

When did “Opportunity” Become a Dirty Word?

Photo: Jim Heffelfinger



By Jim Heffelfinger

The overall goal of deer management in most states and provinces is usually to provide ample hunting opportunity while maximizing the number of deer within the capacity of the habitat. Still, each year agencies hear from some members of the public who feel there are too many deer tags and they feel that is simply an attempt to make money at the expense of the deer herd. There is no denying that money is needed for conservation; we all brag about the fact that conservation is largely driven by the financial contributions of hunters, anglers, and sport shooters. But, state and provincial wildlife agencies have multimillion dollar annual budgets and authorizing an extra 100 deer tags here and there is not going to result in a noticeable bump in their annual income.

For those interested solely in hunting mature bucks, the word “opportunity” has become a dirty word. It is unfortunate, but some agencies have refined the way they talk to the public about this topic to avoid using the “O word” altogether since it seems to trigger such a negative reaction in some.

WHO WANTS TO GO DEER HUNTING? Research shows people first and foremost just want to have the opportunity to get out and go deer hunting next fall. Professionally-designed hunter surveys in state after state showed that “getting

Photo: Jim Heffelfinger



The size of the buck does not matter, when you have three family generations hunting together.

to go hunting” was the most important factor to hunters, followed by “seeing a harvestable animal” and then “getting a shot.” Near the bottom of the list of importance was “harvesting a trophy animal.”

For the last 24 years, I have been involved in the process of prescribing the appropriate number of deer tags for a state agency in the West. Through those years and uncountable discussions about permit recommendations, my constant source of guidance was to try to offer as many tags as the resource would allow. This was not to fill the agency’s coffers, it was driven by my desire to get as many sons, nieces, grandfathers, mothers, brothers, daughters, sons-in-law, and coworkers out in the field together to spend quality time together. With a lot of luck and a little skill, hopefully they would be successful in bringing home some meat to share around the family table for the following year.

My desire to get as many people as possible in the field was not solely to help out those fortunate hunters, but because participation in hunting is the very foundation of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. The wealthy make incredible financial contributions to wildlife, but this great conservation paradigm that has resulted in the conservation and recovery of nearly

all native North American species has primarily been the work of the everyday hunter. What makes hunting – and conservation – in America so unique is that it's not an activity reserved for the wealthy; there is opportunity for all and we all benefit.

THE PROBLEM WITH OPPORTUNITY

The problem with allowing a lot of people to take to the field deer hunting is that when they get there, they find a lot of people in the field! Most importantly, they are all in “your” area. We wait and plan and hope for a coveted deer tag in the drawing and rejoice when we score a tag in our favorite area. The anticipation mounts as the hunt gets closer and thoughts turn to great times with family and friends, but then you get out there on opening day and find someone is already in your spot.

Allowing a lot of opportunity is what drives our great system of conservation, but tell that to someone who anticipated his deer hunt all year and then saw hoards of other hunters and only does on their hunt. At that point they want to see fewer hunters and fewer bucks harvested in that area. This is a natural and understandable reaction. Some worry these unpleasant experiences may drive hunters to quit hunting altogether. What good is hunter recruitment, they argue, if we can't retain our avid, long-term hunters?

It's not just some hunters who, paradoxically, want fewer hunters in the field. Even agency biologists and game wardens tend to be naturally restrictive in their deer permit recommendations for a host of reasons. If you are a local deer manager and reduce tags or keep them low, the only hunters you encounter in the field are those who were drawn for your area. These lucky hunters love you for providing fewer hunters in the field with them, more open camp spots, better buck:doe ratios, older bucks, and higher hunt success. Those who were not able to hunt are not there to complain about it because they are home watching football and thinking about what other fall activities they enjoy besides deer hunting. Generally, life is



Photo: Levi Heffelfinger

Allowing young and middle-aged bucks to mature requires a restriction in hunting opportunity.

better for the local deer manager when they restrict hunter opportunity. With fewer deer tags, comes fewer accidental law violations to deal with and fewer complaints from landowners about crowding, open gates, and litter.

