



Should you lease your land to a sportsmen's group?

How do you regard the wildlife living on your farm or ranch? A nuisance attracting trespassers, a pest destroying crops, a potential source of disease such as brucellosis, or a resource to be cultivated, managed, harvested?

Answers are numerous and varied depending upon the species, the area of the country, state and federal laws, and local culture. The attitudes of a region may range from benevolence and tolerance to being outright exploitative bordering on "the citizens right to poach".

Such is the crazy quilt of concerns, practices, and issues displayed across the country and confronting wildlife experts and landowners.

Dr. Jim Knight, wildlife specialist for the New Mexico State University Cooperative Extension Service, thinks a partnership can be forged between wildlife management and fee hunting. "It's long been recognized that the future of wildlife in the United States depends on the management of wildlife on private lands." He cites prime wintering areas as well as better year-round habitat are often found on private lands.

Acknowledging this, the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks and the Kansas Board of Agriculture have authorized Governor Mike Hayden to increase

landowners' incentives for allowing public access.

Under the proposal, if the landowner signs as a cooperator, he or she may receive a per acre payment based on the quality of wildlife and recreation opportunities there.

Dr. Knight suggests incentives exist whether government-sponsored or induced from pressures by the hunting public. "Although most ranchers and farmers have an aesthetic appreciation for wildlife, when the inconvenience becomes excessive, they no longer want these animals present. In the past, landowners have had little, if any incentive to manage for wildlife on their private lands. Now, ranchers and farmers are realizing that wildlife represent an economic resource they have previously underutilized."

A recent article from the *Record Stockman* by Patrick Dawson illustrates some of the conflicts and dilemmas posed by wildlife on the land. Fee hunting on private land is not as well-established in Montana as it is in Utah, Dawson points out.

Utah ranchers charge access fees and the practice has become expected. Most of the operations are long-estab-

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lished with larger-than-average spreads according to Utah State University researchers Lucy Jordan and J.P. Workman.

The average Utah fee-hunting enterprise might encompass 15,000 acres and encompass primarily Fee hunting accounts for less than 10 percent of the annual gross income. Deer and elk predominate.

Unlike Montana, fee hunting is more traditional and not prompted by outside wealth seeking hunting grounds. The industry is characterized as stable by Jordsn and Workman. About half the Utah landowners sell trespass permits directly to individual hunters and the other half lease their land to hunting clubs or outfitters. Or, a rancher may sell trespass permits to an outfitter who in turn issues them to hunters. This type of permit allows control over hunters, land management and wildlife management objectives. Leasing to clubs relinquishes some control, it's thought. In Utah and potentially in other areas of the Rocky Mountain West, it's expected the demand for hunting privileges should mount. The challenge, some say, might require imposing quotas or a rotating system to accommodate hunters seeking access to private land.

This, in contrast to Texas, where competition has led some landowners to scramble for available hunters.

Montana landowners witness elk and deer grubbing pastures down to stubble, raiding haystacks, and elk herds trashing fences. On the other front, they must also bear increasing pressure from slob hunters who trespass, clip wires, wreck or leave gates open, shoot livestock, or vandalize facilities. Approaching from still another position is the respectable hunter who will pay for access privileges and conduct himself as a guest while on the property.

Solutions include closing land off to all public access. Then, the landowner must wrestle with the wildlife and appeal to the state or federal agencies for help in controlling game or denying it access as well.

Or, should the property owner elect to allow hunting on his or her land, must the landowner charge a fee to each hunter, lease the land or



the privilege on a group basis, or freely escort hunters over the property so they can remove the surplus and help the rancher cope with feed and forage loss from the deer and elk?

All three proposals have been tried in Montana and other states with high game populations. Success varies depending again on the species, size of population, game habitat, game patterns and migration, and pressure from hunting and anti-hunting groups.

Dawson reported on a seminar sponsored by Montana State University, the Cinnabar Foundation, and the Montana Committee for the Humanities. What transpired was a roundtable debate opening such thorny areas as private property and public rights, growing elitism in a democracy, and the possibilities of an ecological crisis.

"Wildlife in this country belongs to all the people," reported Dawson quoting Jim Posewitz of the Department of Fish,

Wildlife & Parks. "When this fundamental fact gets ignored or circumvented, we assail the political populism of American wildlife conservation as well as the public trust restraint.

"Because it belongs to all of us, the state is entrusted with the responsibility to manage it in our common interest. No one person or group is more potentially endowed than another with any right or privilege concerning its use.

One Montanan who opted for the lease approach was John Flynn, attorney and rancher, who helped form Greyson Creek Meadows Recreation, Inc. Here, resident hunters are favored with out-of-staters charged higher fees. The growing trend toward the exclusion of resident hunters on private lands, warned Flynn, "is a reality. Once prime hunting ground is leased to an elite few, it will be hard to secure access for resident hunters. More and more private land is going to non-resident hunters. We have to give the landowner economic incentive to tolerate wildlife."

