

Dr. Deer's Whitetail World

BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL

What Is Management? Part 1

Whether you call it *quality* or *trophy* management, interest in managing deer herds for better bucks is spreading. It all began in Texas some 50 or more years ago when private ranchers started protecting and enhancing their deer herds. One such rancher was H.B. Zachary, a San Antonio contractor who purchased two ranches in the famed south Texas brush country.

Mr. Z wanted to produce better bucks, so he enticed Texas Parks and Wildlife biologist Al Brothers to come to work for him. Over the next few years, Al not only produced monster bucks for Mr. Z, but he also became an avid apostle for the concept of managing for bigger bucks. Along with that of his good friend Murphy Ray, Al's work ultimately led to the publication of a landmark book, *Producing Quality Whitetails*.

My friendship with Al brought me to implement the same landowner-centric strategies. When ***North American Whitetail*** began 26 years ago, its founders wanted to deliver sound management advice to hunters and landowners. That's when I became involved with the magazine, and I'm very proud of what we've accomplished since.

THE INFORMATION AGE

Building on the concepts Al and Murphy covered in their book, we set out to conduct research to fine-tune the process. Our long-running series "Building Your Own Deer Factory," which began in the July 1998 issue of ***North American Whitetail***, was extremely successful. We continue this trend today through this column and other articles by recognized experts.

After visiting the Zachary ranches in the late 1980s, a group of Southeastern biologists led by Joe Hamilton began what now is known as the Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA). At last report, QDMA has grown to about 50,000 members, supporting the idea that "management mania" is definitely spreading.

Yet there are hundreds of thousands of landowners in the U.S. and even more hunting club members. And in spite of all we have done, there is still much confusion about what deer management is all about (especially in regard to growing bigger bucks). Furthermore, there are many misconceptions involving the expectations from such programs. What are reasonable expectations? Even worse, many deer hunters still do not understand the role of state agencies in all this. What I hope to accomplish in this three-part series is to help clarify a few of these points.

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What are reasonable expectations for today's intensive deer management programs? Dr. Deer says you must start with clearly defined goals. Are your goals well defined?

GETTING BACK TO BASICS

Some folks in my profession look upon Wisconsin biologist Aldo Leopold as a god. Aldo was a good scientist. During the Depression he tried to find better ways to help landowners manage wildlife, so he justly deserves credit for his part in American wildlife management. The tenets he puts forward in his landmark book *Game Management* have proved themselves many times.

Aldo pointed out what I also learned the hard way. There are three important aspects of managing any species — people, habitat and populations. Each has to be addressed in order to succeed. There is also one additional aspect, the achievement of which is measurable — a well-defined goal. Without a clear goal, you'll never succeed.

Whenever I ask a landowner what his or her primary goal is, I usually get the same answer: "Well, we want to produce a lot of trophy bucks." That is not a goal. It is an expectation! A more reasonable goal would be to say, "We want to harvest four mature bucks annually from our land." Now, *that* is a reasonable goal, provided the landowner has enough land on which to make it happen.

PEOPLE, HABITAT AND POPULATIONS

So, let's now take Leopold's three components and see how they fit into deer management. The first, people, is the hardest one to deal with. I often have said I can grow big bucks in a parking lot, *if* people would go along with me! Whether on private or public lands, the manager must understand what the people want. Those wants may be as simple as a single landowner who wishes to exercise "king-like" dominion over his property (easy to achieve). Or they may be more complicated in a state where a public hunting tradition has existed for 200 years (harder to deal with).

A biologist in either case must first assess what is desired. In all honesty, state agencies have come along begrudgingly in the "better buck" management boom. States tend to judge everything from a "hunter opportunity" basis, and they tend to operate from revenues received from licenses, fines and fees. Anything that poses a potential threat to income or public satisfaction is suspect!

