

# **Baiting and Feeding: The Problem that Will Not Go Away**

*Keith R. McCaffery*

Everyone likely has a fairly long list of problems that they can obsess over. But, one problem that has certainly polarized hunters in Wisconsin during the past several years is that of baiting and feeding deer. Why is this a problem? We hunters have made it so.

## **History**

Some level of baiting and feeding of deer has probably always occurred. My great-granddad was a market hunter and was known to put out salt in the late 1800s. The Wisconsin Conservation Department fed deer during winter from the mid-1930s until 1960. Farmers often placed cull apples or potatoes for deer. And, some businesses/resorts put out feed to attract a few deer for patrons to see.

However, baiting and feeding deer seemed to increase rather dramatically beginning in the late-1980s. Some growth in baiting can be probably attributed to growing awareness that it was legal. Recreational feeding likely increased in part because of residential sprawl to the countryside. The extent of recreational feeding in Wisconsin is still largely unknown. And, surveys to document the baiting trend were only recently begun in the mid-1990s.

Michigan conducted deer baiting surveys beginning in the mid-1980s. Michigan hunters reported placing 3.3 million bushels of bait in 1984. In 1991, 13.1 million bushels of bait were used! A four-fold increase in just 7 years! One might suspect that the growth-rate of baiting was similar in Wisconsin, though starting somewhat later.

## **Harbinger for Change**

For decades, Wisconsin and Minnesota deer biologists watched Michigan for emerging trends that eventually would affect hunting in the sister states. In 1991, baiting was not yet popular in Wisconsin or Minnesota, but one could imagine that quickly changing. Anticipating the ethical and ecological implications, both Wisconsin and Minnesota sought to prohibit baiting before it became widely established.

Minnesota succeeded by Commissioner's Order in 1991. A subsequent survey by the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association found that 70% of hunters favored the ban (this was before TB or CWD was known in the Midwest). But, Wisconsin DNR encountered some objections to a ban and was asked to study the matter for up to 5 years. Without taking action to control it, baiting became widespread in Wisconsin within a few years.

By 2001, a survey found that 40% of Wisconsin bowhunters and about 17% of gunhunters admitted to baiting deer. Nearly half of Wisconsin hunters seemed to think that there was nothing wrong with baiting deer. Many hunters seemed to think it was merely a matter of personal ethics and choice. Clearly, hunters should know now that baiting is more than a personal matter of ethics.

### **Ethics and Baiting**

Ethical concerns dominated debates among hunters. Pre-baiting an area and excluding other hunters on public land didn't seem fair. Attracting deer onto private land where they were not accessible by other hunters seemed unethical. Hunters who claimed that bait was necessary to position deer for a "clean shot" seemed to lack patience to wait for an appropriate shot. Some bait users were tempted to exceed quantity limits, while others illegally shot over lighted baits at night. Some justified baiting by saying simply that it was legal. Meanwhile, 26 states did not allow baiting of deer already by 1999. Many non-hunters questioned the practice as being unfair to deer. But, all of these arguments paled in comparison to the biological and ecological issues that were largely overlooked by those favoring baiting and feeding.

### **Disease Transmission**

The discovery of TB in free-ranging deer in Michigan in 1994 underscored the need to re-evaluate baiting and feeding practices nationwide. TB transmission is known to occur off of feed piles. TB has been found among captive deer and elk in Wisconsin, including a recaptured escapee. How long before it is found among free-ranging Wisconsin deer?

The discovery of CWD in southwestern Wisconsin in February 2002 raised the panic flag again. While the exact mechanism for CWD transmission is as yet not understood, there is growing evidence that it is passed in the saliva, nasal droppings, and/or feces of infected deer.

The REPEATED REPLACEMENT of food to a location, as occurs during baiting and feeding, distinguishes these practices from any other natural foraging by deer. These sites become progressively contaminated with feces, urine, saliva, nasal droppings, and pathogens. My brother would say that anyone having walked through such a site would never lick the soles of his shoes again! Why encourage deer to lick such sites?

There are about a dozen communicable diseases of deer and we should not foster conditions favorable for the transmission of any of them. Domestic livestock often feed out of the same site, but farmers must constantly shoot cattle full of anti-biotics to maintain their health. We don't (can't) do that with wild deer.

### **Ecological Impacts**

If 100,000 archers and 100,000 gunhunters bait, imagine the quantity of bait placed in the deer woods. This can easily be thousands of tons of artificial energy being dumped into the natural system. Add to that the quantities of food placed by recreational and supplemental feeding. This energy changes productivity, survival, distribution and behavior of deer.

