

CONSERVATION COMPASS

Game Farm Trophies

Recently, I was seated in the “first cabin” of a plane — a privilege accorded those who fly too much — and reading the *Journal of Wildlife Management*. My seatmate guessed that I was a wildlife biologist. He discovered that I was an editor/author of *The North American Elk: Ecology and Management*, of which he had a copy.

He showed me photographs of an elk, killed on his “annual trophy hunt,” that carried massive antlers — 7 points to the side and perfectly balanced. He had scored the antlers using the B&C method and cited a raw score verifying that this was among the largest bulls I had ever seen.

The “hunt” occurred on an “elk ranch” under legal conditions. The bull was 8-1/2 years old, born and raised on a licensed elk farm until age 5, and sold as a “breeder bull” to the fenced-in licensed “hunting preserve” where it was killed. The bull was fed a high protein diet laced with nutritional supplements and kept separated from other males assuring that it bred the cows turned in with it and precluded injury from clashes with other bulls. The objective was “monster” bulls in the sire’s image. At age 8-1/2, it had served its purpose as a breeder and attained maximum trophy value.

The bull was released alone into a “shooter pen” small enough to preclude a client wounding and losing the animal — good business, for once in the shooter’s possession, its value was described, with a wink, as “well into five figures.” My seatmate had seen pictures with an “estimated B&C score,” and made the deal beforehand.

He had, he said, a choice of “hunting” — shoot from a blind overlooking the feeder, or from a vehicle, or “stalking the animal” with the operator as back-up. An easy shot at close range was certain, as the pen was small, the bull had no fear of humans, and the operator was there to help.

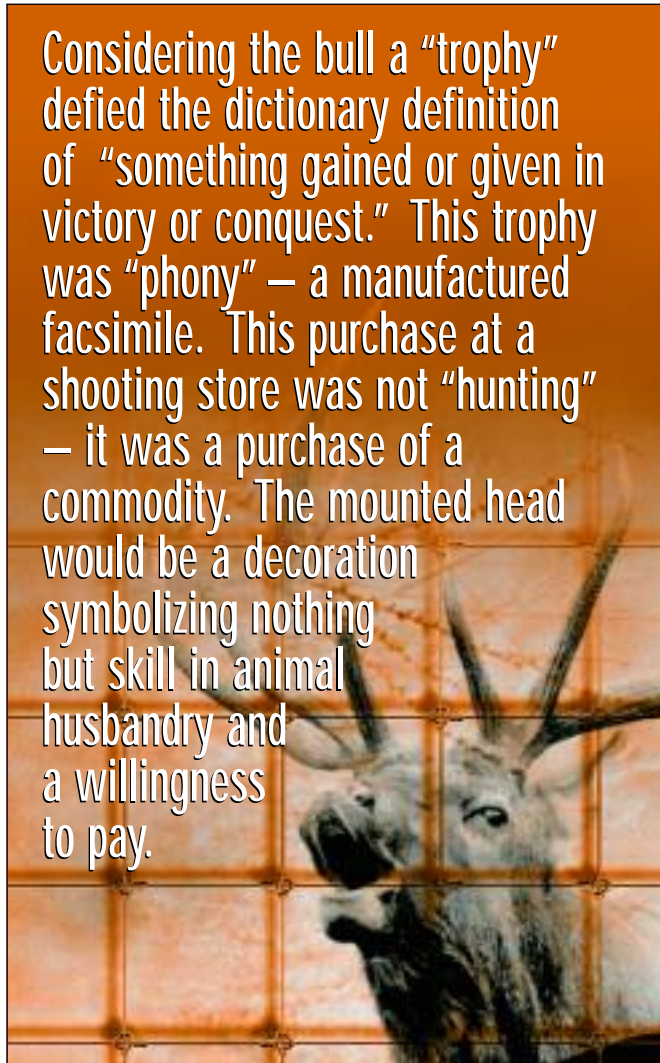
My seatmate described his trophy

room with its mounted heads of deer and elk plus several other exotic species on display. All had been taken in similar circumstances for fees ranging upward from \$5,000.

The hour was late and the cabin darkened as one passenger after another turned out reading lights, reclined seats, and drifted into what passes for sleep in an airline seat. I leaned back and pondered the story.

It was obvious why an entrepreneur would enter such a business — there was a niche to be exploited. It was a new way to increase return from the ownership/management of land — business acumen right out of Business 101. Clearly, this customer was satisfied. So what’s the problem?

Considering the bull a “trophy” defied the dictionary definition of “something gained or given in victory or conquest.” This trophy was “phony” — a manufactured facsimile. This purchase at a shooting store was not “hunting” — it was a purchase of a commodity. The mounted head would be a decoration symbolizing nothing but skill in animal husbandry and a willingness to pay.



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Other such operations that I have seen are closer to the “natural world,” but still intensively focused on producing “monster” males as judged by antler size and formation. The objective is to satisfy clients who pay top dollar to kill the animal and pass off the freakishly large antlers as trophies.

Three factors influence antler growth — age, nutrition, and genetics — variables manipulated by big game managers and trophy farmers alike. In such extreme as this, there is no “trophy” and no “hunt” involved. Such doesn’t even deserve being called a “canned hunt.” “Canned shoot” is a better term where clients pay for and shoot semi-domesticated “freaks” highly unlikely to occur in the wild.

Such activities are distant from any concept of “wildlife,” “hunter,” and “hunted.” These practices are nothing but intensive animal husbandry and slaughter. There is no skill in stalking the prey, no mystery, no tradition, and no honor involved. Even using such terms as “hunter” and “game” and “trophy” is a travesty — a burlesque.

Aldo Leopold, the “father” of wildlife management in North America and a member of the Club, long ago noted that the value of wildlife and hunting was inversely related to the artificiality of the circumstances. That was good wisdom then — and more so now that the “artificiality of circumstances” has reached levels described by my seatmate. Such excesses, unless addressed by the hunting community, has the potential of turning the tide of public opinion against hunting in North America. ■



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