

# CONSERVATION COMPASS

## The Quest for Trophies — Cloning is a Step Too Far

The Boone and Crockett Club began keeping records of remarkable “heads and horns” to document their status as their populations trended toward extirpation or even extinction. The data available from that record keeping has been used by researchers to test the hypothesis that sport hunting was leading to deterioration in the genetics of big game species. These tests were constructed on the theory that “survival of the fittest” was manifest in the size of the antlers or horns of mature males. Genetics, nutrition, and age, in combination, were assumed to be responsible for the size of antlers and horns.

Some hunters are dedicated to pursuing and taking animals with large antlers or horns as trophies. Why? Trophy-class antlers or horns personify animals with the survival skills — and luck — to have evaded predators, including humans, for long enough to bear “trophy class” antlers or horns. In turn, hunters skilled enough — and lucky enough — to harvest such animals attain a trophy that attests to their achievement.

Examination of the entries in the Club’s records books, long ago, put aside fears that sport hunting was causing deterioration in the genetic makeup of North American big game so far as reflected by horn or antler size. But, by then, record keeping had become an honored aspect of the North American hunting heritage and continued to honor the best specimens taken in the spirit of Fair Chase.

Over intervening years, hunting big game became increasingly entwined with commercial activities involving guided hunts, lands managed for the production of hunting opportunities, and management (nutrition, herd structure, and genetics) to produce males of trophy quality. There is little doubt, given the entrepreneurial spirit of North American societies, that capturing economic return from hunting helped preserve and produce hunting opportunities. And, certainly, top economic returns to those in the “hunting business” are related to providing opportunities to harvest trophy-class animals.

Massive antlers and horns are representative of the “fittest” males only if the genetics, nutrition, and age that, in combination, produce such are “natural.” Clearly,

game managers traditionally manipulate those factors when they control hunting to maintain appropriate sex ratios and age composition. Likewise, numbers are controlled to provide adequate nutrition and prevent deterioration of habitat.

But, when: “superior” males are bought and sold for breeding purposes; animals are provided supplemental feeds laced with dietary supplements aimed at producing large antlers or horns; and competition for breeding is limited to “superior” males, the animals produced are less and less products of survival of the fittest in interaction with their native habitats and are ever increasingly a product of animal husbandry.

I do not know, precisely, where the line lies between good management and inappropriate levels of animal husbandry. It is not clear just when a big game animal is “wild” and a superior example of evolutionary process and when it becomes, literally, a “monster” of human creation highly unlikely to occur in nature. But, as a Supreme Court Justice said about pornography, “I know it when I see it.”

There will always be debate in such matters. But, sometimes, the line is clear, bright, and unmistakable. Word comes from Texas that a “deer scientific breeder and veterinarian” has cloned buck deer with the objective “to increase the genetics ... and, therefore, to grow bigger horns” for producing “breeder deer” to “improve genetic quality” of deer herds.

These deer are not “superior.” If so, when released into the wild they would dominate “inferior” males and pass on their “superior” genes with the result that subsequent generations would exhibit those characteristics. If such deer were the result of the evolutionary process for that habitat, they would already exist having evolved from the age-old drama of the “survival of the fittest.” Such are the deer honored in the records books.

The deer cultured in laboratories and feed lots are not “superior.” They are simply freaks. The title of “Frankendeer” seems more appropriate. Such do not deserve the title of “trophy” as they are but ornaments produced to assuage the ego of the buyer or the creator — the “wizard behind the curtain” produced the aberration. Wherein lie the mystery, traditions, and honor associated with centuries of hunting traditions?

Such is but an outright perversion of the fair chase hunting tradition and the age-old concept of trophy that honors both hunter and hunted. It is simply a step too far.

Cloning is an amazing technological accomplishment with great promise to achieve good. This, unfortunately, is a frivolous misuse and a perversion of all that is associated with the concept of “trophy” and of “fair chase.” Sadly for the authors, who have reasons to revere this institution that succored many of the world’s finest wildlife specialists, this work comes out of the College of Veterinary Medicine at Texas A&M University. ■



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