

KNOWLEDGE BASE



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Frankendeer: The Fear is Real

One of my first actions as the 2012-13 president of The Wildlife Society (TWS) was to appoint a committee to address the issue of intensive deer breeding. TWS is the wildlife profession's premier scientific

organization, and its members are very concerned about the expansion of deer-breeding facilities, including proposed legislation that would allow the industry into new jurisdictions. In 2011, such legislation was introduced in at least 10 states. The bills vary but most would take management authority for captive deer away from state wildlife agencies and transfer it to the agriculture agency or state veterinarian.

Is this a new issue for TWS? No and yes. No—inasmuch that practices employed in intensive deer breeding have long been recognized by TWS as harmful to wildlife. TWS's Technical Review on the Biological and Social Issues Related to Confinement of Wild Ungulates (November 2002) surveys the vast body of science documenting the adverse effects of confining deer and other wild ungulates. The most serious problems concern the spread of diseases from captive deer to wild populations. For example, within this past year Iowa and Pennsylvania reported their first cases of chronic wasting disease (CWD), traced back to deer-breeding facilities. In October, Indiana experienced a CWD scare following the escape of 20 deer from a deer farm breeding "trophy bucks." In addition to such biological concerns, privatizing wildlife and transferring management authority away from wildlife agencies is contrary to the public trust doctrine and other pillars of the North American Model of Wildlife Management.

So what is new about the issue? Make no mistake—the new operations are not the little deer farms that supply venison as a novelty item on some restaurant menus. The techniques of intensive breeding include confinement of deer (usually whitetails) in breeding pens or enclosures, genetic manipulation, and treatment with steroids and other growth stimulants—all for the purpose of growing abnormally large, often grotesque antlers. The industry includes the

trade, distribution, and transportation of semen, ova, and embryos as well as farm-raised animals. In essence the deer change from being a public trust resource to "alternative livestock," consigned to a miserable existence of captivity and intensive intervention to produce "enhanced" breeders and bucks for the market.

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during the 1990s. Farming of maral (same species as our elk) was the most profitable agricultural endeavor in the Altai Republic. Maral farmers had selectively bred captive herds for over a century, resulting in small-bodied animals with abnormally big antlers.

The antlers were shipped to Korea and China for use in medicinal concoctions. It was a simple business. The larger the antlers, the higher the price-per-unit-weight that farmers could get for them.

For the deer breeding industry in North America, big antlers also mean big money. Here the market is driven not by medicinal values, but by one thing only: the craze to possess a huge set of antlers—no matter the cost, ethics of the practices involved, or the sheer artificiality of it all. The Internet is alive with ads and videos showing how you, too, can "hunt" in a high-fenced enclosure where one of these artificially-enhanced monster deer will be delivered to you, guaranteed!

Of course this has nothing to do with hunting, and is the farthest thing imaginable from the fair chase ethics we champion as Members and Associates of the Boone and Crockett Club. Yet it has immense potential to undermine our hunting heritage by giving the "antis" one more, horrendously awful example of "what is wrong with hunting."

I'm very proud of TWS for stepping up to lead the science in fighting this disturbing trend. I'd be doubly proud if the *Fair Chase* community would step up to lead the ethical debates. ■

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