

Inside QDMA



Conservation Partners



Imagine this – yearling bucks with more than 200 inches of antler and adult bucks exceeding 500 inches (that’s larger than the current world record wild bull elk). While this may sound like fantasy land, it’s reality today in captive whitetail breeding facilities. These bucks are touted to have “superior” genetics due to their enormous, often grotesque antlers. The reality, however, is that these bucks are the product of many generations of inbreeding (their owners prefer the term “line-breeding”), with many “lines” so closely related that genetics experts have had to increase the normal number of DNA markers just to separate individual animals.

This industry, often referred to as the *captive cervid industry*, has quietly proliferated in recent years, largely under the veil of deer farming or alternative livestock. To be clear, I am referring specifically to confined deer *breeding* operations rather than all high-fenced hunting facilities, especially large, well-managed ones containing native deer. Current estimates suggest there are nearly 10,000 deer breeding operations in the U.S., with Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin each home to more than 500 such facilities. Their business model is simple – create a core group of “breeder bucks” from which semen straws and inseminated does can be sold to the highest bidder. Any bucks not worthy of breeder status are typically sold as “shooter” bucks to high-fenced hunting operations, often released just days before a “hunter” enters a “preserve” to collect his “trophy.” In general, the larger and more extreme a buck’s antlers, the higher its value and, thus, the smaller the “hunting” area required to ensure success.

Some argue this is an innocent endeavor with no negative impacts to wild deer or the everyday deer hunter/manager. As CEO of North America’s leading whitetail conservation organization with a mission to ensure a sustainable future for wild white-tailed deer, I emphatically and unapologetically disagree. Not only does this industry undermine the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, it threatens the health of wild deer and the public’s perception of hunting. In fact, just before this issue of *Quality Whitetails* went to press, Missouri joined the growing list of states with Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in wild whitetails. Not surprising, the infected animals were discovered less than two miles from a captive whitetail facility that had previously tested positive for CWD. Coincidence? I think not. Similar discoveries have occurred in other states.

Despite the undeniable risks to wild deer and the future of hunting, the captive cervid industry is currently launching efforts to loosen regulations to enable expansion within or into many new states. In fact, at time of press, the QDMA was fighting captive cervid legislation and related efforts in seven states including Georgia, Indiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia. If you agree the health of wild white-tailed deer and the preservation of our deer-hunting heritage is more important than antlered freaks in pens, pick up the phone, write a letter, and get involved. Our association’s strength lies in our membership, and there is no more important time or place to demonstrate this strength than right now in the legislative halls throughout North America. This is a battle we simply can’t afford to lose.

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