An echo from fellow rancher John Gilpatrick of Hilger who offered his opinion that the increasing concentration of American land holdings smacks of traditional European baronies. He reflected that this nation's founding fathers fled continental/British traditions of privileged land ownership and "wouldn't approve of the concentrated land holdings today ... sustained by large, efficient equipment and government farms subsidy programs. This growing concentration of private land will mean less access.

"It is wrong to deny many of the Lords blessings to those not fortunate enough to own land. I believe we have a moral obligation to share with our city relatives. I just don't want to see our land-use decisions based on economics."



Gilpatrick expressed the concern that Montana ranches could be bought up by wealthy sportsmen as hunting reserves with the less affluent or local residents shut out.

Ranch owner David Cameron presented another aspect. His forage base is continually under siege by a year-round resident elk herd spilling over from the Beartooth Game Range. "Someone has decided," stated Cameron, "that it is our social responsibility to run 350 head of elk. That equals 200 cow units, which is a real ranch in Montana."

Cameron tried fee hunting but quit after being sued by an injured hunter several years ago. So now, his approach is to open the gates so hunters can cull out the elk. Since 1978, 1,500 hunters have been escorted at ranch expense to the elk ground. He estimates his winter feed losses at \$25,000 annually.

The Montana experience underlines some of the cross currents and controversy swirling around wild game, its attractions, its drawbacks as a source of revenue for the private landowner. Game as a public resource and the public's right to enjoy it is another complex dimension to the issue. Does the public still have a right to enjoy state or federally owned wildlife if it happens to enter private lands?

Where are we now in the private management of game for public enjoyment?

If the setting is right, the game is of high quality and plentiful, and the rancher/farmer wants to deal with the public, wildlife management might become an added source of revenue and a part of the overall operation. Tossing out a little extra feed for antelope or deer, keeping tanks flowing in remote pastures even after cattle are removed, salting, or even reporting poachers more consistently might be fruitful.

Farmers and ranchers as a body are usually forgiving of wildlife provided they're not overrun. Good range management is also good wildlife management, says Dale Rollins, Oklahoma State University Extension range management specialist. Oklahoma rancher Joe Flusche of Muskogee County practices weed and brush control to improve land use by his beef herd. Yet, his land provides good diversity for wildlife habitat with really no alterations. Many farmers and ranchers enjoy a variety of terrain and vegetation that can provide for a good mix of bird or mammal game species without overhauling the basic resource. Just a little atten-



tion to these values can reap a fair reward, say the experts.

What if the rancher or farmer should go for broke and harvest all his pheasants, quail, or whitetails in one year, some ask. Not likely, says Dr. Knight, who points out most farm or ranch operations think in terms of renewing and replacing—normally one doesn't sell all the cows in one year. "Obviously, he would like to see the benefits of the wildlife resource occur year after year."

One state where the resource is more or less constant and free of public lands questions is Texas. Ninety-eight percent of the state is privately owned. Fee hunting, commercial hunting has flourished here as the public land access is a very minor factor. States where the federal government is the major landlord or owner will not ascend to the scale Texas has enjoyed. New Mexico's Dr. Knight suggests only 15 percent of his state's private land will be involved in fee hunting operations.

Texas hunting is well-developed with a wide variety of American species and well known for offering exotic African, Middle Eastern, and European species

for those wanting something special.

But, fee hunting and private management of game continues to provoke argument across the land. It rubs across the grain of the independent pioneer-provider of America's frontier tradition. "The game's always been here for the taking. Sure we'll pay for a license as we see the benefits, but we're not going to stand for a public resource being locked up on private holdings," vocal groups protest. Such a prospect resembles the feudal lord arresting his serfs for poaching—"M'lord owns the game an' the earthe beneath, y' see."

States vacillate. Some discourage private management of game species. Others such as Texas and California encourage private landowners to treat public game as private enterprises. Wayne Long is a columnist for *"Hunting Ranch Business"*, and he writes: "Landowners who are managing wildlife as a business are both preserving and adding to important wildlife habitat on land that would possibly be used for other things. It must also be brought out that wildlife habitat work for commercial game species is also beneficial to many non-game species as well.

"We provide hunting opportunities and services to many sportsmen who otherwise wouldn't be hunting at all. Today,

it is difficult, almost impossible, to find a quality place to hunt on public lands.”

Merridee Smith in her study of Texas enterprises reported in the March, 1988, issue of *The Cattleman*, addresses this quality issue. “Time and again it has been shown that hunters want more than a ‘kill’. Indeed that is part of the ‘total hunting experience’, but it is not the sole reason for participating in this form of recreation. They enjoy the outdoors, the excitement... the friendships that develop.”

