

FROM THE EDITOR



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The Currencies of Big-Game Management

Wealth, power, jealousy, resentment, 24-hour surveillance, survival, career suicide, good guys, spooks, hired guns and assassinations... the mild-mannered *Fair Chase* reader may now

be thinking: What the...?

No, this will not be the review of some novella of fiction. Today's piece concerns the governor's-, or, better, the auction-tag phenomenon. As I understand it, this is where some state governments involve themselves in the auctions of pure-premium hunting opportunities of public game animals, thereby allowing a few of our most excessively wealthy neighbors to bypass the standards and quotas that regulate the rest of us. These activities are all very much in the name of the common good, mind you. For participating game and fish departments, and/or some hunting-based conservation non profits, the monies raised by these super-special allowances have equaled comparatively massive windfalls.

All the same, the murmur of discontent rose appreciably following the Boone and Crockett Club's recent announcement that a 478-inch-plus Utah elk, a titan dubbed the Spider Bull, which was hunted and killed by a sportsman on auction tag, had been panel crowned the new World's Record. But a funny thing happened in that go-round of the well-intended hunter-conservation celebration: blowback. For the first time anyone could remember, a fairly sizable group of hunters "rushed the front gate" waving pitchforks.

During the fallout from the super-legit Spider Bull, your forward-thinking Club conducted a survey. The report that it elicited became one measurable in an address by the Club's Vice President of Big Game Records, the distinguished Eldon L. "Buck" Buckner, to the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies on July 12, 2009. The fact that the Club was present recognizes the view that free-marketing a few of these tags is a much-needed source of revenue for wildlife management. The survey indicated that in 2008, 16 western states and one Canadian province captured an average of \$650,000 from auction tags—more than \$9 million cumulatively—with 85 percent of

the proceeds earmarked for species-specific projects. "The balance benefitted cooperating conservation organizations, such as the Wild Sheep Foundation, which sell the tags," Buckner told the managers.

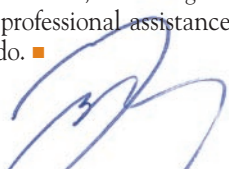
The considerable money from auction tags represents a sort of regionally supplemental health care system for wildlife populations, including non-game species. Further, perhaps, it is cash that's not as readily created by other methods of privilege distribution, including, many of us presume, more publicly accessible raffle systems.

With respect to the credo that timing is everything, where this jackpot seems to get a bit sideways today is in the not-in-this-lifetime pursuit of ultra-limited species, the special-privilege packages that often accompany these whopping purchases and in the elaborate ways a few of these tremendous animals may come to be hunted. Consider this all-encompassing example: Over the years, tens of thousands of sportsmen have invested millions of dollars into putting wild sheep back on the mountain, but almost exactly none of us will ever enjoy the *carte-blanch* privileges of an auction permit.

And then there is the fact that off-the-grid "hunting" options are certainly available to the magnificently rich, which can challenge the very soul of fair chase. In a world of accounting firms and aviation fuels, \$45,000 to scouting is a rounding error. In fact, just to keep things moving, how 'bout we dial in a statewide old-fashion hunting practice? Bounty paid to outriders for maps to the whereabouts of on-license national treasures wasn't even new in 1887.

Only a rogue alarmist would suggest that the governor's-tag system is broken or that at any amount unscrupulous behavior by auction-taggers is the norm. Certainly, though, the environment for these programs is now evolving more quickly than ever before. Therefore, on behalf of the Club, Buckner recently called on our fish-and-game fellowship of western managers to exert some intellect and power to the issue, perhaps focusing a few of the shekels so easily ginned by these programs on wisely educating the public, the media and our next round of public officials.

Based on my limited experience with big-money decision makers, educating them and offering your professional assistance is about all you can do. ■



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