The Issues At Hand

No pens, no fences, only 100 percent fair chase hunting...oh, urp!

By Dr. James C. Kroll

Editor's note: This previous column is still timely, so we thought we would dust it off and share it with our readers once again.

Every year or so, an article comes out in which the author asserts he is going to cover the “controversial issues” of fair chase. He goes on to give a rehash of the same old material, presented in such a way not to offend anyone. In so doing, he deftly sidesteps the real issues we are facing as deer hunting and deer management come into the 21st century. This column, I promise you, will deal with the most important issues. In doing so, I probably will step on a few toes in the process, but it is time someone steps up to the plate on this critical issue.

As a caveat, let me assure you I have broad experience in deer hunting. Of the several hundred bucks I have killed—some of which have been record-book animals—only a handful have come from high-fenced properties; not because I am opposed to them, but I prefer to hunt the wild, far away and challenging places. I also want to assure you bowhunters I have indeed killed lots of bucks with a bow (recurve, compound, etc.), so do not think you have anything on me. I also have hunted whitetails in every habitat in which they reside, including the tropics and New Zealand. In saying this, it is not my intent to be boastful, rather to assure you I have “walked in your boots.”

It is hard to imagine two cavemen, Muck Muck and Tamud, sitting around the campfire, engaged in a spirited discussion of what is fair chase. These folks would, and regularly did, kill more than they needed—and never worried about how fair their tactics were to the game. North America is covered with evidence of mass over-kills. Hunting to these folks simply was the way to survival. It was not play.

Subsistence hunting persisted in one form or another until the early part of the 20th century for many peoples. By the mid-20th century, hunting (and often fishing) had become a recreational rather than a subsistence activity. Although I still hear folks talking about “getting their venison,” countless tons of venison lay in freezers around the country, slowly getting freezer burn. For many people today, hunting no longer is a means of bringing meat to the table, other than as a novel treat.

One of my pet peeves is the persistent use of the term “sport hunting.” Hunting, as it exists today, pure and simple, is a ritualistic return to our roots. It rightly should be called “recreational hunting,” which better describes what it does for us. It allows us to re-create ourselves annually. It is a reconnect with our genetic tendency to hunt and gather.

The word “sport” is defined as (1) that which diverts and makes mirth; pastime; amusement or (2) mock; mockery; contemptuous mirth; derision. In regard to hunting, it is defined as: “Diversion of the field, as fouling, hunting, fishing, racing, games, and the like, especially when money is staked.” Obviously, if we view hunting as sport, we look at this activity in a much different way than when we consider it to be recreation.

Sports must have rules, and intuitively there must be a winner of the game. The purpose of rules in sport is to assure all sides play fairly. The focus is on the participants, not the game itself or the object of the game. No one ever concerns himself with the welfare of the ball or bat, only whether or not all participants are being treated fairly and obeying the rules of the game.

It was not until hunting became a “sport” that rules became important. What are the rules of hunting? Unfor-
In it were discussed how hunters should purport themselves, especially in regard to proper pursuit. The focus was more on a hunter being an important part of management than deciding what was “fair.”

Although written hundreds of years ago, it informed the reader on how to age live deer, a topic only recently “discovered” by American wildlife managers and the outdoor press. To date, however, no one in America has written such a book.

We conducted a study here at the Institute for White-tailed Deer Management and Research on what people consider the definition of fair chase. To our surprise, two totally different interpretations appeared between hunters and non-hunters (and anti-hunters). When it was all said and done, hunters consider fair as being related to each hunter having “fair access to the game.” To the non-hunter, fair was having consideration for the animal and its welfare. So, it turns out the vast majority of hunters really could not care whether they are being fair to the animals, provided some other guy does not have unfair access to the game. As Shakespeare said, “Therein lies the rub!”

Today, we see a great deal of class warfare in American society. Politicians tend to use this to generate support for their particular political agendas, and nowhere do we see this more than in modern hunting. The NRA published an article (in American Hunter) detailing how the periodic study by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, on hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation in America, revealed three important tration in regard to poor quality hunting opportunities.

It is similar to what we are seeing in the Middle East where theocratic dictators are selling the idea America is the cause for the misery and poverty of their people. So, today we see an effort—whether on purpose or accidentally—to divide hunters based on class warfare.

Texas is a unique state. I do not have to tell you that. And, deer hunting, especially trophy deer hunting, is an integral part of our hunting heritage. In the past, access to big bucks pretty much was the privilege of folks with large ranches or properties. That does not mean the poor hunter could not have a chance at a big buck, rather there is more abundance of big deer on large properties.

