I am blessed to have spent much of my career working over the entire range of the white-tailed deer. As a consequence, I have examined deer management both from landowner and hunter’s perspectives. There are times I feel my role is to serve as a “confessor” for these groups.

Weekly, my phone buzzes with some complaint by a landowner about a lease or vice versa. So, I decided to devote this column to the common problems encountered when landowner and lessee meet.

The most common complaint today is: “We’re being price out of deer hunting.” But when a group of hunters really gets a property to the point of producing big bucks, the landowner calls up one day to inform them he has a better offer.

Years of hard work and self-control quickly go out the window. The only recourse is look for a new place where the same thing happens again and again. Yet, it does not have to be this way if both sides only consider the other’s needs and aspirations.

Seldom does a landowner consider anything but a short-term lease. After all, lease prices may go up, the landowner’s situation may change and there is the ever-present human tendency not to make long-term agreements.

However, a long-term lease actually works to the landowner’s and lessee’s advantage. A landowner who looks cautiously for new hunters willing to pay more and more may not be coming out on top in the long haul. Here’s why:

My colleague Dr. Gary Kronrad and I conducted an economic analysis on values a hunting lease may add to a ranch or other property. We looked at the true value of activities, such as hunting camp development, electrification, water well drilling, road construction and maintenance, security, as well as actual improvements to the deer herd itself.

We discovered the lease amount being paid to the landowner pale in comparison to the per acre value lessors offer. We also discovered, though, the willingness of hunters to provide improvements is a direct function of the level of security they feel towards the longevity of the relationship.

What happens in a case where there are no guarantees? Just about the time the herd is producing trophy bucks, some fellow with a handful of cash shows up to take it away? Is that a good deal or not?

Hunters, especially those who can afford a good South Texas lease, understand economics. As with any commodity, prices go up and the landowner obviously wants to make the most income. So, in a good lease relationship there needs to be an acknowledgment from both sides that a lease fee will increase inevitably over time.

The trick is not to increase the fee beyond the financial limits of the hunter. That’s where value-added activities come into play. A good lease should include an agreement from the hunter concerning what activities they will invest in as lessees, either in direct payment “sweat equity.” Each of these should be agreed upon and the value of each clearly stated.

For example, what is the benefit of feeding deer? When done correctly, feeding deer often costs thousands of dollars per year. Our research has shown a deer on the typical ranch will eat about two pounds of feed per day.

A 2,000-acre ranch with an “estimated” deer population density of one adult to 20 acres will have about 100 deer. That means the herd will consume around 200 pounds of feed per day or $6.00 per ton per year. That amounts to about $10,000 ($5 per acre), not including feeders and labor.

Research has shown that deer feeders can be doubled through feeding, so the value-added benefits of feeding can be substantial, and that’s just one activity.

Adding in a water well (at least $9,000), road construction and maintenance, road maintenance ($1,000 per mile), etc. brings the value of those contributions to a very high level.

But, won’t the new, higher-dollar lessors do the same things? Maybe, but my experience is the more someone pays for the lease, the more they expect out of it. The previous hunters commonly let young bucks walk, with the expectation they would be around in three or four years to benefit from this action.

I have been working with some hunters on one of the best-known trophy ranches in Mexico, the Cueva Ranch. For many years, these guys have invested thousands to make Cueva what it is today. They think nothing about letting a Boone and Crockett buck walk. He can pass on his genes.

Fortunately, the family that owns the ranch long ago realized this type of committment was worth real dollars over the long haul. They easily could lease the ranch for much more, but the new lessees would not have the same emotional and financial commitment to the herd. So, they were less willing to make the sacrifice. What is a ranch with dozens of trophies worth compared to one with mediocre, immature bucks?

The prudent landowner obviously wants to increase or increase the value of his property. To do so, more often than not, he establishes shooting quotas, usually for the number of trophy bucks and “management” or cull bucks. This is often a big mistake on the part of the landowner. “You each can shoot one trophy buck and one management buck,” the rancher will declare.

Some lessors will translate that into action by his hunters. The average hunter will work all season trying to extract the biggest buck on the place. This “cherry picking” does not stop with the killing of a trophy buck.

The next step is to search out the largest

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firearms refresher course

1. An armed man is a citizen. An unarmed man is a subject.
2. A gun in the hand is better than a cop on the phone.
3. Check the original point and the interface.
4. Gun control is not about guns. It's about control.
5. If guns are outlawed, we can use words.
6. If guns cause crime, then pencils cause spilled words.
7. Free men do not ask permission to bear arms.
8. If you don't know your rights, you don't have any.
9. Those who trade liberty for security have neither.
10. The United States Constitution © 1791, all rights reserved.
11. What part of "shall not be infringed" do you not understand?
12. The Second Amendment is in place in case they ignore the 13.

64,909,967 firearms owners killed no one yesterday.
14. Guns have only two enemies: rust and liberals.
15. Know guns, know peace and safety. No guns, no peace, no safety.
16. You don't shoot to kill; you shoot to stay alive.
17. 911 - government-sponsored Dial-a-Prayer.
18. Assault is a behavior, not a firearm.
19. Criminals love gun control - it makes their jobs safer.
20. If guns cause crime, then matches cause arson.
21. Only a government afraid of its citizens tries to control them.
22. You own the rights you are willing to fight for.
23. Enforce the "gun control" laws we have, don't make more.

by the way, the family also gets to hunt

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seldom kill a top end buck until he has passed his prime.
Research has shown most bucks make their ultimate genetic contribution between 4 and 5 years old. Those are the years bucks fight their way into the breeding pool. After their fifth year, their contribution declines, and it really does not do much harm in taking them at that stage. Some biologists want folks to wait until a buck is 8 or 9 years old, but there is no sound science behind this strategy.

So, in a real trophy management program, one (and there are several others) important management strategy is to try to kill most of the bucks 3 years old or older, with small main frames and eight or less points. This also must be coupled with protection of the best bucks on the property for at least two years. In so doing, the bottom gradually approaches the top.

The next problem involves who can hunt the property. That is the source of this issue's title. Many times, landowners reserve hunting rights for their families, which turns out to be a disaster.

First of all, who exactly is "family"? Does this include grandchildren and cousins? Will they be allowed to take trophy or management deer? When will they be on the property? Some ranchers designate a specific portion of their hunting property for family. Yet, every study ever done reveals even on extremely large properties (25,000-plus acres), most of the bucks in one part of the ranch ultimately end up on another. So, we go on to lease your property, lease the entire ranch.

It does not end with family. In a good lease, it is established in writing exactly who gets to hunt. I have seen so many a good lease destroyed because the guest hunter killed the best buck taken all year. Since it is a sound strategy to remove most, if not all, management bucks, this is often difficult for a small number of hunters.

Most ranches in South Texas limit hunter density to one per thousand acres. Although this has no real basis in fact, a 5,000-acre property would then only have five hunters. Again, I like the way some Mexican ranchers are now organizing these leases.

Because there is a sound relationship—
and clear objectives for the management program—these ranchers permit the lease to sell management buck to guests. The owner earns not go into the pockets of the lessees. Rather, there is just a accounting of income, and, the money goes toward an annual, and, usually, agreed upon, project.