



Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Deer and Wild Turkey Study Group Committee Report 2007

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Respectfully submitted by
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Meeting Time and Place

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife (DOW) hosted the 31st Midwest Deer and Wild Turkey Study Group (MDWTSG) meeting August 19-22 at the Elizabeth L. Evans Outdoor Education Center Canter's Cave 4-H Camp in Jackson.

Attendance

With the exception of North Dakota, representatives from all 12 member states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) and the province of Ontario, Canada were present at the meeting. Ontario sent only a turkey group representative to this year's meeting. Representatives from the National Wild Turkey Federation and the Quality Deer Management Association were in attendance for at least a portion of the meeting. Besides invited speakers (Appendix 1), guests included Jim Crum, West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, David Yancy, deer program specialist for Kentucky Fish and Game and Kip Adams of the Quality Deer Management Association.

Executive Summary

The Midwest Deer and Wild Turkey study group conducted its annual meeting August 19-22, 2007 at Elizabeth L. Evans Outdoor Education Center Canter's Cave 4-H Camp in Jackson. As in past years, this year's meeting began with a number of invited presentations to the entire group. Speakers from the Ohio Division of Wildlife, The Ohio State University, and Ohio University discussed a range of topics including marketing strategies employed by the Ohio Division of Wildlife, Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia (VHS) and restoration of the American Chestnut in Ohio. Presentation abstracts are attached (Appendix II). Individual deer and turkey group discussions including state and province status reports, and a brief joint business meeting followed on the second day. Aside from passing the baton to Nebraska, who will host the 32nd Annual MDWTSG and welcoming new member states Kentucky and Colorado, much of the discussion focused on the group's future and its purpose and how best to meet the needs of the Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agency (MAFWA) directors. The highlights of this discussion are summarized in a Director Information Item below.

Director Action Items

None to report.

Director Information Items

MDWTSG Direction and Purpose

During our joint business meeting, it was brought to the group's attention that some in attendance had reason to believe that the future of the group was in jeopardy without substantive changes to the group's form and function, specifically its productivity. Much of the ensuing discussion focused on a general lack of clear direction and guidance from MAFWA. Because our liaison to MAFWA, Dale Garner, was unable to make the meeting due to other obligations, the host state agreed to contact Dale and discuss these concerns with him directly and to share these discussions with the group at a later date. Dale assured the group that there were no plans to disband and that the

current directors do not have a radically different set of expectations for the group (relative to other groups). They do expect, as did their predecessors, for the biologists to serve as the "eyes" and "ears" for them on emerging biological and management issues. What wasn't especially clear was whether that meant "wait for direction", or prepare white papers, resolutions, or simply a laundry list of topics on our radar, submit them to MAFWA and then wait for direction. Of the 4, Dale thought that the latter was the best idea. To that end, the deer and turkey biologists in attendance were asked to submit their top 3 current or emerging deer and wild turkey management issues in their respective states. These would not only be submitted to MAFWA, but would also be discussed at our meeting in Nebraska. The topics were ranked and the top 3 issues follow. The deer issues are based on input from 11 biologists in 10 states while the turkey results are based on responses from 3 biologists in as many states.

Top 3 Current Deer Management Issues in the Midwest		
Rank	Topic	Comments
1	Strategies to Increase Antlerless Deer Harvests: Education Instead of Regulation?	It came as no surprise that nearly everyone is struggling with antlerless deer harvests. How do we compete with leasing, "hornography", and a growing unwillingness to harvest an animal that is being devalued by its own abundance and even our efforts to manage it. There seems to be consensus among many in the group that we may have focused on opportunity for too long at the expense of educating hunters about the role of antlerless harvest in deer management. How do we change a hunter's willingness to harvest antlerless deer? Marketing the science of deer management and the changing role that hunters MUST play in deer management may be a place to start. This topic received 60% more votes than the 2 nd place finisher.
2	Leasing	How do we manage deer on leased lands? This is related to issue 1. One partial solution may be to consider a private lands program modeled after a popular program in many southern states – Deer Management Assistance Program or DMAP. Spending more time assisting land owners with deer management decisions and management plans may be necessary in the future. While there is consensus among the group about the need for novel approaches to selling the importance of antlerless harvests, the group is divided on how to proceed with assisting private property owners with deer management plans on their property.
3	Managing Urban Deer	

Current Turkey Management Issues in the Midwest¹
Oak regeneration
Hunter recruitment
Hunter access
Turkey subspecies, wild and domestic, hybridization and related issues
Turkey nuisance problems
Spring season opening dates the push by hunters to have it earlier each year
Need to reexamine turkey harvest and population models

¹Since there were only 7 unique topics presented, they are all listed here in no particular order.

