Dr. Deer's™ PRESCRIPTION

Management?

By Dr. James C. Kroll

In the near future, I will be issuing a press release and white paper focusing on the future of the whitetail and deer hunting in America. Horace Gore will tell you I have been concerned for many years (since the 1980s) about the way our favorite game animal has been "managed" over the years. Although Texas has remained fairly immune from many of the issues discussed here, some definitely apply or will soon apply to the Lone Star State.

If we Google the term "management," the general definition returns as, "The process of dealing with or controlling things or people (e.g., the management of elk herds)," according to Wikipedia.com. It is interesting the example used by Wikipedia deals with game manage-



ment. So, I Googled "wildlife management" and got this definition: "In his 1933 book Game Management, Aldo Leopold, one of the pioneers of wildlife management as a science, defined it as "the art of making land produce sustained annual crops of wild game for recreational use." There are some key words and phrases in the latter definition. The most important one is "... making land produce sustained annual crops of wild game..." Secondary is the term, "recreational use." And, these concepts are the focus of my concern for the future.

In 1994, Dr. Harry Jacobson and I traveled to Edinburgh, Scotland to present a plenary paper to the 3rd International Congress on the Biology of Deer. Our presentation and paper was entitled: "The White-tailed Deer: The most managed and mismanaged species." In this paper, we expressed our concern for the future of the species, focusing on the following issues:

- Deer populations have increased to alarmingly high densities.
- Over-population of deer has dramatically changed the natural landscape (viz., "the deer woods").
- There was no evidence state and federal efforts to control populations are not successful.
- Over-exploitation of males has produced unnatural herds demographically.
- These changes in demographics have resulted in delayed or sporadic breeding.
- And, we alluded to the potential for diseases, even a new one coming into play in the future.

We included a table with population estimates on a state-by-state basis to back up some of our concerns. Interestingly enough, within two years, most states had abandoned the practice of publishing estimates of their herd numbers! I cannot say they did it to avoid future criticisms, but it probably was a good idea anyway, since I have long asserted that trying to estimate deer numbers is the "La Brea Tar Pits" of deer management! There is no way to accurately estimate deer densities on a broad geographic context; and, even with small properties there are challenges. It is far better to let the habitat and deer themselves tell you how they are doing by collecting the right information (discussed later).

Fast-forward to the 2013 hunting season and a lot of what Dr. Jacobson and I predicted is, unfortunately coming true. To begin with, the rut was again sporadic, frustrating countless hunters. High mortality numbers continue to come in from a host of causes, including EHD (epizootic hemorrhagic disease), predation, over-harvest and habitat degradation. In retrospect, we may have chosen our subtitle poorly. We presumed at that time deer were indeed being managed, as well as mismanaged. So, in the remainder of this column, I will delve into what exactly IS management, and what should you as a landowner, lessee, or hunter expect from deer managers?

The Tenets of Deer Management

In my recent stint as "Deer Trustee" of Wisconsin, I repeatedly pointed out deer management can be likened to a three-legged stool, each leg representing population, habitat and people management. The reason behind choosing this stool was that, without any one of the legs, you fall on your behind! The amount of attention each leg receives in the management process depends heavily on the situation. In reality, there are two management scenarios involved: public and private land. I see no reason why the two are not the same, yet agencies continue to consider them separately. Assuming there are sufficient differences to separate the two management situations, let's have a look at what should be involved in each.

We hear a lot today about the North American Wildlife Model and its success. No one can argue, in the initial days of implementation the Model deserves credit for restoring game species to the American landscape. Yet, the Model was aimed primarily at restoration; and admittedly equal access to game by all hunters. Yet, few professionals ever considered the day would come when these game species would be restored and then they would need to be managed to produce what Leopold referred to as a *sustained* annual crop of wild game. Year after year, wildlife managers of the 20th century patted themselves on the back for the fine job they did; annually measuring success as a "record harvest." However, we were living like the "alcoholic who drinks his liquor with the sack around it, so he can't see the end coming!" And, the end is coming. As part of restoration, we created a generation of hunters who thought shooting a doe was the worst thing you could do. "Management" focused on antlered harvest.

So, what should be involved in managing a public trust resource? Returning to the three legs of deer management, game agencies tend to focus entirely on one leg—population management. Yes, people aspects are considered, but only as "tools" of wildlife management, who through regulations carry out the mandates of agencies. That is precisely how the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) got into the predicament requiring Governor Walker to appoint a Deer Trustee. They were ignoring the wishes of the people, and hunters were being treated as "tools" to achieve the DNR's goals. The WDNR was setting population goals for specific management units, based on a computer model that produced estimates of population size with a margin of error in the plus or minus 123 percent range! Over several years they never achieved the population goal.

What should states be doing to manage deer in the public trust? I have questioned the actions of state agencies more than once in my 40-plus year career, but I always maintained a presumption of competence in doing so. We just differed philosophically I assumed. Imagine my shock and dismay when about five years ago I began to learn that most states really do not have adequate data to make sound management decisions! Millions, if not billions of Pittman-Robertson dollars collected from sportsmen and women have been expended under the guise of "management." Yet, when asked to produce sound data to support management decisions, most states fall way short of delivering on the request. What should they be able to produce?

