



Frequently Asked Questions About QDMA's Stance on Captive Deer Breeding

On February 23, 2012 the Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA) issued a national press release urging its members and other concerned sportsmen in several states to contact their elected officials and urge them to oppose legislation initiated by the deer breeding industry that would enable introduction of captive deer breeding operations or expansion of these practices within those states (to view the press release, visit www.qdma.com/media-room/deer-breeding-legislation-2012/).

QDMA supports the legal, ethical pursuit and taking of wild deer living in adequate native/naturalized habitat in a manner that does not give the hunter an unfair advantage and provides the hunted animals with a reasonable opportunity to escape the hunter. QDMA is not opposing high-fence operations that meet the above conditions.

What is the captive deer breeding industry?

The captive deer breeding industry (also called the deer farming industry or captive cervid industry) uses artificial means to breed captive deer for profit – typically realized through sales of live animals for controlled breeding and shooting, as well as semen and embryos. Current estimates suggest there are more than 10,000 deer breeders in North America. In general, breeders seek to establish one or more genetic “lines” of deer to produce bucks with the antler size and configuration they desire. Bucks that do not meet this objective typically are sold to fenced shooting preserves, with some killed only days or weeks after release.

The process of selective breeding typically requires animals of known and often narrow pedigrees to be intensively handled and frequently medicated. Bucks from which semen is collected often are physically or chemically restrained and subjected to electro-ejaculation, whereby an electric probe is inserted into the buck's rectum and energized until ejaculation occurs. In does, artificial insemination is common, whereby a doe may be stimulated to ovulate through use of estrous-synchronizing drugs, followed typically by insertion of semen into the doe's reproductive tract.

Why is this issue one that QDMA felt the need to address?

QDMA's mission is to ensure the future of white-tailed deer, wildlife habitat and our hunting heritage. This mission is specific to wild white-tailed deer, not those genetically altered, artificially created and human-habituated. QDMA believes that growth and expansion of the captive deer breeding industry could threaten North America's wild white-tailed deer and the deer-hunting heritage. QDMA is responding to aggressive moves to legalize deer breeding in several new states and to loosen regulations in others. Previously, such efforts were limited to just a few states annually (which QDMA also opposed). However, during the 2012 legislative season, this number swelled to nine states. Simply stated, QDMA believes the potential negative implications warrant our actions.

Isn't this a private property rights issue?

QDMA has a long history of supporting private property rights, especially those which do not infringe on our members' rights to hunt healthy, wild, white-tailed deer on the properties they own, manage or hunt. Under the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation and the Public Trust Doctrine, wildlife, including white-tailed deer, are collectively owned by all citizens rather than individuals. We contend that captive deer breeding facilities infringe upon the tenets of the North American Model. Thus, we see this as a resource issue (use, access, and allocation) rather than a private property rights issue.

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Isn't this just dividing hunters?

The underlying ethics of North America's hunting heritage were well articulated by early conservation pioneers such as Teddy Roosevelt and Aldo Leopold. We believe that to the vast majority of hunters, deer hunting is the pursuit of wild deer produced without direct human contact or artificial manipulation that are hunted and harvested in an ethical manner. We adhere to Webster's definition of "wild" as follows: "living in a state of nature not ordinarily tame or domesticated." Therefore, we don't agree we are dividing hunters, but rather distinguishing between hunting and shooting based on whether or not the quarry is wild. While practices such as Internet shooting, poaching, and canned shoots involve killing of animals, the hunting community, as well as the majority of the non-hunting public, widely reject these practices as hunting.

What are some of QDMA's primary concerns with this industry?

1 – Erosion of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation and the Public Trust Doctrine

The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is recognized globally as the premier model for wildlife conservation and management. We believe the captive deer breeding industry undermines important tenets of this model, notably that wildlife is a Public Trust resource owned collectively by the people, not individuals.

