

A Century of Deer Management in Wisconsin

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There have been 2 revolutions in North American wildlife conservation during the 20th Century and we are warned that we are on the cusp of a third revolution. The first revolution was in the early 1900s during a period of diminishing game populations. Teddy Roosevelt with George Grinnell and others ushered in a period of protection and restoration that was highly successful in reestablishing wildlife populations.

Aldo Leopold began a second revolution in 1933 with the advent of professional game management. And, the third on-going revolution is a movement toward the European style of management where landowners, in effect, own the game and control both whom hunts and what is harvested.

This European Model contrasts with the North American Wildlife Policy. Under the latter, wildlife is held in public trust and the material benefits (carcasses, furs) are allocated by law rather than by social status, land ownership, or wealth. The outcome of this on-going revolution will surely affect how Wisconsin manages and hunts deer in the future.

History and Travail

The history of deer management in Wisconsin during the past 100 years was driven in large part by these broader influences. Deer populations reached record low numbers by 1910 as a result of unregulated subsistence shooting and market hunting.

Protection included buck-only laws starting in 1915 and alternate closed seasons from 1925 to 1935. Deer populations responded rapidly in the prime habitats of the cut-over and burned north. In the southern part of the state, habitat loss and very low deer numbers delayed herd recovery until much later. So prior to the recent two decades, events were driven primarily by what happened in the north.

Winter starvation was noticed in 1935-36 and the chronic losses that followed led to the “Deer Wars.” These began with the “split” season in 1943 that permitted the taking of antlerless deer for the first time since 1914. Aldo Leopold, at great personal sacrifice, was among those that led the charge for herd reduction.

The all-time record high deer population in northern Wisconsin appears to have occurred during the early 1940s.

Over-reaction to the 1943 season by the public resulted in buck-only hunts until 1949 when antlerless and any-deer hunts ran through 1951. The cry went up, “Stop the slaughter, they’ll kill ‘em all!”

Adding to the public over-reaction to these liberal hunts was the fact that severe winters coincided with the 1943, 1950 and 1951 liberal harvests. These tough winters magnified

the impact of hunter harvest and reinforced the mentality that shooting does was not a good thing.

Buck-only hunting resumed until 1956 when Party Permits allowed the taking of a limited number of antlerless deer. Attempts to reduce the herd north of US Highway 8 in 1959 with large numbers of Party Permits again frightened people, particularly since hunters tended to concentrate in areas just north of the highway.

The perception of over-harvest was reinforced when the 1960 harvest fell off (due in part to record warm, snow-free hunting conditions). This prompted the Legislature to impose a 2-year moratorium on antlerless harvest. Management authority was temporarily removed.

The foregoing travail led to the **“birth of modern deer management”** in Wisconsin in 1962-63. A number of factors came together to consolidate a foundation from which our current management program has evolved.

Mandatory registration of harvested deer had begun in 1953, but it was 1959 when registration began using newly defined deer management units. The Sex-Age-Kill population-reconstruction technique for estimating deer numbers was adapted for Wisconsin use by Bill Creed in 1961. Unit-specific deer population goals were first established in 1962. And, legislation authorizing unit-specific quotas of antlerless harvest was passed in 1961 and implemented following the 1962 hunt. These were big steps in scientific deer management.

Management Model

The ability of Wisconsin biologists to monitor deer herd size, to prescribe unit-specific antlerless quotas, and to accurately predict harvest outcomes was soon recognized and envied by peers regionally and nationwide. Wisconsin became a model for deer management in North America.

Attesting to this recognition were professionally invited papers by Wisconsin authors. These included articles on harvest management to the regional Midwest Deer Symposium in 1979, the national book “White-tailed Deer Ecology and Management” in 1984, and to the 1994 national text “Research and Management Techniques for Wildlife and Habitats.” Other symposia and workshop papers on deer harvest management were also invited to Ontario, Vermont, and Pennsylvania.

While regulated antlerless harvest has brought Wisconsin much acclaim, the open statewide buck season should not be taken for granted. It allows any number of hunters to (1) hunt every year (2) all season and (3) in the area of their choice.

The tradition of “free-by-permission” hunting even on private and posted property has also contributed to Wisconsin having the third largest deer-hunting public in America. Only Pennsylvania and Michigan sell more deer licenses.

The Wisconsin hunting tradition contrasts with Southeastern states and Texas where hunting is more likely to require fees to hunt leases or club lands, and differs from many Western states where buck or bull quotas limit the number of hunters that can participate in a given area or year.

Controversies Continue

The technical ability of the State to manage deer has been widely acknowledged in the scientific arena, but has repeatedly exceeded public understanding and perceptions despite educational efforts. Thus, there continue to be confrontations with some constituency groups.

Wisconsin manages on a fairly fine scale (deer management units of 200 to 400 square miles of deer range). This is finer and with greater precision than other states. But, this does not meet the satisfaction of some individuals who are concerned about a square mile or smaller area. Public unrest has led to a series of audits.

The deer program underwent 4 reviews beginning in the late-1980s. The first was not by public demand, but occurred during preparations for a Federal Court hearing involving the Chippewa tribes. Later, the Legislative Audit Bureau was asked to investigate the deer management program. This was followed with appointment by the Natural Resources Board of a multi-constituency Ad Hoc Deer Committee to review the deer program. The most recent review was conducted during the Conservation Congress-lead Deer 2000 study.

All reviews gave generally favorable marks for procedures used for goal setting, population monitoring, and antlerless quota-setting. However, these audits have not satisfied all groups partly because some have forgotten and many folks remain unaware of them.

Reviews and audits can be helpful and likely there will be more of them. The quickest proof that the system works is to look back over the past 40 years of performance. With over 100 deer management units statewide, there are more than 4,000 annual unit results to examine. They indicate that the system has served us very well.

Scientific and quantitative deer management is not easily understood by or explained to the general public. Combine this low level of understanding with widespread suspicion of all government and you have a formula for ongoing struggle, particularly when some constituency groups feel that their objectives are not being met.

Increased public involvement in deer management, such as the recent "Deer 2000 and Beyond" initiative, was designed to bring the public into the center of policy making and learning. This type of procedure was meant to smooth the road for more consistent harvest management.

Now, chronic wasting disease (CWD) has certainly put a new wrinkle in our present focus and may profoundly affect our future.

Future

Many challenges face deer management and hunting as we enter the 21st Century, but two dominate other concerns.

The “third revolution” in wildlife conservation could be the greatest nationwide threat to the hunting heritage. It involves the trend toward privatization of wildlife and commercialization of hunting.

Symptoms of the trend include increased leasing of hunting lands, private efforts at so-called quality deer management, shooting preserves as featured on TV, the content of many sporting magazines, high fences, food plot development, acquisition of private hunting lands, hunts-for-hire, and deer baiting and feeding.

Privatization pressures and self-interest will be difficult to change. But, the second dominant threat is also daunting. Much hunting may also be lost to CWD. We all need to seek somehow to contain and eradicate CWD.

Deer management has always been exciting (controversial) and it will likely continue to be so. Balancing the interests of a diverse public is one of the principal challenges for any State’s regulatory agency. They seek to achieve and maintain responsible deer numbers while preserving equitable access to deer and deer hunting by the general public.

We all want deer to remain a charming member of our landscape and not a scourge. Agencies and citizens must work together. It is important that deer continue to be held in Public Trust and not as an item of property or commerce. And, we must conquer CWD. Then we can go back to enjoy arguing the finer points of deer management!