

## A statement by Valerius

Geist in his newest edited volume: "Wildlife Conservation Policy" caught my attention as it relates to the lack of ethical restraint and respect by hunters. Geist points out that "*The American system [of wildlife conservation] is based on the inefficiency of consuming wildlife, such as making every consumer buy the appropriate equipment to obtain, process, and store the quarry, travel to and from the hunting or fishing grounds, and often legislating the hiring of guides in pursuit of wildlife.*" These words remind me of current management of both mule deer and public hunters on the Rocky Mountain Front, especially on the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch. Here, we have a situation in which current management overcomes the inefficiency by providing hunters with easy access to vulnerable mule deer; thus, eroding the system of wildlife conservation by limiting options for future management.

Since the purchase of TRM Ranch by the Boone and Crockett Club in 1986, a policy of public hunting has been in place. At the time, the Club made public access one of their management objectives for the ranch, mostly for mule deer hunters. Over the last ten years, this policy has given hundreds of hunters the increasingly rare opportunity to hunt on vast expanses of privately-owned land. And hunting on the TRM Ranch is exceptional. Depending on weather conditions in the high country, up to a thousand head of mule deer migrate onto the ranch seeking forage and shelter in the open foothill habitats. In this harsh environment, mule deer depend on the availability of these habitats for winter survival. This high concentration of animals combined with the easy accessibility of the ranch, ensures that deer hunting in this manner presents few challenges. From different vantage points, hunters can view often hundreds of deer at a time. And most of these viewing sites are within short walking distance from the nearest county road. Thus, many hunters spend only a few hours hunting/spotting before killing a

deer. As a consequence, hunters have been extremely efficient in taking large numbers of mule deer in the past, often most of the mature bucks in the herd. Without some form of regulation, over-hunting is inevitable.

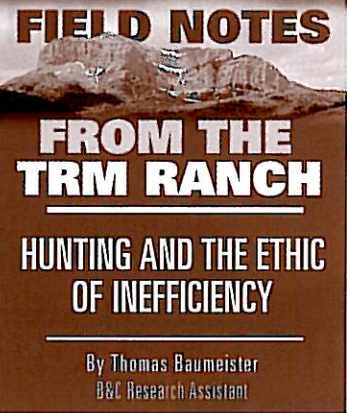
A few years ago, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks established a permit system for private lands for the latter part of the hunting season during which mule deer are most vulnerable. Although this system has limited the number of hunters in the area, the legislative mandate to provide public hunting makes this approach far from perfect. The permit system has no provisions to respond to seasonal fluctuations in migration patterns and weather conditions, and is revised with hindsight only every two years.

To compensate for this inflexibility, TRM Ranch management devised its own harvest and hunter management program for the ranch. Now, a harvest quota ensures a more consistent take of mule deer that takes into account vulnerability and herd composition. Although very successful in preventing over-hunting on the ranch, the voluntary management program has had little influence on the overall regional take of deer. This is because neighboring ranches operate under different premises, some of which grant unlimited fee access to hunters. The result is that many of the protected deer on TRM ranch are taken on adjoining properties, especially during the rut in November. This pressure on mule deer has recently been intensified with the adoption of the hunter access program by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Under the new access program, private landowners are financially compensated for the "inconvenience" of granting access to public hunters. Through a simple formula of hunter days, type of access, and huntable species, landowners can earn up to \$8,000 per season. Currently, no cash rewards are made to those landowners who invest in habitat management or who establish voluntary hunting

quotas to maintain the health and productivity of wildlife species. Instead, this program aims only at assisting hunters in overcoming the inefficiency of having to ask for permission prior to hunting private lands. Now, access is as easy as driving up to a ranch house and signing a permission slip. And many landowners welcome the extra bucks—the green bucks.

What are we trying to accomplish with our wildlife and hunter management programs today? Are we eroding our own system of wildlife conservation by overcoming the inefficiency of consuming wildlife? Are we, in fact, in violation of our own ethics when we hunt mule deer on TRM Ranch? We tend to refer to laws and regulations as guideposts for legally permissible conduct, forgetting that personal restraint and respect for the animal and hunt should be virtues of the responsible hunter. Enamored by gadgetry, technology, and more recently by financial incentive programs, we are rapidly descending a dangerously narrow path in pursuit of personal gain. Treasures like TRM Ranch may cease to grant public access, only to be set aside as refuges to protect mule deer from the hunter. Current mule deer and hunter management on the Rocky Mountain Front is a classic example of the dominant exploitative human attitude toward nature and the diversity of life. The future of the American system of wildlife conservation will depend on the degree to which individual ethical restraint and respect based on the fair chase principle will augment existing legislative frameworks of ensuring the continued inefficiency of consuming wildlife.



**Are we eroding our own system of wildlife conservation by overcoming the inefficiency of consuming wildlife?**