

# I've Walked the Line

## Have You?

By Robert D. Brown  
B&C Professional Member

Though we may not realize it, many of us who hunt big game are approaching a line in the sand. No one will tell us where that line is, and we may not even know it when we cross it. In fact, there may not be any obvious consequences for us when we cross the line. Likewise, the game we hunt is approaching a similar line, with the same vagaries, lack of clarity, and lack of obvious consequences the hunters face. But the long-term consequences of crossing these lines will be significant indeed.

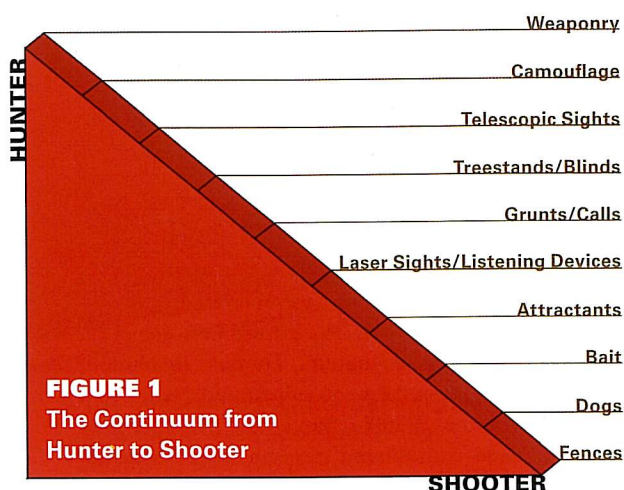
The lines I am referring to are the ones you cross from being a hunter to being a shooter, and when big game change from being wildlife to being domesticated livestock. We are now somewhere on the continuum between the Native American, dressed in buckskins and wielding his spear, stalking wily deer, elk, moose, or bear and the modern farmer or rancher who dispatches a docile, farm-raised sheep with his .22 before preparing it for dinner. Technology has allowed the hunter to gain more and more advantage over his prey, from seemingly innocuous things like camouflage clothing and high-powered rifles to telescopic sights, listening devices, range finders, Doe-in-Heat and other scents, and Deer Suckers and other lures.

In the Wal-Mart in Kerrville, Texas, near my former Hill Country deer lease, I purchased a Feeder Repeater made by Moultrie Feeders. The front of the package depicts two trophy-size whitetails and states, "We make the call, you make the shot," and "Sounds like an automatic deer feeder." Yes, that's right, for \$4.95 you can buy a battery-powered gizmo that fits in the palm of your hand and makes the sound of a deer feeder going off. You don't even have to buy the corn! On the back of the package, quotes are taken from a *Wildlife Society Bulletin* article by Dr. Scott Henke titled, "Do white-tailed deer react to the dinner bell?" (WSB 25:2:291-195). The quotes include, "A recent study from Texas demonstrated that with a little training deer would arrive at a timed feeder when it goes off," and "Deer can easily be trained to show up at a particular time and place," and "Some deer respond from the sound alone and will run to the sound."

Most hunters I know feel that this device clearly crosses the line. But where in that continuum are we, and where should we be? I'd argue that Native American hunters were not necessarily ethical by modern standards. They drove buffalo over cliffs to kill them, set baited traps, and set fires to drive game. In other continents jungle dwellers used poisoned arrows. None of that would pass the Boone and Crockett Club's Records or Ethics Committees. But these people had to hunt to survive or they would perish — we don't.

A lot has been written on the topic of why we hunt. Not long ago, a member of The Wildlife Society sent out an e-mail to officers asking us to list the benefits of hunting in a modern society. For me the answers were easy:

1. Hunting is an important means of controlling wildlife populations, to prevent overpopulation and possibly irreversible damage to habitat.
2. Hunting is a family-oriented activity, with most hunters learning from their



fathers, brothers, or spouses.

3. Hunting requires the hunter to know and appreciate nature — the biology and habits of the game animals and the importance of good wildlife and habitat management.
4. Hunting is a healthy outdoor activity, requiring physical fitness, shooting skills, and outdoor awareness.
5. Hunting helps maintain a heritage and tradition of living off the land, environmental ethics, and an appreciation of skills needed to survive in a pre-electronic world.

