

A FALSE PRODUCT



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While the story of the exact origins of the expression “the real McCoy” vary, most people instinctively know it means “the real thing” or “the genuine article.”

Our society tends to value the real thing over a fake, although imitation has earned a place in commerce. Take a synthetic cubic zirconia “diamond” for example. People who cannot afford or do not want the real thing do have an option, without diminishing the value of a natural diamond.

But commerce in wildlife is a different story.

The hunting community today faces a challenge with the false product of farm-raised, genetically-manipulated whitetail deer and elk. Privatized herds of deer and elk are being artificially grown to produce antler dimensions well beyond the capacities of nature. This is not for science or research or the betterment of the species. It’s for ego, status and commerce. This raises many interesting and troubling questions:

- Does this intense manipulation add value or devalue the real thing? Just because we can engineer deer and elk, should we?
- What does this say about the direction the hunting community is taking itself, or being led?
- Is this defining the value we place on nature, these species, and the opportunity to hunt?

- What are the implications of re-classifying these animals as private livestock and not wildlife, so they would fall under the jurisdiction of state departments of agriculture instead of fish and game? Is less oversight and regulation a legitimate concern? If it’s livestock, is it still hunting?

- Shouldn’t we take action given the solid connection between shipping this “product” around the country and the spread of CWD to both captive and wild herds?

- The public is being led to believe this is hunting today. Shouldn’t we be disassociating this industry and its false products from hunting?

They’re all good questions that we should be prepared to answer. To begin with, the traditions of hunting were forged in the wild and with wild game. So were the traditions of fair chase, and the “no guarantees” nature of hunting.

These traditions are diametrically opposed to the “put-and-take” operations of game farms and shooting preserves, where a customer can, in many places, choose a specific animal and pay by the antler inch. These operations virtually guarantee success, many backed by a no kill-no pay scheme. Although all are under high fence, their names—Wilderness Lodge,

High Adventure Ranch, and Autumn Wind—suggest a wild experience, presumably because it is a more powerful draw for customers.

So what’s wrong with a false product and these businesses? And what of their customers? Do they have any culpability in this game? This industry has a long list of prepared statements to silence its critics, including:

- We are providing a desired service to willing customers and some people just don’t have enough time or the physical capability to go on a “real” hunt.

- Our deer and elk are better cared for than animals living in the wild, and we are merely allowing people to hunt the way they choose without judgment.

- We offer a great opportunity to mentor and introduce young hunters to hunting and we host a lot of disabled veterans.

- What’s wrong with people wanting big bucks and bulls?

This may all seem like harmless free enterprise, but we really haven’t seen the big hammer fall yet, at least in this country. Much of the public and the media are unable to discern the differences between game farm shooting operations and fair chase hunting, and they have proven more likely to take issue with all forms of hunting rather

than sort out the good from the bad. For example, there recently was a global, public uproar over captive bred lion shooting in Africa that inevitably cast a wider net over the acceptability of *all* African hunting. Subtract “lion” and insert “deer” and the same thing can happen in North America.

The takeaway is that commercial interests are deciding the public image and fate of hunting for us. For now, it’s legal, but many states are re-thinking the matter. As fair chase sportsmen, the best thing we can do is not continue to look the other way but do everything we can to keep wildlife as an untamed expression of the natural world, elevate the experience of a wild, free-ranging hunt, and distance this industry and its false products from the hunting practiced by the majority of sportsmen.

There is a reason why you never see a mount of a farm-raised deer or elk with its ear tag. Is because there is still tremendous value in the real McCoy? Let’s hope so. ■

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