



Let's lower the temperature

By Justin Tomei
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What is the biggest threat that the hunting and conservation community face? Shockingly, it may be that we are our own worst enemy.

Sitting through the Natural Resources Commission (NRC) meeting in June was, sometimes, quite tense. Going through the deer regulatory cycle fired up a lot of emotions and made adversaries of people who should be allies.

Emotions ran high as nearly 30 members of the public and various stakeholder groups sat in front of the commission and talked about why their preferred version of deer management was the right one.

A pro-antler-point-restriction (APR) person would get up there and say their piece, then someone opposed would say their view slightly louder. The emotions just seemed to be ramping up – by the end of the meeting, one individual was cursing at commissioners.

Too many people forgot something fundamental: everyone speaking was a conservationist who cares about the deer and our hunting heritage, and everyone there should be on the same team.

Hunters already have too many things going against them. Declining participation as baby boomers age out, uber-funded anti-conservation groups, conservation funding issues, animal disease, and the list goes on. But what is the

biggest problem? Hunters can be our own worst enemies.

Too often, we squabble like siblings to the benefit of no one. Public versus private land, fly versus spinning, walleye versus trout (bluegill are the best fish), bait versus hounds – it's a nonstop battle it seems. While hunters and people of shared heritage and purpose argue, the anti-conservationists are united and motivated.

\$266,315,205

Any guesses on what that number represents?

For context, the Michigan DNR Wildlife Division fiscal year 2023 appropriations was \$47.5 million. According to the most recently available 990 tax filings, the National Deer

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MUCC Advocacy



Association has a little over \$4 million in net assets. The National Wild Turkey Federation has \$22 million in net assets, Pheasants Forever \$43 million, National Trappers Association just under \$1 million, Fur Takers of America \$500,000, and Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation \$4.2 million.

So what does that \$266,315,205 represent?

That is the reported net assets for the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) – the country's largest, most active, and best-funded anti-conservation organization.

Representatives from HSUS often appear at NRC meetings and legislative committees. They have an effective call-to-action program that utilizes social media and plays on emotions.

At one NRC meeting earlier this spring, the bulk of the public comment was from individuals representing various anti-conservation organizations or positions opposing a director's order on nuisance animal trapping. This was on top of the thousands of emails that flooded commissioner emails.

Natural Resources Commission Chair Tom Baird expressed his interest in continuing the discussion on deer regulations at that June meeting and every meeting after that. He said he wants to look at these as a larger

issue, requiring more time and thought than picking at it in three-year cycles.

There is a desire from commissioners to update the CWD Response Plan and the Michigan Deer Management Plan, last updated in 2012 and 2016, respectively.

I think all stakeholders would offer constructive input on those plans. The amount of information we have learned on CWD in the last couple of years alone is staggering. The playing field is not the same as it was in 2012.

Similarly, the deer management plan is outdated. We have changed license structures and antlerless quotas, and more hunters have aged out. It is due for a face lift.

What will this discussion look like? The DNR already has a variety of different stakeholder workgroups: the Bear Forum, Furtaker user group, and Citizens Waterfowl Advisory Council are just a few.

It would stand to reason that one of these models would be a template for the DNR to use in creating a deer workgroup.

These various workgroups are successful because of buy-in from stakeholders and the department, allowing

both sides to have frank and productive discussions.

One of these workgroups struggled through some growing pains, and realizing that they were getting in their own way, the group tightened down and became a model, to which at least one commissioner points..

The bear forum, for instance, was notorious for being more than a bit testy. But as the role of the group became apparent, the folks in the room realized they had more to gain from working together than infighting, and now it is a much more effective body.

MUCC assisted the department in 2008 with gathering stakeholder input via a series of deer workgroup meetings across the state. That work eventually led to the development of the first Deer Management Plan.

We know more about management, and we know more about the diseases we are fighting. Why not try again?

Even beyond management, the stakeholders often need to look inwards as well. The Michigan National Deer Association (NDA) is doing just that.

Over the summer, the NDA



You can stream each Natural Resources Commission Meeting at the MUCC Facebook Page.

www.facebook.com/mucc1937

MUCC Conservation Policy Board & Convention Calendar:

Policy Board

*August 26 - Alpena
Sportsmen's Club*

*December 2 - Southeast
Michigan (Region 8)*

Convention

*March 8, 9 & 10, 2024 -
Sault Ste. Marie*

sent out a survey to gather input on Michigan's deer management from members and non-members. They hope to use this survey to help drive their organization's resources and supplement what we know about hunter attitudes.

MUCC is constantly debating policy to ensure that the membership's views are always at the forefront. Quarterly Conservation Policy Board meetings ensure proposed policies are factually accurate and within the scope of the mission before a larger representation of the membership tackles the issues at the annual convention.

An informal workgroup of conservation partners across the state has formed smaller

committees to look at conservation issues on a smaller scale and report back to the larger group.

The winds of change are blowing, and it seems everyone involved is at a confluence of interests where decision-makers and stakeholders agree that the status quo is insufficient.

The tools are in place for conservationists to be successful. There is a team of world-class biologists within the department, engaged and effective stakeholders, and one hell of a state to hunt and fish in.

Let's lower the temperature and remember that, as conservationists, we are all on the same team.