Carrying capacity is artificially elevated causing undesirable impacts on plants. Deer are attracted into or near residential clusters or onto private land where firearm discharge is unwelcome or access is restricted. Deer distribution becomes increasingly uneven. Highly productive herds require special hunting seasons (e.g., T-zones, earn-a-buck) to

contain herd growth. All of this greatly complicates proper harvest management of the public's deer.

### **Confounding Issues**

Some think that baiting and feeding are a private landowner's right. They forget that wild deer (all wildlife) are a public trust to be managed by the States for the benefit of all citizens. To the extent that landowners post their lands against hunting, they de facto privatize any deer that might be present.

Baiting and feeding (and foodplots) may exacerbate this by attracting, concentrating and holding public deer in a privatized situation. Other hunters do not have access to these deer. Hunting opportunity suffers and very often community-established deer population goals are unattainable or are ignored by the hunter. Deer distribution becomes increasingly patchy (boom or bust).

Wisconsin has a world-class deer herd that generates at least a billion dollars of economic activity every year. We also have an agricultural industry that fears some diseases that are shared between wild deer and domestic animals. Yet, we selfishly chose not to ban baiting and feeding of deer, despite disease transmission risks.

Some hunters seem addicted to baiting, plus there is an industry that has grown to support baiting and feeding practices. These hunters and this industry seem to have won the hearts of Wisconsin legislators despite the pleas of scientists, conservationists and farmers. So-called "compromise" legislation, a capitulation to those who profit from selling bait and feed, will guide the near future of baiting and feeding of deer.

### **The "Compromise"**

The new law authorizes the DNR to regulate feeding and limits the quantity of bait and feed to no more than 2-gallons per site. The only real compromise was in quantity. Previously, there was no regulation of feeding and up to 10 gallons of bait could be used at any one time.

The change in quantity to 2 gallons will have greatest effect on those individuals that were feeding with trucks and gravity feeders. This new rule represents some progress as the amount of "artificial energy" will be reduced. Still, a rural resident that places ONLY 2 gallons ONCE each day during a 150-day winter will have placed a cumulative ton of food. Year-round feeding of 2 gallons per day would amount to 2.5 tons per site each year.

Rhinelanders has a night-time population of about 8,000 people, but the Chamber says the day-time population is more nearly 20,000. Thousands of cars commute into the city daily from lakeshore- and woodland-homes where people interact with the deer herd. If only a small proportion of these folks feed deer, one can quickly imagine thousands of tons of "artificial" energy being fed within 12-15 miles of Rhinelanders, alone.

### **Important Problem Remains**

There seems to have been little recognition that 2 gallons is still sufficient to habituate multiple family groups of deer to visit a bait-feed site. According to disease specialists, veterinarians, and wildlife biologists, this is a mechanism for disease transmission. Inter-agency State scientists called for a total ban statewide on baiting and feeding. Scientists from across America and Canada endorsed this recommendation. State hunting and farmer organizations, veterinary society, and newspapers endorsed the ban. But, it didn't happen.

What consideration was given for enforcement? Our relatively small Warden force facetiously jokes about issuing shop-vacs so that they can vacuum up bait piles to see if they meet the 2-gallon criteria. A quantity restriction is far more difficult to enforce than a total ban.

There are only a few known actions that can be taken to proactively combat the establishment and spread of CWD. A bait-feed ban was a primary part of those actions and we have compromised it. Controlling the movement of carcasses from infected areas is another necessary action and this legislation died in a committee of the Legislature this year. How many other tools do we want to compromise if we are serious about containing and eradicating CWD?

### **Conclusion**

The repeated replacement of foods to a location distinguishes baiting and feeding from any other foraging by wild deer. A small quantity is all that is necessary to habituate deer to return to a site. Two gallons is plenty enough to attract multiple family groups of deer, especially where other bait-feed piles might be nearby. Feed-bait sites become incubators for disease transmission as they become progressively contaminated. Hunters and fisherman have a history of enforcing ethics on themselves for the sake of the resource (bag limits, catch-and-release) and their own well being (gun safety). It is time for a new ethic in hunting to emerge. Hunters and citizens should ostracize those that continue to bait and feed. I'm convinced that baiting and feeding remains a problem primarily because hunters, especially, have not gotten themselves informed. Thus, baiting and feeding remains a problem because hunters have allowed it to remain a problem.