

WILD, FREE RANGING BIG GAME

THE ETHICS OF FAIR CHASE



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Wild (naturally occurring), free-ranging (unrestricted within its biological home range) big game has always been the central focus of the Boone and Crockett Club. This is also fundamental to the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, which is the basis for most of the game laws and conservation efforts in the United States. As long as respect, dignity, and reverence guide our efforts afield, we will be allowed to continue in our pursuits. This is the sweet spot in which we as hunters are supported strongly or moderately by 77 percent of the adult population (Mark Damien Duda, February 2015). Incidentally, when the general public believes we have strayed from this, the number can and does shift away from support and tolerance. On an ethical plane, we have to do whatever we can to dissuade and coach bad players within our ranks and we have to defend ourselves aggressively against those that pretend to be our brethren when they clearly are not. The most current and egregious of those are deer breeders driven solely by ego and profit, operating with blatant disregard for the well-being of the wild herds across this great land.

As I am sure you have seen lately, there is a movement afoot to move the management, regulation, and control over the deer breeding business away from wildlife agencies and into agricultural agencies. For some reason the participants in this business see agriculture departments as more forgiving than fish

and wildlife agencies. The misfortune here is deeply philosophical in that agriculture is about managing and regulating a profit-based industry, while wildlife management is about the provident management based on the well-being of wild animals and wild places. The measure of success for these two regulatory areas is very, very different. Both are necessary, well-intentioned, and competent, but the goals and techniques of each are very different.

What is tragically obvious is that the breeding business is profitable enough to influence the otherwise good judgment of lawmakers who would put corporate profit above the needs of our wildlife resources. I see this as eerily similar to the market hunting that led to the eventual decimation of entire species. The players have the same motivation and disregard. The difference this time is the bullets are chronic wasting disease, EHD, and the like. Whoever is the consumer of their product either does not care or is unaware of the damage; and therefore business goes on quite profitably.

While some might dismiss this as vitriolic, anti-business sentiment and others might fall back on the simple justification that "it is legal," I assure you I am as much a capitalist as any of you. Sometimes I just wish a particular industry didn't exist as it has no socially or culturally redeeming benefits for the rest of us. More specifically, the problem is that this industry cuts hard against the North American Model and

the public resource doctrine upon which it was established. As I said earlier it confuses the general public and erodes the tolerance we currently enjoy on the part of the non-hunting public. And finally, it pretends to be hunting.

That said, there might actually be an opportunity in this situation, at least until the decision-makers recognize their mistake and correct it. While everyone will debate and discuss the ability and appropriateness of one agency over another, I hope no one misses the simple fact that the breeders have accidentally re-branded their product as "livestock," not wild game. The pseudo-hunt scenario, into which they will place their product, is not even masquerading as the real deal anymore. They are now going to charge mega-bucks for shooting cattle and they have purchased the label themselves. Their blindness, borne out of greed and ego, keeps them from seeing how they have increased the distance between their contrivance and a real hunt. With their gross, mass-produced caricature of wild game and a sure-kill livestock slaughter, they are highlighting this enormous difference. I seriously doubt any of us have ever had chasing livestock on our bucket list.

My hope is that the consequence of their cavalier,

disrespectful, and deceitful ways is ultimately a major devaluation of their product. Now that they are selling a livestock harvesting opportunity in place of a hunt, the participant will be less likely to enjoy the experience and the bragging will be tolerated less and less until there is no one to listen at all. At some point, when the breeder's product no longer holds any luster, it will lose its value completely and the business model from which it came will collapse under pounds and miles of antler inches.

In the meantime, the rest of us need to pay attention to what is happening. CWD in Texas; this terrible legislative mistake in North Carolina; deer being transported across state lines from known CWD infected farms; and the list goes on and on. We need to be hypervigilant and make sure our legislators know where we stand. Tell anyone that will listen that slaughtering livestock pretending to be wild game is not on your bucket list and shouldn't be on theirs. ■

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Pedrotti, Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

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