I received only one response (which was from another TWS officer and Professional B&C Club member): "Don't forget that game meat is a healthy food, and many of us enjoy eating it!" So we can easily justify hunting as an activity in our culture, but why do "we," that is, you and I, go hunting?

Around the country there have been numerous university and game-agency studies over the years about why some people hunt, and why others do not. In general, people hunt to be in nature, to be with their friends and families, to pass on a heritage to their children, and because they like game meat. A fairly small minority of hunters are trophy hunters. Those who do not hunt, for the most part, simply have other things to do and have never been introduced to hunting. Some say they don't like the idea of killing, or don't like guns, and a few say hunting is too expensive or they don't have a place to go. A surprising number of non-hunters say they would like to go hunting if they had the chance.

One of my favorite quotes about hunters is from Aldo Leopold, the father of wildlife management in this country. He said, "A man may not care for golf and still be human, but the man who does not like to see, hunt, photograph, or otherwise outwit birds or animals is hardly normal. He is super civilized, and I for one do not know how to deal with him." He also said, "Poets sing and hunters scale the mountain for one and the same reason — the thrill to beauty."

In 1942 the Portuguese philosopher, Jose Ortega y Gasset wrote a book titled, *Meditations on Hunting*. In it the author



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Reference:  
Wildlife Society Bulletin 25(2):291-195  
Do white tailed deer react to the dinner bell?  
"Deer can be easily trained to show up at a particular time and place."  
"A recent study from Texas (Henke) demonstrated that with little training deer would arrive at a timed feeder when it goes off."  
"The deer would still arrive no matter if corn was in the feeder or not."  
"Some deer respond from the sound alone and will run to the sound."  
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states that the essence of hunting is to pit our senses, instincts, knowledge, and experiences against those of a wild animal. He said that we no longer hunt because we have to, but we continue hunting to remind us of who we are and where we came from. He said the greater the confrontation, the greater the satisfaction from the hunt. That is, a true hunter must know the biology and behavior of the game, must be in good physical shape, must practice marksmanship, must have good eyesight and hearing (although those can be remedied nowadays), and have experience in the game's habitat to test his or her instincts to stalk or at least not be seen or heard.

But look at what is happening to hunting as an activity these days. In Figure 1, I depict the evolution of a hunter to a "shooter." I use the term shooter to describe the person who uses no more skill or instincts than that farmer killing his sheep for dinner. Most of us would not say it is wrong to use a high-powered rifle to take most game, although some find more challenge in using muzzleloaders or archery equipment. Most would not say camouflage clothes, face paint, tree stands, or telescopic sights are inappropriate. We use grunts or whistles to call deer and elk, but what about professionally-made, recorded calls? What about the fancy listening devices we see advertised in hunting magazines, or laser range-finders, or laser sights? The Boone and Crockett Club clearly states that game cannot be entered into the Record Book if the animals have been taken with electronic devices. But what about the ethics of using these devices to take the non-trophies most of us hunt? And let's not forget the scents, like doe urine, and baits, like Deer Suckers, that can be put out, and of course the ubiquitous corn feeders, where they are legally allowed. Are we crossing a

line where we are just shooting an animal and not hunting it?

Believe it or not, I'm not trying to be judgmental here. I've done many of these things myself, where they were legal. And I know that in some terrain, controlling the population of deer, for instance, would be nearly impossible if it were not for the use of bait. I recall a meeting of the South East Deer Study Group many years ago, which I attended as I left Mississippi State University as their Wildlife and Fisheries Department Head to go to Texas A&M University, to take a similar position there. At those annual meetings, there is an evening "Shootin' from the Hip" session, where controversial topics are debated. The Mississippi deer biologists were browbeating the Texas biologists because Texas allows hunting deer over bait. The Texans, however, countered that the Mississippians were unethical because they allowed the use of dogs. Ethics are what your culture allows them to be.

