As my good friend Dale Rollins' preacher sometimes provides as a preamble to his sermon, "I ain't mad at nobody," I'll lead off this article with the same spirit of understanding. And I am not going to preach.

I am a degreed wildlife biologist, and since 1987 I have owned a business that specializes in implementation of commercial hunting programs and wildlife services on private lands. During this time, we have worked with a wide variety of game species in several states and foreign countries and have probably outfitted as many whitetail hunts as anyone. We currently offer and profit from whitetail hunts on a variety of properties, from low-fenced extensively managed places to very intensively managed high-fenced properties where deer are released for hunting.

Over the last 25 years, I have seen some interesting changes in the hunting and wildlife management communities, some of which create personal concerns. Since hunting has largely capitalized our ability to manage and conserve our wildlife resources in North America for over 100 years, it is my contention that anything that we do that compromises the strength of our hunting markets and economies and reduces support from our hunting patrons has the potential to have devastating effects on wildlife.

**A Fallen Hero?**

Historically, the white-tailed deer, as a game animal, has been considered North America’s most popular and economically valuable wildlife species. Here in Texas, whitetails caught the imagination of hunters during the 1970s and 1980s and manifested an appetite for big antlers that arguably was unprecedented in the hunting community in the U.S. In a state with great latitude in our wildlife regulatory structure, this huge appetite for big deer, combined with an incentivized landowner component, has been a recipe for deer management practices and deer hunting methods that have been pushing the envelope for some time.

During this era of big deer production, we have steadily graduated from relying on conventional Leopoldian management tools (cow, plow, ax, fire and gun; the same tools that had nearly destroyed wildlife by the beginning of the 20th century and are now...
used to restore and manage populations) to tools that are more artificial. We have arguably transitioned from deer management to deer husbandry in many occasions, and the products of these efforts include the ability to mass produce abnormally large whitetail bucks. And, with well over 100,000 whitetails in pens in Texas, there exists potential of morphing basic supply/demand relationships within the deer hunting markets.

One could easily ponder the long-term implications of these artificialized big deer. Aldo Leopold purported, “The recreational value of a head of game is inversely proportional to the artificiality of how it was produced.” Further, do these artificialities also reduce esoteric values to those who value these species in a bit more of an emotional, spiritual or aesthetic perspective?

Through mass production of big whitetails, primarily through artificialized means, we have eliminated the virtue of scarcity in the market dynamic. Additionally, any big buck that is taken these days is automatically suspect in terms of how it was grown – in a pen or in the pasture. If we could no longer distinguish between a real diamond versus one that is cultured, what do you think this would do to the diamond market? Similarly, in most markets, there is value in uniqueness, and this is why an original painting will almost always fetch a much higher price than a giclee print, even though the print may be more flawless. Are big whitetails as unique as they once were? For that matter, are white-tailed deer, in general, as unique as they once were?

Between our analytics tool that evaluates traffic to my company’s website, what people choose to view on our site, to phone inquiries, and various comments that I hear clients and prospective clients saying, there simply does not appear to be the interest in whitetail hunting to the extent that there was a few years ago, and this is industry-wide. And, I suspect that we may be reducing the average life cycle of many deer hunters through our ability to now provide a quick fix for their big deer appetite, and perhaps through those who are turned off by how we produce these animals. As a colleague...
the use of some this modern equipment. At probably have a difficult time appreciating are supportive of certain aspects of hunting, life of certain hunters? Non-hunters, who are maybe supportive of some of these interests. Regardless, I feel that we need to identify ways to best facilitate these hunting outlets. Regardless, I feel that we need to identify ways to best facilitate these interests.

Equipment – Through equipment technology, are we taking too much of the hunt out of hunting? Does this technology reduce the fulfillment level of the experience to a point where it diminishes the retention life of certain hunters? Non-hunters, who are supportive of certain aspects of hunting, probably have a difficult time appreciating the use of some this modern equipment. At some point, we should probably put more responsible effort into analyzing the net impact of our hunting gadgetry on the hunting community and how those around us view this.