To begin, there is no need to spend millions on deer census. It is a "fool's errand" to try to estimate how many deer there are, except perhaps a ballpark figure for the state or a region. As I noted earlier, the habitat and the deer are more than happy to tell you how they are doing, if only you would ask the right questions. Texas is one of the few places where at least some of this information is being developed, but not on public land. Over the years, I have seen habitats deteriorate in much of the country under the onslaught of heavy deer browsing.

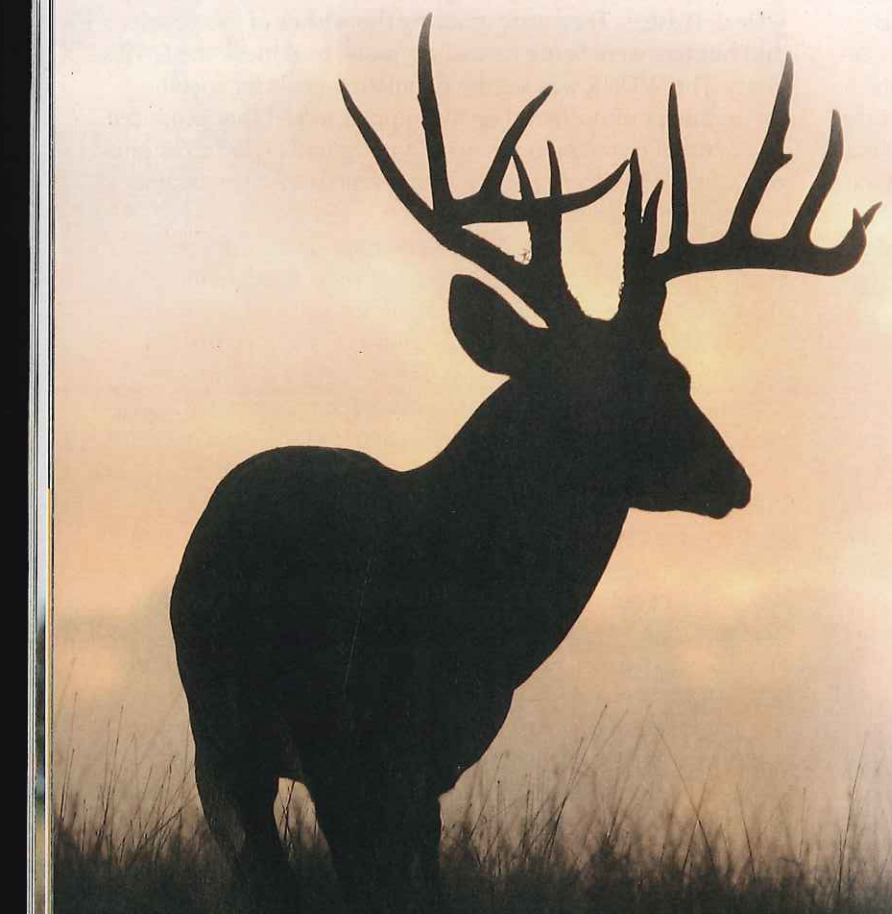
When I arrived in eastern Texas in 1973 plants such as strawberry bush were common. Today, you cannot find a single plant outside of native plant gardens. In Michigan, Canadian yew can only be found on islands where there are no deer. One of the first wildlife biologists in Texas, Dan Lay, developed a browse survey technique in the late 1960s which could be used to monitor the stocking rate (high, medium and low) over time; yet, there are very few states that have anything relating to Dan's protocol; not to mention using it!

In states with a large amount of public hunting, there should be concerted efforts to assess the health, productivity and demographic composition of the deer herds. Again, however, most states fall short; relying on simple questionnaires or "ice house" studies to determine these critical parameters. One of the most frustrating aspects is how states report the deer harvest as numbers of antlered and antlerless deer taken. "Antlerless" includes buck fawns, which often is a significant part of the harvest. Or, how about this one? *Adult* often is defined as older than one year! Some states have check stations, many of which are operated by convenience stores and even bars. I registered the buck I shot in Nebraska this past season at such an establishment; and, although the proprietor was very nice, he had no clue about the age of my buck. Although I told him, he had nowhere to even write the age down.

When it comes to the health and productivity of the habitat, it gets even worse. We are blessed in the South with an abundance of studies and data on deer forage production and sustainability in an array of forest management conditions. In eastern Texas, wildlife science pioneers like Lowell K. Halls, John Stransky, Bob Blair and Don Dietz, Sr. spent their careers developing models to predict how many deer various forest stands and management activities will produce. Yet, these studies remain remarkably absent in many states, as well as some regions in Texas.

You can see why I am a bit frustrated with the state of management across the range of whitetails. Remember, deer represent the vast majority of income to state agencies, yet receive the least effort when it comes to sound data collection. What should you expect from your state agency? Here is a list of information any state agency should have readily available to support the question: How did you arrive at this regulation?