Should a landowner think he or she might be able to develop a fee hunting or commercial lease program, what are the steps?

There are a variety of systems. According to Charles Winkler, big game program director for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, leases are typically of three types—season, year-long, day, or “something in between”. Winkler says the variation in types spawns variables in price, the species hunted, and the location and facilities provided by the landholder.

Most common, says Winkler, is the season or year-long lease. He labels this one the poorest for achieving deer management goals, for examples.

“Landowners like this system because they get their money at one time and deal with only one group of hunters. Hunters like this method because it gives them considerable latitude in planning their hunting activities. But, it’s not the best method for managing deer. The average Texas deer hunter hunts only seven days in the season and kills about .6 deer for his efforts. On a statewide basis, the Department would like to see about twice as many deer harvested annually; however most of the additional harvest would be antlerless deer.”

The day lease usually provides more income but the landowner must deal with many more hunters. Success rate is much lower because he’s unfamiliar with the territory and has little control with so many more hunters in the field.

The third lease “something in between” can be three days to two weeks. Winkler thinks more landowners should choose this approach as it allows more alternatives for income and deer management goals. Ranchers or farmers could tailor their areas to different types of

hunts or hunters, placing the short timers in areas of greater concentration and sending the trophy hunters with time and desire toward a higher quality hunt into areas where those qualities prevail.

Specializing in particular species of wildlife is possible if the landholder has the terrain and vegetation appropriate for, say, wild turkey, Combined hunts where hunters have opportunity to bag both a turkey and deer command premiums.

Oklahoman Joe Flusche leases to a club. He prefers this arrangement as hunter traffic is limited and controlled. The game is managed and not overwhelmed by hunters who become partners with Flusche in cultivating the wildlife population and controlling the use of the land.

Ten hunters share the lease on more than 3,000 acres of Flusche’s range.

The club owns a six-year lease with annual payments that increase each year. A gradual hike was agreed upon at the outset. It was felt the diminished hunting pressure and improved habitat and wildlife management should improve the land’s hunting quality over the years. Therefore it becomes more valuable.

The club provides Flusche with a list of members’ vehicles and tag numbers. No additional friends or relatives

are authorized to hunt. The land is posted by club members with "Leased—No Hunting" signs.

Flusche's expenses included liability insurance, attorney's fees, and installing swinging, chain-fastened gates that are easy for hunters to operate.

Club members have a vested interest in the land and its improved resources. Parties cooperate to make the arrangement workable and beneficial to all involved. But, one of the unpleasant aspects according to Flusche was informing acquaintances who had hunted the land for years that the ranch was no longer open to them. The lease provides Flusche with a legal basis for turning down requests to hunt.

In Texas, Henry Welge of Doss, realizes the importance of marketing the benefits, not simply a hunt. "If the hunt's a memorable experience, the customer will come back again the next year.

"Have a positive attitude toward your hunters," he advises. "Many ranchers have the attitude of give me your money, don't bother me, don't shoot too many deer, and leave us soon as possible."

"Hunters sense how you feel and they won't come back." Welge thinks landowners needn't confine their resources to hunting. Jeeping, four-wheeling, hiking, camping, photography, bird-watching, rock hunting, and searching for Indian artifacts are possibilities.

The Welges-Henry, Conrad, and their wives Sherry and Marsha provide heated and air-conditioned cabins with kitchen and bath facilities, transportation to and from the hunting sites, blinds, dogs, and game processing services. There's also a 2,300-foot airstrip.

A waiting list of hunters want to go to Welge's. Prices are \$300 for a 2 1/2-day hunt. An additional \$300 is charged if they kill a buck, \$150 for a spike buck and \$100 for a doe.

Fees of \$300 to \$400 for the first two weeks of hunting are common among more than 80 ranchers signed up under the Cave Creek Wildlife Management Area. President Larry Burrow says some tariffs may run as high as \$500 if trophy bucks are desired. Nearly 35,000 acres are supervised.

Other landholders in Texas charge hunters \$50 a day plus \$200 for each buck and \$50 for each doe. Recently, Willie Wehmeyer who owns 750 acres under the Cave Creek umbrella levied \$200 for a three-day hunt where a hunter can take three doe. If he can't re-

sist that tempting buck, the hunter should be prepared to pay \$250.

Burrows reports price is an effective control and helps ranchers shift the population of the deer especially. "After three seasons, we've reduced our total population to one per four acres and increased our buck-to-doe ratio to one to 5.5. With more bucks getting into the 2 1/2- to 4 1/2- year age bracket, we're seeing more eight and ten pointers. According to Welge, a Texas A & M study reveals 70 percent of the hunters seek recreation and sport and seven percent stalk trophies.

