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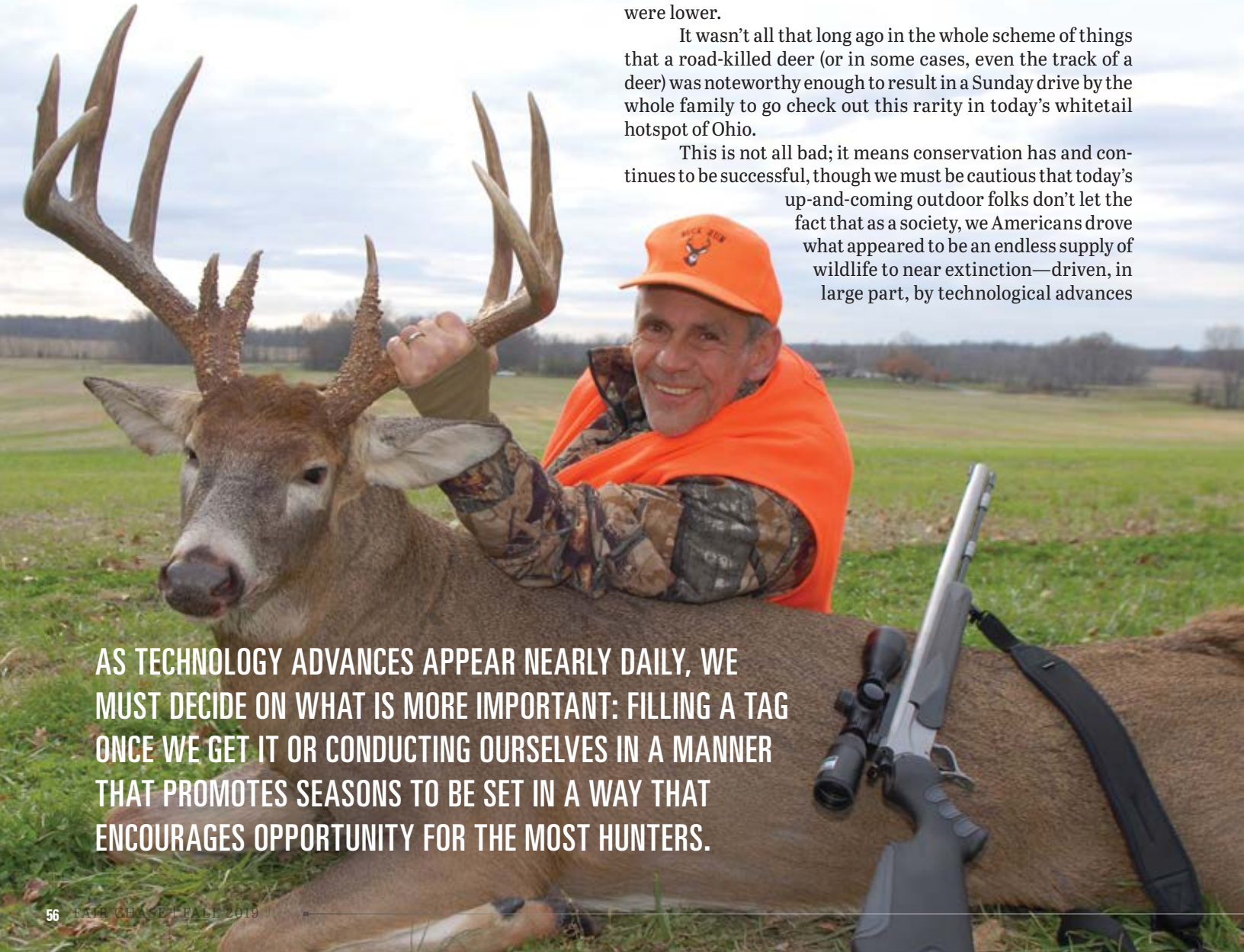
TECHNOLOGY: PLEASE ENJOY RESPONSIBLY

They have finally come out and confirmed that I am not a millennial, or maybe I am, depending on which clickbait you read. In any case, I came of age with the personal computer and all the gadgetry that goes with it. I am far from a tech genius, but the idea of Bluetooth connections, apps, digital mapping, and GPS are all well within my grasp. I listen in on conversations about how technology is the end of hunting as the older generations of hunters scoff at a program that shows you land ownership and helps ensure you are within the prescribed hunt area.

In my opinion, the next generation of hunters truthfully cares about the wildlife and its habitat just as much as the previous. The trophy photos they show may be of the meat they pack out rather than the antlers, but that doesn't make it wrong. Amongst their peers, they are justifying the act of satisfying the inner desire to participate in nature by latching onto the locavore movement. The culture is different, but the desire to participate and to ensure the future of wildlife is the same. What the newer generation, myself included, does not have in our memory banks is a time when wildlife populations were lower.

It wasn't all that long ago in the whole scheme of things that a road-killed deer (or in some cases, even the track of a deer) was noteworthy enough to result in a Sunday drive by the whole family to go check out this rarity in today's whitetail hotspot of Ohio.