Leasing And Hunting Access In America's Heartland

Deer managers in the Midwest have expressed concern regarding the apparently increasing prevalence of leasing and potential impacts of lease and fee-based hunting on deer hunting and management within the region. After discussing these issues at the 2006 Midwest Deer and Wild Turkey Study Group (MDWTSG), attendees agreed that a summary of findings regarding the impacts of leasing should be developed and consideration given as to whether a draft resolution should be forwarded to the Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (MAFWA). This document constitutes the summary of findings of an ad-hoc workgroup created to address this issue. A subject of conversation among all member representatives during the 2007 MDWTSG will be the consideration of submitting a draft MAFWA resolution.

It is the opinion of the ad-hoc workgroup that a draft resolution should be developed and forwarded to MAFWA for their consideration. The resolution should recognize the potential impacts of lease and fee-based hunting on deer hunting and management in the Midwest, and urge member agencies to collaborate to collect pertinent information for comprehensively evaluating these impacts and recommending measures to address them. Recommended actions to be included in the resolution are provided at the end of this report. It is not our opinion that a general position statement should be adopted to oppose or support the leasing or fee-based selling of hunting access rights. This opinion is based in part upon the difficulty of comprehensively assessing the issue at this time, and in part upon the complex nature of wildlife management in North America. Two quotes effectively address this latter consideration:

“As a citizen, each will agree the right to own and control land by individuals is fundamental, and yet, as an American, each feels entitled to hunt and fish no matter how thin the pocketbook may be” (Barrett 1955:19).

“Wildlife management in North America will most likely always be a blend of private and public ownership of resources and a mix of market- and public-oriented management strategies. Between the extremes lie potentially the successful solutions to some of our most difficult resource management dilemmas” (Rasker et al. 1992:346).

The workgroup members express sincere gratitude to the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at Michigan State University for their willingness to allow the use of a hunting access, recruitment, and retention bibliography that is currently under development to facilitate this review. The preparers of the bibliography, Dr. Shawn Riley (Assistant Professor), Jordan Pusateri Burroughs (Wildlife Outreach Specialist), and Daryl Lederle (Student Assistant), are especially deserving of recognition.

A brief historic perspective on hunting access and leasing

Wildlife managers have long recognized the importance of maintaining adequate access to sustain hunting in North America. Berryman (1957) noted that one of the most critical challenges faced by wildlife agencies was ensuring that hunters had access to places to hunt. Surveys conducted in 1954 indicated that 14% of the land in a traditional hunting region of Michigan was posted against hunting, which was an increase of 38% over a period of 6 years (Barrett 1955). In 1994, 96% of state agency administrators believed private land hunting access was important for meeting their departments' mission, and 45% believed access for hunting on private land had decreased over the previous decade (Benson 2001). Access was viewed as a major problem by 55% of state wildlife agencies in 1997 (Wright et al. 2001). The number of hunters utilizing private land declined 9% from 1991 to 2001, and the number of states in which 90% or more of in-state hunters utilized private land declined from 22 to 13, with a cluster of states from Iowa through Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio contributing to this trend (Aiken 2005).

At the same time that utilization of private land for hunting has declined, the number of hunters that leased land decreased by only 1%, and the average expenditure for hunting leases increased 66%, with both figures estimated in 2001 dollars (Aiken 2005). In 1985, 15 agencies considered the amount of land that was leased for hunting in their state to be of major importance (Wiggers and Rootes 1997), and 69% of agencies estimated that the amount of private land leased for hunting had increased over the following decade (Benson 2001). Wiggers and Rootes (1997) observed that leasing was thought to be most prevalent in the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic regions, and seemed to be related to a high proportion of land in private ownership and moderate to high population densities. Langner (1987) demonstrated that the availability of public land was the most influential variable for models predicting likely participation of all hunter types in fee-based access arrangements. Based on these observations, Wiggers and Rootes (1997) felt that the Central region of the U.S. represented the area in which the greatest opportunity existed for an increasing prevalence of leasing.