Sometimes hunt structure changes to become more conservative happen abruptly. In one state, a past wildlife commission did not accept the recommendations of its biologists and cut mule deer permits by 25% in most of the state. This was not in response to a biological need, but rather social pressure from a vocal minority who wanted older bucks and more antler points, even if thousands more hunters would have to stay home to achieve it. These restrictions created a mature buck age structure and a ratio of about 1 buck for every 3 does. The chance of harvesting a mule deer in that state approached 40% statewide (if you get a tag) and about 40% of the successful hunters took home a 4x4! Luckily that state is working its way back from this arbitrary permit reduction to allow more people to hunt each year.

Prior to 1999, Colorado had unlimited over-the-counter buck licenses and limited doe licenses. Hunters expressed an interest in managing for higher

buck:doe ratios to see more mature bucks, even though that meant a loss of hunting opportunity. Because of this, in 1999 Colorado instituted totally limited buck licenses. Consequently the number of deer hunters was reduced by 46% in one year, from 149,616 to 80,649. Despite this huge loss in opportunity, this change has been viewed as positive as the statewide average buck:doe ratio increased from 18 to 28 bucks:100 does.

THE TRADE-OFF

One state polled its hunters and asked if they would prefer “more bucks” or “bigger bucks” and most hunters responded that they wanted “more bigger bucks.” There seems to be a general perception that having abundant trophy bucks is a measure of a well-managed herd. We all want to hunt in an area with an older age structure and good buck:doe ratio, but we also want to hunt our favorite area every year. There is a misunderstanding among some that reducing tags in their favorite unit means other people will have to stay home. It doesn't always work that way. Some hunters have unrealistic expectations of how many trophy bucks they will see once they do draw a premium hunt. Additionally, the “value” of these limited hunts is increasingly measured in years of wait rather than the actual hunting experience.



Research shows that camaraderie and family bonding is one of the most important parts of hunting.

Many hunters with these coveted tags are still quite happy harvesting young bucks!

In most states and provinces, a majority of the harvest is bucks and their removal doesn't affect the number of fawns recruited into the population or how many deer there are in the long term. Regardless of the buck:doe ratio and age structure of the buck segment, all does are still bred so whether an area has liberal or conservative buck-only harvest, it is not affecting the density or abundance of deer overall.

Offering unlimited opportunity for an unpleasant hunting experience is not satisfying an agency's responsibilities as trustees who manage wildlife and hunting opportunity for the public. By the same token, it is unfair to not allow thousands of hunters go deer hunting while the statewide buck:doe ratio remains very high and mature bucks are dying of old age.

Truthfully, a herd could be managed for very, very low buck:doe ratios, a young age structure, and low hunt success and it would not have negative biological effects. We could also manage for very high buck:doe ratios, old bucks, and high hunt success and it would not negatively affect the overall deer population

significantly. This means agencies can select a management style anywhere within this wide range of potential options and not hurt the deer population or its ability to prosper. Quality vs. quantity in deer management is a balancing act and the fulcrum is public opinion. Within the broad bounds of biology, public input is what helps determine where that point of balance is set.

As mentioned above, research consistently shows hunters want the opportunity to hunt first and foremost. Research by Mark Duda and others across the country shows general public support for legal, regulated hunting nationwide is high and increasing (73-79%) in recent years. Hunting for meat, protection, and population management is supported by 81-85% of Americans. In contrast, public support for trophy hunting is consistently low (10-28%). The public may not think of trophy hunting in the same way as hunters do, but it doesn't matter when their votes are based on their perceptions.

Considering these levels of public support, management agencies should be cautious about shifting management paradigms on a large scale from offering a chance to go hunting and bring home venison to something that is not as important to most hunters and not sup-

ported by the public (trophy hunting). Management for mature bucks has an active contingent of supporters that are engaged with agencies. Spike bucks, however, don't motivate people to give up their Saturday and drive to a commission meeting simply to argue for the opportunity to go deer hunting with friends and family. Those who come to public meetings, belong to organizations, and post on internet forums are not likely to be representative of all hunters and so they don't provide reliable information about what hunters generally want. Many times the most active and passionate voices heard by the wildlife agencies come from landowners, guides, and outfitters who have built a business based on being able to provide mature bucks; general hunter opportunity is not a primary concern of theirs. This means that agencies must use professionally-designed, scientific surveys of the public to guide their management in order to provide what hunters truly want in the accurate proportion they want it. Maintaining some areas with older deer and a premium hunt experience is important, but with those established, the rest of the state should not be inched slowly in that direction.