This is not all bad; it means conservation has and continues to be successful, though we must be cautious that today's up-and-coming outdoor folks don't let the fact that as a society, we Americans drove what appeared to be an endless supply of wildlife to near extinction—driven, in large part, by technological advances



AS TECHNOLOGY ADVANCES APPEAR NEARLY DAILY, WE MUST DECIDE ON WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT: FILLING A TAG ONCE WE GET IT OR CONDUCTING OURSELVES IN A MANNER THAT PROMOTES SEASONS TO BE SET IN A WAY THAT ENCOURAGES OPPORTUNITY FOR THE MOST HUNTERS.

in weaponry, transportation, and cartridge design.

I am not, by any means, warning of mass population reduction across the range of modern wildlife due to technology, but we must remember that the technology of the 1800s facilitated us nearly wiping out every member of the species we so lovingly cherish today. We humans have the technology and ability to very effectively harvest wildlife. Fortunately the field of wildlife management was successful in its development, started by Club Member Aldo Leopold in the 1930s. Every state relies on these educated agencies and now set harvest levels to ensure the take doesn't exceed the sustainable yields of these populations to help secure their continued existence.

The problem with technology and efficiency comes with how these managing agencies are funded. In most cases it's through license sales and Pittman-Robertson funds. License sales are where the issues start to bubble up on why the most ethical action is not to ensure quick success.

Let's take an archery elk hunt, for example, that has 100 hunters wanting to hunt a particular unit. The population can sustain 10 elk harvested per year. If we use historic archery tag success rates of say, 10 percent, that means each of those hunters can hunt every year, and one of 10 years they will kill an elk. All get opportunity, the population is maintained at a sustainable level, and the agency sells 100 tags at $10 apiece, which provides the agency $1,000 to manage these elk.

What if the hunter success rate increases to 30 percent? The population can only sustain 10 elk harvested, but if there is 30 percent success, that means 30 elk are harvested from that population with 100 hunters out. To account for this increase in success, the tags start getting allocated by a draw where only roughly 33 hunters can be in the field. The state can now only sell 33 tags at $10, so they only have $330 to manage the herd. Theoretically, I could only hunt once every three years and it will take me statistically three tags before I harvest an elk. The population is still the same size, the harvest is still 10 animals a year, and I will kill one elk every 10 years but I just lost my opportunity to hunt seven out of 10 years. In addition, assuming it takes $1,000 to manage the herd, I will now have to pay $33 for my elk tag that I have a 1 in 3 chance of filling instead of 10. Basically the numbers are all the same, other than my opportunity.

The same happens if we go to 50 percent success. The state can only have 20 hunters in the field, which means the tag goes up to $50, and you get to hunt twice a decade. And you still will harvest one elk every 10 years.

In terms of recruitment and retention of hunters, this is clearly problematic. The issue gets even worse if we start trying to figure in wounding loss. A hunter waits five years for a tag. He is so obsessed to fill it as he hasn't been able to hunt the previous four years, so he takes a shot too far for his abilities and wounds an elk that later dies and is not recovered. That surplus of 10 animals in the population is now nine. If the hunter fills on another bull, now, instead of 33 tags issued at a 30 percent success rate, there can now only be 16 issued.

I know some will say that this argument just goes to show we should ensure a kill and use all the technology we can, but personally I would rather hunt every year, honing my skills to deliver one single well-placed and effective shot when my once-in-10-year opportunity presents itself.

This newer generation of social media allows us to watch more closely what our fellow hunters do and say. I know I have joked, using "eating tag soup" as a synonym to failure. I propose that instead of a negative, those electing not to fill a tag be honored. Consider the hunter that says they shot a management buck because they couldn't find a big one. Perhaps settling for a younger specimen (in certain areas) just to ensure a tag is filled should be considered unethical.

This argument gets further convoluted when we add in variations to populations and conditions across the country. New Jersey, for example, is no place to criticize someone for filling their first buck tag on a small forkhorn. The population is out of control, and hunter harvest isn't near high enough so that other drastic actions must be taken.

Though that same hunter that comes out West after waiting five years or more to draw an elk tag probably should really consider if that young raghorn is really a bull worth taking. Or is the fact that you can use magnifying electronics on a weapon historically limited to maybe 100-150 yards really the path we should be taking? Be the hunter that draws the coveted muzzleloader elk tag and limit yourself to traditional muzzleloading equipment, or the archery hunter that can shoot a bow 70 yards but instead tries to close the distance to 40 yards.

Since the inception of the Club and the ideas of Fair Chase were first promoted, hunting has existed due to self-regulation. I make the same argument about auction tags as I will about a draw hunt: you drew or bought the experience, not the animal.

Let us ensure as we decide which technologies to embrace that we are not doing so to guarantee harvest. That, my friends, is called a shortcut, and thankfully in the world of hunting we pride ourselves on taking the ethical road, not the easy road.

As technology advances appear nearly daily, we must decide on what is more important: Filling a tag once we get it or conducting ourselves in a manner that promotes seasons to be set in a way that encourages opportunity for the most hunters. Access is one of the major obstacles hunters face, so by utilizing all the available technology you are greatly increasing your personal hunting footprint and space you need; therefore, reducing availability to others. Historically 150-300 acres of whitetail ground was nearly a full time job to scout. You had to be able to get out to pull camera cards, check gates, monitor prevailing winds. Now I can do all that from my laptop from anywhere in the world on all my farms spread across four states. Ultimately you are furthering a problem that, as the human population grows and technology increases, may become one of the greatest challenges that wildlife management, funded through hunting, will ever face. ■