Particular concern regarding leasing of deer hunting access

Berryman (1957) considered the most urgent access challenges to be for waterfowl and upland game hunting. Nearly three decades later, Thomas (1984) identified the projected increasing demand for big game hunting as creating an access crisis. This changing emphasis parallels the increased importance of deer hunting relative to overall hunting activities in North America. Approximately 10.3 million

hunters pursued deer in 2001, more than four times greater than turkeys, the next most hunted species (USDOI 2002). This constituted about 80% of all hunters (USDOI 2002), similar to the 90% of Michigan hunting license buyers that purchased deer hunting licenses (Frawley 2006). Conversely, the number of hunters pursuing small game in Michigan has declined 65% since the mid-1950s (Frawley 2005). While deer hunting appears to be increasing in relative importance for recruitment and retention of hunters, perceived lack of accessible hunting areas has been identified as one factor contributing to declining hunter effort (Miller and Vaske 2003) and hunting license sales (Mehmood et al. 2003). Leonard (2004) determined that that 9% of deer hunters lease hunting land, in comparison to only 3% of non-deer hunters. Constrained opportunities for access to deer hunting locations could disproportionately impact trends in overall hunting effort and participation, even if access for other forms of hunting are more widely available. Adequate access is also critical to the ability to successfully manage deer populations through hunting. Trends in landscape changes have been shown to influence hunter distribution (Harden et al. 2005) and harvest efficiency (Foster et al. 1997, Harden et al. 2005). Brown et al. (2000) concluded that limited hunter access was one factor likely to seriously challenge the future capacity of hunting as a deer management tool.

Potential opportunities provided by lease and fee-based hunting

A variety of viewpoints and assessments have suggested that leasing may offer some positive benefits for both hunting participation and population and habitat management. Hunters are willing to pay more than their current level of expenditures for big game hunting (Aiken 2005). Hunters may specifically be willing to pay more for enhanced quality or exclusive access to hunt on private land through arranged leases or fee-based access (Mozumder et al. 2007). It has even been proposed that charging fees for hunting access to public lands could result in enhanced hunt quality through reductions in hunter densities and increased revenue to support management (Thomas 1984). The economic value of hunting leases may encourage landowners to maintain and improve wildlife habitat (Mozumder et al. 2007) and improve public attitudes towards hunting (MacKay and Campbell 2004). Furthermore, the influence of the opportunity to formalize hunting arrangements through leases or fee arrangements may be even more important than the income provided to landowners in their decisions to open or continue to provide hunting access (Guynn and Schmidt 1984).

Potential negative implications of lease and fee-based hunting

The most serious objections to lease and fee-based hunting focus on the potential exclusion of some individuals from participation. The “Democracy of Hunting” has been identified as one of 7 elements contributing to the unique foundation of the North American wildlife management (Geist et al. 2001), and the sale of hunting privileges has conversely been proposed as a serious threat to wildlife conservation (Geist 1988). Fee hunters have higher average incomes than other hunters, and the probability of participation in fee hunting increases with level of education, years of hunting experience, and amount of overall hunting expenditures (Langner 1987). In addition to the potential direct impacts on recruitment and retention if hunting becomes increasingly

associated with higher income and long-term participation, concerns have been raised regarding the increase of poaching that has been observed when and where hunting privileges become a focus of class conflict (Geist 1988, Geist et al. 2001).

Challenges to interpreting the currently available information

Perceptions of agency administrators suggest that many of the potential benefits of lease and fee-based hunting do not seem to be resulting from the recent rates and types of hunting leases (Wiggers and Rootes 1987). Although managers believed that programs to provide financial incentives held the greatest potential to improve access (Wright et al. 2001), specific program assessments have indicated that existing incentives or feasible increases are insufficient means for raising or even maintaining landowner enrollment (Oliver 2005). Even among landowners that have established leases for granting recreational access to their properties, the most common arrangement is to establish a fee below the perceived going rate in order to create an agreement with an individual that can be trusted to help care for their property (Teasley et al. 1999). This indicates that incentives that are more difficult for agencies to influence play a significant role in landowners' decisions. However, these considerations should not discount the fact that several states at the western boundary of the region have successfully operated programs to provide hundreds of thousands of acres of public hunting access. Indeed, this highlights one of the challenges made apparent through this review. Assessments of the amount of hunting access and means of gaining it (including leasing) have been widely spread geographically. Regional variation in hunting intensity, land ownership and existence of public access programs, popularity (and even distribution) of game species pursued, and other cultural aspects of hunting traditions complicates applying the results of these findings. Such variability occurs even within the Midwest, which suggests that general application of the existing information cannot be uniformly applied within the region.