High fences, for instance (Fig. 2), can be an advantage to the hunter, if they channelize the game. But they are more often used as a means of controlling the population of game and the quality of the habitat. I tend to "sit on the fence" on this issue, as I've seen both good and bad use of high fences. But fencing is part of what I deem the transformation of wild animals into domesticated animals. The Laplanders have domesticated reindeer to the point of milking them and harnessing them to sleds. New Zealanders farm red deer for meat and antlers, and Asians have domesticated water buffalo as draft animals. What goes into the process of domestication, and are we not on that slippery slope with the ways we are managing our deer? In Figure 2 you see the general trend. Whether it is sheep, cattle, goats, or deer, we first provide better habitat by clearings and plantings, and if that's not enough,

we provide supplemental feed. We control predators so we'll have more lambs and calves, and perhaps more fawns. We certainly want to count our "herd" and mark them or perhaps use infrared trail cameras to identify the trophy deer. We can dip and vaccinate our calves and lambs, and also our deer if we catch them, or we can put anti-worming agents in the feed.

Breeding has gotten completely out of hand. For decades we've heard

of moving Michigan and Wisconsin deer to Southern states to breed, but in recent years artificial insemination of whitetails has become commonplace in some areas, and now Texas A&M University has a private company cloning whitetails. That's right — cloning! Skin cells from the ear of one superior buck have been grown in test tubes, and dozens of clones (not just identical twins, but actual clones) have been produced, which will be sold for princely sums to "shooters" to "harvest."

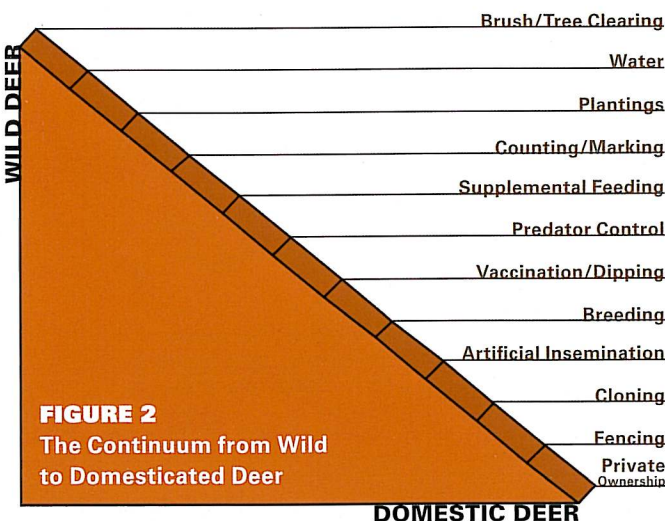
There is obviously a lot of money in this business. A breeding buck in Texas recently sold for \$650,000. The well-to-do that are into this activity are the ones pushing for private ownership of deer and other games species to protect their investments in these "superior animals." But what are these deer superior to?

These bucks didn't have to forage for their own food, they didn't have to learn to avoid predators, they didn't have to fight other bucks for breeding rights, and they won't have to learn to avoid hunters. They may still be skittish, much like skittish cattle, but they are not wild animals. Neither are the fenced, fed, bred and trained-to-the-feeder deer we see more commonly. Again quoting Aldo Leopold, "The recreational value of a head of game is inverse to the artificiality of its origin, and hence in a broad way to the intensiveness of the system of game management that produced it."

My argument is that each hunter needs to individually draw our line in the sand as to what is an ethical hunt, and what is legitimate wild game. We need to consider if we are still in this for the beauty of nature and the thrill of the hunt, or are we compromising our ethics and our values for the sake of a big trophy head on the wall. Surveys have shown that most of the public approves of hunting, but only for harvesting the meat and controlling the wild population. The non-hunting public strongly disapproves of trophy hunting. What would the non-hunting public think if they understood where we were going with hunting "technology" and feeding and breeding our "wild game."

Aldo Leopold said, "The ethics of sportsmanship is not a fixed code, but must be formulated and practiced by the individual, with no referee but the Almighty." Here's where I'll disagree with Aldo. I'd argue that if we don't set some standards soon, the public may decide for us. ■

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**FIGURE 2**  
The Continuum from Wild to Domesticated Deer