Average income per acre from hunting for the Cave Creek ranchers is \$10. "With intensive management," says Burrows, "We should be able to push that up to \$20 an acre." The group's major concern is to reduce numbers and improve habitat so the product will eventually become

more desirable.

"The average ranch in this area is only about 300 acres. That's not big enough

to make a living on," Burrows continues. "More income from recreation is the only way many of us can stay in agriculture."

Visitors to the famous Y. O. Ranch in Kerrville, Texas, are treated to a full-blown package including exotic deer with well-equipped cabins and chuckwagon meals. Rate per day is \$75. A guide fee of \$125 is added with no more than two hunters per guide. Fees for species taken can range from \$350 to \$1,500. Additional attractions include photo safaris, zoos, and sales of exotic game animals or venison.

Y.O. also conducts wildlife awareness programs for young people.

A registered Angus establishment, Riverside Farms at Hamilton, Texas, offers an extensive bird hunting package as well as deer. Birds of four species numbering approximately 14,000 are raised on the ranch, according to Lee Ethetton, manager of the hunting enterprise. No bag limit is imposed as the birds are privately raised. Deer and turkey are subject to the state tag system. Hunts are of the European "driven" type or "rough" with dogs-on-point as preferred in the U. S.

Contributing editor of the *Farm Journal* Rick Mooney describes the operation of Bill and Curtis Sidwell, Queen City, Mo., as a success story built with careful planning. This father and son



team decided to supplement their cow-calf operation with a fee hunting program about three years ago.

First came an assessment of the resources. Within the nearly 5,000 acres of crop, pasture, and timber land, there seemed plentiful habitat for natural populations of dove, turkey, deer, quail, and pheasants. Whitetail deer and turkey were most promising.

Next, analyzing the different types of fee programs, they considered both daily and package hunts. Rates vary according to the species, length of hunt, guided or unguided. "We considered a seasonal lease, but that limits income potential," Curtis explained.

Then, the Sidwells decided to offer overnight lodging to clients. They leased a lodge bordering their land and remodelled a two-story house on the ranch. Twenty to 25 hunters can be accommodated. There's also a primitive campsite available.

The most difficult step was attracting hunters. "They just don't appear. You have to work to get them. It's nine-tenths of the business." Advertising was placed in outdoor magazines and metropolitan area newspapers. Displays at midwest sport shows during the winter help spread their name.

"The best advertising...is to give your clients a good hunt," says Curtis. "You'll get repeat business, and they'll tell someone else about it when they get home."

Nettlesome but necessary is liability insurance. All visitors are required to sign an agreement releasing the ranch from liability and though an attorney prepared it, not every conceivable possibility is covered. "Liability insurance is expensive," Curtis agrees, "but, I wouldn't, be in this business without it."

The hunting business is "a full-time part-time job", according to Curtis Sidwell. Time management is important with a keen sense of balance required to keep both the cattle and the hunting workloads on an even keel. Local guides are hired if Curtis and Bill cannot be with their parties continually. Guides day-work plus tips.

Some risks to consider

The November, 1988, issue of *"Hunting Ranch Business"* warns ranchers of the potential danger of crowding wildlife onto smaller and smaller areas of habitat. It cited research from R. M. Robinson of the Texas Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory.

Robinson segregates wildlife management schemes into three types.

The least intense—"let nature take its course"—competes well because of low overhead, but game populations are subject to severe fluctuations and income may be erratic. Disease, other than malnutrition, has little practical importance.

The second approach includes supplemental feeding and allows native game to increase beyond the normal capacity of natural forage. Food plots or direct supplements are employed. High fences and habitat improvement are involved. More overhead, but income is also improved and more stable.

Disease becomes a concern as populations become more dense. Parasites surface. Anthrax, enterotoxemia, and acidosis may pop up. Inoculations and pelletized rations for acidosis may prevent outbreaks. Encouraging native browse can be very helpful, says Robinson.

The third type of management, he observes is usually a combination enterprise incorporating native and exotic game. Maximum production is usually sought. Parasite control and vaccinating is vital to the management plan. High investment in facilities to "work" the exotics is required.

Habitat health is a must.

Diseases such as salmonellosis, pasteurellosis, yersiniosis, and colibacillosis can emerge in intensive schemes. Keeping populations spread evenly across the habitat is helpful, Robinson advises. Moving feeders and strict attention to abundant watering areas and habitat condition are mandatory.

Strict rules are followed concerning hunter density: no more than 10 clients per 1,000 acres. Game habitat is enhanced by scattering food plots around the ranch and practicing rotational grazing.

"Overgrazing can destroy cover and food for wildlife. If you want the game to care of you, you must take care of the game."

Sounds like the cattle business.

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