2 – Loss of public support for hunting

Multiple surveys have confirmed that a wide majority of hunters and non-hunters alike support ethical hunting and venison consumption. Therefore, we have concerns that expansion of rearing or shooting of artificially manipulated deer may erode public support for our deer-hunting heritage.

3 – Unnatural and extreme manipulation of white-tailed deer

This industry routinely produces bucks with unnatural, often grotesque antlers through controlled breeding, often of closely related animals. In fact, some breeders have produced bucks with antlers so large they can barely keep their heads off the ground. During this process, there has been minimal focus on other genetic traits important to long-term health and survival. Basic genetics shows that focusing on a single trait such as antler size often is highly detrimental to a species in the long-term.

4 – Potential spread of disease and other biological agents

Any time an animal is moved, any disease or parasite associated with that animal also is moved. With an estimated 10,000-plus deer breeding facilities in North America, including many in states which can import and/or export deer to other states, the potential for spread of disease is undeniable. Some diseases of concern include chronic wasting disease (CWD), bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis, though certain internal and external parasites also could threaten the health of wild deer.

While there has yet to be conclusive evidence related to transmission of chronic wasting disease (CWD) from captive to wild deer, most states and Canadian provinces where CWD has been documented in wild deer also are home to captive deer facilities. This poses tremendous risks with respect to CWD since the most reliable test for this disease can only be performed on dead animals. CWD incubation time in whitetails can be several years, and therefore unidentified CWD-positive deer can be unknowingly transported across state lines and/or among captive facilities. Despite a lack of conclusive evidence confirming transmission of CWD from captive to wild deer, there have been some suspicious cases. For example, CWD was discovered in a captive deer facility in Missouri in 2010, and in two wild bucks within two miles of that facility in 2012. Numerous disease experts agree the distribution map of CWD suggests that CWD likely arrived in several new states through transportation of live deer or deer parts (either legally or illegally) and not spontaneously or through natural deer movements.

5 – Lack of benefits for wild deer or the vast majority of deer hunters

For the overwhelming majority of deer hunters in North America who will never be a deer breeder nor have the resources or inclination to shoot an artificially manipulated, human-habituated buck, there are numerous risks and no tangible benefits of the captive deer-breeding industry to them or wild deer.

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6 – Public cost

Where deer breeding exists, wildlife and agricultural agencies have considerable oversight responsibilities related to permitting, testing, surveillance and enforcement. Collectively, this consumes considerable time and resources from already depleted budgets. This is hunter and taxpayer money that we believe would be far better spent providing public hunting access, technical assistance to landowners, and wildlife law enforcement. Also, when CWD or other diseases which require state/provincial-mandated action are confirmed, the cost to taxpayers often runs in the millions of dollars. Also, unlike hemorrhagic and some other diseases, there is no way to decontaminate an area after CWD is identified. It remains present in the soil with the ability to infect deer that come in contact with it in the future. This presents a tremendous long-term risk to wild deer, sportsmen and our state wildlife agencies.

7 – Devaluation of the intrinsic value of deer and the hunting experience

We believe the proliferation of the captive deer breeding industry and related shooting facilities are negatively affecting public perceptions of wild deer and related hunting experiences. Further, we are concerned that the widespread availability of captive-reared, abnormally large-antlered “shooter” bucks could alter hunter expectations and change the fundamental hunting experience, thus exacerbating hunter declines and associated economic contributions.

Conclusion

We believe the time is now for engagement and solutions to this complex issue. It is QDMA’s hope this will lead to a long overdue nationwide discussion on this topic and development of safeguards to protect North America’s 32 million wild white-tailed deer, 16 million whitetail hunters, and our hunting heritage from potential risks.

About the Quality Deer Management Association

Founded in 1988, QDMA is a national nonprofit wildlife conservation organization with nearly 50,000 members in all 50 states and Canada, and several foreign countries. QDMA is dedicated to ensuring the future of white-tailed deer, wildlife habitat and our hunting heritage. To learn more about QDMA, call 800-209-3337 or visit www.QDMA.com.