The ability to satisfy the minority who want the opportunity to hunt mature bucks depends on the combination of total deer available to harvest and the number of hunters who want a tag. In 2015, Arizona had 62,831 applicants for mule deer tags, but only 24,991 tags available. This means fewer than 40% of the people who wanted to hunt mule deer last year were able to. With this as a backdrop, would it be prudent to further restrict the number of mule deer permits so that the hunters who were fortunate enough to get a tag could harvest an older buck? Arizona already has 10 Game Management Units that are managed for trophy bucks and is famous for producing the largest trophy mule deer in the world. Last year a single mule deer tag was auctioned for \$320,000; that doesn't happen unless the best guides and outfitters know a single Arizona mule deer is worth that much.

Photo: Levi Heffelfinger



Managing a mule deer population for high buck:doe ratios and mature bucks usually comes at the expense of opportunity to hunt in your favorite place annually.

Photo: Jim Heffelfinger



Meat is a popular motivation for deer hunting and a welcomed byproduct for everyone regardless of motivation.

Photo: Levi Heffelfinger



Harvesting a big buck is nice, but it is not the main motivation of a majority of hunters.

Agencies must do their best to offer a wide range of different types of hunt structures to provide something for everyone. Most states and Canadian provinces have a lot of general seasons to provide opportunity to hunt with friends and family. But, they also offer some limited draw hunts, or areas of conservative harvest, so you can choose to apply only for those if you are willing to not hunt every year.

WHY OPPORTUNITY IS IMPORTANT

Wildlife agencies are charged with the responsibility of conserving wildlife populations and providing for the regulated and sustainable use of those resources. That use has to be available to the broadest possible segment of society because that is the very foundation of this great system of wildlife conservation we all enjoy. Hunters contribute more than \$1 billion each year to conservation through hunting license fees, taxes on equipment, and private donations. In addition to those well-known contributions, hunters also spend money during their hunts which adds a significant amount of cash flow into rural communities across North America. According to a 2011 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service national survey, there were 13.7 million hunters that year and their hunting-related expenditures were estimated at \$33.7 billion.

Besides that enormous financial contribution to conservation and the economy, hunters represent a force of 13.7 million organized advocates for wildlife and their habitat.

When something threatens populations or the wild places they need, hunters are often the first to mobilize and fight against destructive forces. When politicians need to be encouraged, or discouraged, to vote a certain way, engaged hunters are there to show them the right course of action. Studies also show that nonhunter support for hunting is highest if the nonhunter personally knows someone who hunts. All of the conservation benefits that are associated with hunting are diminished when we erode the size of that army.

If no one cares about maximizing opportunity and getting as many people out in the field as possible, we weaken our hunting heritage. People who are denied the opportunity to go deer hunting for a couple years start to develop other interests in the fall. A study by Southwick Associates found 25% of hunters don't renew their license each year. We should be very concerned about why that is. It may be that they don't know where to go or have other activities competing for their time, but if it's because we did not offer hunting opportunity that could be made available then we are doing a great disservice to all who benefit from this great system of conservation. Hunters who primarily just want to hunt regularly need to do their part and be more engaged in the herd management planning and quota setting processes.

With fewer hunters, we lose the grassroots support for funding conservation, advocating for habitat protection, and

the ability to manage wildlife populations efficiently. As we continue to be more conservative in our hunt management, hunters begin to accept the lower number of permits, older age structure, higher buck:doe ratios, and lower hunter densities as the new norm. Once the hunting community becomes accustomed to this new baseline, there will be great resistance to emphasizing more opportunity for all hunters to support conservation in a sustained and renewable way. I fear at some point we will sit back and wonder how the North American Model slipped away from us without anyone noticing.



Jim Heffelfinger is Adjunct Faculty at University of Arizona, Professional Member of the Boone and Crockett Club, Chair of the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Mule Deer Working Group, and the Wildlife Science Coordinator for the Arizona Game & Fish Department.

See WWW.DEERNUT.COM for a copy of his book "Deer of the Southwest" and follow him on Twitter @GameTrax