are growing in numbers, and, if you're against them, get over it! Your efforts would be better spent attacking the root cause behind the fencing movement—poor public management of this valuable resource.

conditions; that simply is what I prefer. Still, I enjoy the unique position of doing this as a profession. Believe me, I don't take myself very seriously when it comes to being a "deer hero!" I and my TV colleagues have access to some of the finest hunting grounds in the world. Who am I to question the ethics of someone hunting on fenced property? As I have noted many times in these columns, the ethical line I draw is based on two questions. First, is it good for whitetails? And second, does it protect undeveloped land? If the answer to both is "yes," then it's fine with me.

A High Fence Is Not Management!

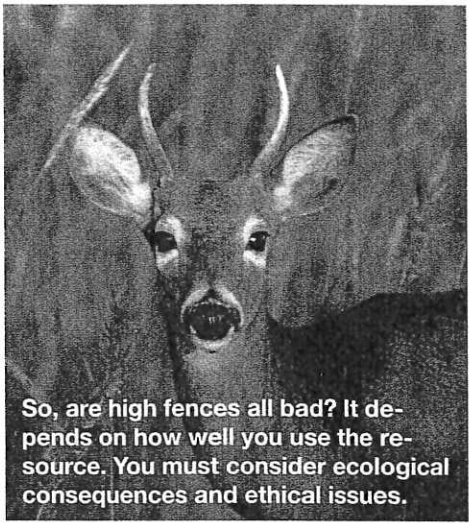
Folks often come up to me to discuss various management issues and problems. "We manage our deer," an individual will say, adding, "We have a high fence." What does *that* have to do with it? Simply erecting a fence doesn't guarantee you'll ever produce quality or trophy bucks. To the contrary, when you erect a fence, you immediately take on the responsibility for the welfare of the animals you confine, so you better be doing a lot more than building a fence. A fence is simply a tool, nothing more, nothing less.

A high fence serves the following management purposes:

- Reduce yearling buck dispersal
- Keep unwanted deer off your property
- Allow you to manipulate genetics
- Increase harvest

My logo includes the three tenets of wildlife management: populations, habitat, and people. A fence relates only to populations, although it does allow you to hold numbers at a density that reduces habitat damage. Believe me, publicly managed deer herds are out of control and do not provide a good example. In order to be successful in management, you have to put a lot of emphasis on the last two of tenets of habitat and people management. If you ignore these two, building a fence is a total waste of money.

So we began this two-part series with the question, "Should I build a high fence?" Hopefully you've learned there's a great deal to consider in answering that question. It involves critically analyzing *your* situation and goals, as well as your personal beliefs. High fences are not for everyone. But keep in mind that game ranching is growing in popularity, they are here to stay, are growing in numbers, and, if you're against them, get over it! Your efforts would be better spent attacking the root cause behind the fencing movement—poor public management of this valuable resource.



So, are high fences all bad? It depends on how well you use the resource. You must consider ecological consequences and ethical issues.

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