A good example is the spread of size restrictions on bucks. Years ago, when size restrictions were first tried in Georgia, the success of this program encouraged other groups to push for similar restrictions in other states. However, the response from many state agencies was less than encouraging. Even with high public approval, some agencies resisted such actions and still do today. Lately some university researchers have even teamed up with agencies to "prove" such limitations do not work.

Sadly, they are missing the point. Although the goal is to produce better bucks, the underlying issue is to achieve sound management of the herd. Improved buck-to-doe ratios make herds easier, not harder, to manage. Once you find out what the goal is, habitat is the real keystone to management. But there are several confusing issues about habitat. From a management perspective, I have produced as many B&C bucks on the properties I manage as anyone, and the three keys to my success have always been: nutrition, nutrition and nutrition! That's why we focused so heavily on food source management in our "Building Your Own Deer Factory" series.

WAR OF THE EXPERTS

In order to achieve your goals, you'll have to focus on improving nutrition on your property. When we conducted the first research ever on planted forages for deer back in the early '90s, we were deeply criticized by some biologists. There were two criticisms. First, they said it would not work! Second, if it did work, they said, it would increase deer populations and destroy native vegetation. What we learned in our pioneering research at Ft. Perry, Georgia, was: 1) it did indeed work, and 2) when done properly, ecosystems actually improved.

Supplemental feeding also became a "hot button" issue. The minute Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) showed up in Colorado around 1970, biologists began to point a finger at feeding deer. Never mind the fact that the disease showed up in state-owned research pens, where wild deer were captured and housed with sheep! And never mind the fact that these same deer later were returned to the wild where they could infect other deer with the disease that apparently jumped species.

Again, misunderstanding of the role of feed in deer management created much of this. Feed should *never* be looked upon as a substitute for sound habitat management. In our soon-to-be-published new book, *Food Source Management for Whitetails*, (expected to be out by Oct. 1) Ben Koerth and I devote many pages and portions of chapters to improving native forages. In order to be truly involved in "management," private landowners and agencies alike have to put considerable emphasis on *habitat* management.

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS

The last step is to address the population issues of any herd. Deer are growing at an unprecedented rate in the U.S. We now have around 35 million animals, more than when Columbus arrived in this hemisphere. Studies show hunter numbers have declined by 10 percent in the last five years. Whenever I'm asked how we can control deer herds, I frankly do not have an answer. However, under a "hunter opportunity" model, deer herds now are out of control!

In my book *A Practical Guide to Producing and Harvesting Whitetailed Deer* (1991), I presented advice on culling deer herds. Yet, "culling" means far more than removing the right bucks. It also means removing excess does. The Europeans learned this 400 years ago. The "cull" in Germany refers to removing both inferior males and enough females to control herd growth.

Traditional deer management in the U.S. has focused on "putting antlers on every wall." Only in recent times have we made headway in getting hunters to shoot more does. If you (or your state) are not actively doing this, you are not managing your deer!

CONCLUSION

Placing size limits on bucks is a management tool that must continue to grow. As I noted above, it does two things. First, it produces an older-aged buck segment. This allows the right bucks to contribute the most to breeding, in spite of what you may have read. All bucks, no matter what their age, do indeed breed in the herd. But there is a disproportionate number of older-age-class bucks that successfully reproduce. A more balanced age structure produces a natural deer herd in which bucks must fight their way up the pecking order to breed. That is good management.

Second, age structure only improves under size limits *if* there is sufficient recruitment (the number of fawns surviving to one year of age). As weird as it might seem, more does will not recruit more fawns. Under a balanced sex ratio, with natural buck age structure, more fawns are recruited. So if your land or your state does not have a balanced age structure and high recruitment, the deer are not being managed. There is only the illusion of management, often emphasizing "feel good" activities.

We still have a long way to go before Al Brothers' dream is realized. Yet we have made amazing progress. A lot of folks have jumped off into management programs across the southeast and Midwest. Now, after seven to 10 years of "managing," some of these folks are becoming disillusioned with their progress. In Part 2, I'll discuss how you can go about assessing *your* management program, and what you can do to succeed.