Then, along came high fences, which created access to trophy bucks on relatively small properties. This did not fit well into the minds of the landed gentry. One landowner told me, “I don’t understand all the fuss about high fences. There are plenty of large ranches for people to hunt.” This “let them eat cake” mentality really describes how large landowners and the wealthy think about trophy deer hunting. They do not live in the real world.

If we are to make hunting a sport, rather than recreation, it is time to write the rules. But, I would be opposed to making it a sport. Animals should not be the object of sport. If, however, hunting is to be considered a ritualistic opportunity to retrace our past, and if we really care for the animals, the rules have to be written by each of us individually.
By the turn of this century, these folk discovered, to their horror, small landowners were producing bigger bucks and more of them. High fences were and are going up at an accelerating pace. Just like the Middle Eastern radicals, this movement provided the perfect victims on which to focus public frustration. The large landowner can profess to be looking out for the little guy, yet our study on why people build high fences clearly showed the number one reason was frustration, not growing bigger bucks.

Folks are tired of trying to manage their deer on small properties, only to have the neighbors kill the young bucks high-fenced ranch. To his amazement, it took hunting all day for six days to kill a trophy.

The same person who criticizes fencing is often a person who hunts over bait or from a truck (legal in Texas). In fact, I often facetiously have said, “In Texas, the average buck kill either is a mugging or drive-by shooting!” In South Carolina, where the state agency has “whipped up” a frenzy among hunters against fencing, they hunt deer with dogs! In Michigan, until recently, deer hunting has been a battle of the bait piles. I have seen hunters bring in an entire semi-load of sugar beets over which to hunt from his heated box.

I firmly believe we each must develop our set of rules for hunting and rules governing our personal conduct in the field. These rules should arise from our own abilities and capabilities, not from what we think will make others happy.
maintain record books view fair chase in simple terms. They are also among the first to criticize trophy hunting as an evil activity. Yet, who has done more to focus attention on what a buck has on his head than how difficult he was to kill? Again, hunting is viewed as sport by these organizations; and, as such, there must be rules of conduct to make it “fair” for all those who play the game. There have to be winners! Record books are for people, not animals.

If we are to make hunting a sport, rather than recreation, it is time to write the rules. But, I would be opposed to making it a sport. Animals should not be the object of sport. If, however, hunting is to be considered a ritualistic opportunity to retrace our past, and if we really care for the animals, the rules have to be written by each of us individually.

A good friend confided on a hunt in Mexico that when he was a young man, he firmly believed it would be unfair to kill a buck either coming back from or going to his stand. “I know that sounds dumb,” he confessed, “but, I really believed that.” He is anything but dumb. What he did was establish his own personal set of rules for how he would hunt. Not shooting a deer going to or coming from his stand made perfect sense to him, as good as any other rule.

If we establish written rules of hunting, who will write them? Who will be alienated and who will be left out? Who will be the keepers of the true faith? And, what tactics will be considered fair?

Bowhunters commonly use tree stands, yet are they fair? Yes, I too have been “made” by a deer when I was perched in a tree, and yes deer do look up, but you do have a marked advantage over a deer from an elevated position. Try shooting the same mature buck or doe from the ground.

As one famous criminal once said: “Why can’t we all just get along?” And, that is my point. Stop this class warfare. It does our favorite recreational pastime no good. When you critically examine who raises the most Cane about fair chase, it is hunters, not non-hunters.

I firmly believe we each must develop our set of rules for hunting and rules governing our personal conduct in the field. These rules should arise from our own abilities and capabilities, not from what we think will make others happy. Do you kill a deer for you or for your friends? If you do make your own rules, write them down and review them periodically. They are uniquely your own.

My personal rules of hunting are:
1. I will not take part in a canned hunt.
2. I will shoot only mature bucks.
3. When I kill a deer, there will be a good reason for it.
4. I will leave each deer herd I hunt in better shape than I found it.
5. I will try to avoid hunting over bait, excluding food plots.
6. I will avoid man-made stands and blinds.

Now, are these the rules I think you must follow? Absolutely not! They are only my rules. It would be unfair to impose them on anyone else. If you want to hunt over bait or from an enclosed blind—fine and dandy. The bottom-line criterion I used in establishing my own rules was the simple question: “Is it good for the deer?” If it keeps deer around and saves deer habitat, I have no problems with what you are doing. So, go hunting and have fun.