Self-Governance
During the late 1800s, concerned sportsmen read the tea leaves, recognizing that many species of North America’s great wildlife were imperiled and headed toward extirpation, and the highly successful North American wildlife conservation movement was initiated. A cornerstone product of this movement was the formation of the Boone & Crockett Club. In addition to recognizing exceptional big game species through its record keeping system, another important task of B&C was, and still is, to ensure the sustained integrity of our hunting heritage through promotion of various hunting standards. Written policies concerning fair chase, hunting ethics and public perception issues have been used to try and maintain the integrity of hunting for the benefit of its sustainability. Though I respect the intent of B&C’s rules and policies regarding these matters, I question whether there is reasonable consideration given to unique cultural locales that represent the full cross-section of hunters spanning our country?

The notion of self-governance for the sake of protecting the long-term viability of an industry is not unique. The United States Golf Association, formed in 1884, sets the written standards by which many of the public and private golf courses administer golf play here in the U.S. The International Olympic Committee has an abundance of policies to protect the value of their industry, and prohibition of steroids is not simply to protect the health of their athletes, but it is also intended to create fair play, which they see as an important consideration in sustaining the viability of their economies. The Jockey Club, who is the governing body of Thoroughbred horse registry, has long been vigilant about enforcing standards for the benefit of their industry. One of the tenets that is core to their registration entry requirement is reproduction through live cover, where artificial insemination is not allowed within their registration process.

In the Texas Wildlife Association’s Position Statement on Hunting Heritage, part of the preamble language says, “TWA believes that individuals have the right and responsibility to make decisions along the reasonable continuum of ethics and does not intend for this Statement to be a rule, but rather a guide for the organization and its members,” and this Statement goes on to articulate a more detailed discharge of its philosophies. This TWA Statement includes tenets that are relatively sensitive toward cultural nuances which are perhaps unique to Texas, and much of this language is not as restrictive as that of B&C Club. (Read the full text of TWA’s Position Statement on Hunting Heritage on page 34 of this magazine.)

Is it time for our hunting community to step up and be more visionary about promoting policies, rules, laws, and restraints that are more self-governing? Is it time for us to also do a better job at reconciling philosophical differences, so that we can develop better synergies in the hunting community? I don’t know what the correct answers may be, but I suspect if we do not become more mindful at addressing these things ourselves, someone else may do it for us! As I discussed in Part II of this series, cultural paradigms shape the way that the
majority of society tends to value things. Should we lose what support we currently have for hunting, and should we have significant erosion of our hunting markets, then the hunting community might as well call it a night, and the biggest loser will be our wildlife resources.

Looking Forward

As I have previously stated, hunting has been the chief financier of wildlife conservation, management and protection for well over 100 years. At this time, there is no significant alternative revenue source or champion that lies in the fold to replace hunting as the “caretaker” for North America’s wildlife resources. Yes, there are limited funds from non-hunting sources, but hunting and fishing related-funds support almost 90 percent of all state wildlife and fisheries departments operating budgets, and hunting largely incentivizes private sector to reinvest in these public interests on private lands.

In order to preserve these hunting markets, our hunting and wildlife community must approach our challenges and opportunities from a more cognitive, big picture approach. I suggest we use second order reasoning to shape our decisions and our actions, assuming a position that short-term benefits do not always equal long-term gains. We must be conscientious about realizing that what we ask for is not necessarily what we need, especially from a policy making standpoint. And we must make sure that wildlife and hunting remains relevant in the eyes of the general public.

Perhaps the greatest achievement that this country has ever realized is that well over a century ago, a group of concerned individuals banded together to save wildlife in North America, and largely, they were hunters and fishers. It was a moment of opportunity, and as one of our great hunter/conservationists, Teddy Roosevelt, once said, “In any moment of decision, the best thing to do is the right thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing.”

Ladies and gentlemen, though the circumstances are different today, I plea to you that we are now faced with as profound of crossroad decisions as those of our great conservation forefathers back in the late 1800s. May we find the wisdom, vision, and humility to seek answers that point toward the right things to do in this moment of opportunity. Failure is not an option. 🧠