- What is the sex/age structure of the deer herd in this county or management unit? (Not the harvest, but the actual population.)
- When is the rut and is it occurring at the proper time?
- What is the annual recruitment and what are the trends?
- What is happening to antler development over time?
- What is the standard dressed weight by age you should expect for this county or management unit?
- How productive are the habitats on public and private lands?
- What is the current health of the deer woods?
- What does the public want in this county or management unit, and how satisfied are they?



This brings us to the role the private landowner plays in supplying a sustained yield of game. I was shocked to hear state game agency officials assert that considering the private landowner was an affront to the North American Wildlife Model, even though 80 percent of the deer live on 60 percent of the land—the private land! In these days of fragmentation of land, how can you even begin to manage deer without considering the private landowner? When I proposed Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) for Wisconsin, there were wildlife professionals who publicly stated it was only for the private landowners. The idea that a DMAP could involve both private and public lands was not even in their mindset. These folks were more likely to pit public hunters against private landowners, and vice versa. Yet, in our focus group meetings of these folks, we learned the private landowners felt the public hunters were killing the deer they were trying to protect; and, the public hunters thought private landowners were hogging their own deer and killing does on public lands. Both were obviously right and wrong at the same time, but there was never an opportunity to work together on deer management in their area. At this age, I do not see the need to mince my words.

Aldo Leopold pointed out in his book, "Game Management":

"Actually game administration in this country has so far concerned itself almost entirely with two things: regulating abuses by the exercise of

its police powers, and attempting to practice management on private lands without the co-operation of the owner. The latter attempt is bound to fail in the long run, because government cannot control environment on lands which it does not own."

Deer Management on Private Lands

We are blessed, as I noted earlier, in Texas to have an agency that recognizes the needs of private landowners. But, are deer truly being managed on these lands? I was cleaning out my office the other day and ran across files from the 1970s and 80s, each representing a landowner or hunting club involved in our cooperative management program. Each file contained raw data taken over several years, including census, browse surveys, incidental sightings and harvest data. Included were annual reports to each cooperator, containing an analysis of results over several years, as well as a comparison to the average hunting lease or landowner in their area. This was a strategy to create a "teachable moment," when they asked *why* they were not up to standards?

It is one thing to collect data, yet quite another to use these data to make management decisions. I am frustrated with the repetitive collection of data, with no analysis or follow up on what the data are telling you about progress toward management goals! It is only my perception, but what happens to all those data collected for the MLDP? Do landowners receive similar reports to those we sent out in the





1970s? Is the purpose of collecting data the process or to aid decision-making?

Deer management mania has been a good thing for the most part. We have generated this interest in management using the promise of producing larger bucks and healthier deer herds. Unfortunately, however, we seldom do either! There is a lot of money in deer management, not to mention pride in accomplishment. Management has spawned a thriving industry, involving everything from supplemental feeding, deer breeding, and now an army of consultants. At this age, I do not see the need to mince my words. Management consultants can be very useful in helping landowners reach their goals, but a consultant should be more than a "form filer and helicopter jockey!"

You cannot expect state agencies to manage the public resource at the intensity required by a private landowner. However, you should expect professionals to do a much better job of managing deer herds and habitats in the private land context. Management plans should be more than fill-in-the-blank forms; they are *strategic plans* that include detailed prescriptions on the what, when and how of each tenet of deer management. Goals should be clearly stated, and metrics for measuring progress defined. Keeping a sustainable population of deer for recreational use depends on management of the food and cover resources on the land, as well as the health and productivity of the herd.

Another problem in Wisconsin was the need for what I call, "Boots on the Ground!" Deer management, and all wildlife management for that matter, *cannot* be done in front of a computer. As I get older, my measure of a professional wildlife manager is based on the amount of wear on his/her boots and the size of belt it takes to hold up their pants! Each property is unique and deer management is *site specific*, requiring a human being out there in the woods finding out what is actually going on. Yes, landowners should be involved in data collection—that is how we generate proprietary interest—but it still takes a professional observing the subtle things that matters.

We stand at a crossroads for our favorite past time. There are increasing signs all is not well in the deer woods, and the predictions of Dr. Jacobson and myself are beginning to come home to roost. Deer herds are declining in more than 15 states as I write this column, with more to come. There is a silent fear growing among professionals; a fear you can smell at any meeting of these folks. And, I place the blame directly on mismanagement by these professionals. Yes, in Texas we are somewhat immune from these problems, since deer management began in the Lone Star State and private landowners are deeply committed to the welfare of their deer and land. Remember, however, there is a great big world north of the Red River and east of the Sabine! In a global world, what is happening to deer hunting outside the State greatly influences what happens inside. Texas no longer is a rural state; it is essentially urban. "Urbanians," as I call them, now control the political direction of every state. The vast army of immigrants moving to Texas to escape the economic hardships of states to the north and east bring with them attitudes that will affect wildlife management for decades to come. It is time to rethink deer management; if it weren't broken, I wouldn't be wanting to fix it!

In future columns, I will be discussing in detail each critical aspect to developing a deer management program on both private and public lands. Stay tuned.