Some of the key insights captured in the literature we reviewed resulted from systematic surveys that have polled opinions and collected the impressions of one or a few agency personnel from each state (Wright et al. 1986, Wiggers and Rootes 1987, Benson 2001, Wright et al. 2001). While the systematic nature of this data collection and the ability to use it to track impressions over time is valuable, as the aggregated opinions of key agency personnel, these figures represent status reports on perceptions regarding leasing issues, and not true measures of the prevalence or impacts of leasing. Conversely, analyses based on statistical sampling of hunters and landowners (Teasley et al. 1999, USDOJ 2002, Leonard 2004, Aiken 2005) typically apply a national framework, leading to challenges presented by small sample sizes when attempts are made to estimate parameters at a regional level. Furthermore, where regional summaries are available, they are provided along a variety of jurisdictional and other arbitrary boundaries, further complicating understanding of regional variation in relationships.

A coarse definition of "leasing" and "fee-based hunting" is often applied. A lease may involve a single or multiple individuals leasing hunting access privileges from a single landowner, or leasing of access to varying amounts of land by outfitters that charge

multiple clients for the privilege of hunting, or provision of hunting access to one or multiple individuals directly by a landowner for a fee, or even potentially agency-sponsored public access programs. Mozumder et al. (2007) further highlight characteristics that distinguish different types of hunting agreements, including means of establishing agreements, exclusivity, duration, and options for termination. Knowledge of such details may be critical for understanding the implications of these agreements, such as whether they might increase or decrease access and/or harvest over “traditional” hunting arrangements. Once again, regional variation does exist. For example, in the northern region of the National Private Landowner Survey of outdoor recreation (which combines the Northeastern states with a bulk of the Midwestern states, excluding those of the great plains), the average number of people covered and amount of use received by each tract leased for recreational access is below the national and other regional means (Teasley et al. 1999). Also, it is most common across the nation for landowners to establish recreational leases with a club, but the most common arrangement in the northern region is with a group of individuals that do not constitute a club.

Recommended actions

A number of specific steps could be taken by MAFWA member state and provincial agencies to collect pertinent information for comprehensively evaluating the potential impacts of leasing and fee-based hunting and recommending measures to address them. While the workgroup recognizes the limited resources at the disposal of agency personnel, we would recommend that MAFWA adopt a resolution encouraging agency directors to approve reasonable personnel time and other resources to address this issue. Such actions could include:

- Provide existing data and/or agency reports characterizing means by which deer hunters gain access and landowners provide access, including summaries of agency-sponsored public access programs
- Submit a summary of any existing state and provincial regulations pertaining to leasing and fee-based hunting
- Identify existing agency programs or program areas that could benefit from explicit information pertaining to the prevalence and practices of leasing and fee-based deer hunting (examples may include Deer Management Assistance programs that aid landowners in developing harvest and management objectives, or regulations within deer management programs that establish bag limits, transferability of licenses, etc.)
- Consider including a uniform set of questions assessing means by which deer hunters gain access and landowners provide access on any planned harvest or opinion surveys, or create a separate survey explicitly addressing this issue if resources allow
- Encourage cooperation of agency deer specialists with any future surveys intended to specifically evaluate the prevalence, practices, or perceived impacts of leasing and fee-based deer hunting

This information item is an ad-hoc workgroup report to the Midwest Deer and Wild Turkey Study Group. It was presented to the deer program coordinators of member states and discussed briefly at this year's meeting. This report was submitted by the following individuals: Lonnie Hansen, Missouri Department of Conservation; Keith McCaffery, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (Retired); Brent Rudolph, Michigan Department of Natural Resources; and Mike Tonkovich, Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife.

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Time and Place of Next Meeting

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission will be hosting the 2008 Midwest Deer and Wild Turkey Study Group meeting September 14 through September 17 at Fort Robinson State Park in Crawford, NE.

List of Appendices

- Appendix I Meeting Attendee List and Contact Information
- Appendix II Meeting Agenda
- Appendix III Past Meeting Locations
- Appendix IV Presentation Abstracts
- Appendix V State/Province Status Reports