



Mule Deer Working Group **Fact Sheet**

## MULE DEER SHED ANTLER HUNTING

### Fact Sheet #16

#### OVERVIEW

Shed antler hunting has become an increasingly popular activity as a form of recreation and a highly competitive business enterprise. Antlers are commonly used for decorative pieces, furniture, crafts, medicinal purposes, and even pet chews. Collecting antlers has even developed into a competitive sport among recreational shed antler hunters. Hunting “sheds” generally occurs during the critical winter period when mule deer are most physiologically stressed and are on a sub-optimal diet. During this period, mule deer limit physical activity and movements to reduce weight loss and increase their chances of survival until vegetation green-up in the spring.



#### CONSIDERATIONS

In parts of the West, antler hunting occurs on a daily basis beginning in November with photographers or people scouting big bucks and their antlers and ending in June with shed antler collection. Most “shed hunting” activities occur during winter and early spring when deer are concentrated on crucial winter ranges. Because of the popularity of mule deer antlers, increasing numbers of collectors are taking to the field earlier in the year during and immediately after antlers are shed to collect the largest antlers ahead of others. Antler hunters primarily frequent bare ridge tops and the open south facing slopes in January and February. This activity often displaces deer from preferred habitats into deep snow and lower quality habitats for the much of the winter. Survival is likely reduced by the extreme levels of disturbance associated with these activities.

Other disturbances associated with antler hunting also have an impact. Shed antler hunters often operate off-road vehicles (ORVs) and snowmobiles off established roads searching for antlers. This is usually illegal and intensifies the disturbance to wintering mule deer. In some cases, disturbance includes chasing deer over fences hoping antlers fall off as the buck jumps the fence. Recently, shed antler hunters are employing drones to scout big bucks and for antlers already shed. While others are utilizing “antler traps” that essentially lure bucks into bait sites rigged with wires, ropes or other apparatus to snag antlers and knock them off. In other instances, some shed antler hunters have been employing the use of domestic dogs trained to find and retrieve shed antlers. Some antler hunters have used dogs to chase deer and pick up antlers as they fall off while the deer is running. Studies have shown when humans are accompanied by dogs, ungulates show heightened flight (avoidance) responses, longer avoidance and flight distances, and longer periods of displacement from preferred habitats. This is likely due to mule deer associating domestic dogs with their natural canid predators.



In addition to mule deer disturbance, antler hunting and associated use of vehicles, especially ORVs, has caused significant habitat and resource damage. Most of the actual antler collection occurs in spring when snowpack is melting and spring rains or snows occur rendering the countryside very wet, muddy, and susceptible to damage by surface disturbing activities including off-road motorized vehicle use.

Shed antler hunting statutes and regulations have been implemented in some states, but have proven controversial, difficult to enforce, and ineffective. Educational campaigns may prove more valuable in the long-term so people recognize the consequences of their actions. Well designed regulations can play an important role in influencing human behavior when coupled with information on the negative effects of shed antler hunting.



### RESPONSIBLE SHED ANTLER HUNTING

Mule deer antlers elicit a sense of admiration and curiosity for many. As a result, shed antler hunting has increased in popularity among recreationists, wildlife enthusiasts, sportsmen, and others. Collecting shed antlers may

increase appreciation for mule deer and their habitats and provide a quality outdoor experience for those who ethically participate in the activity. However, shed antler hunting has the potential to stress or displace deer. The following efforts should be made while in the field to reduce the negative impact of this activity on mule deer:



- Do not chase or harass mule deer or other wildlife – winter is the most critical time for mule deer survival;
- Wait until deer have left the winter range to collect shed antlers; and
- Use all vehicles, such as ORVs, responsibly and legally and only on roads or trails open to such use.

### CONCLUSIONS

Shed antler hunting is an engaging and rewarding outdoor recreation opportunity for many, but it can have unintended consequences on mule deer populations. Mule deer are susceptible to stress during winter because of the harsh conditions and reduced available habitat. Stress associated with movement and displacement of mule deer by shed antler hunters adds to their physiological strain and potentially reduces their survival to spring. This is particularly pronounced when motorized vehicles are used to pursue wildlife. Some states and federal agencies have statutes and regulations to protect wintering mule deer and other wildlife but have had limited success. Certainly the negative consequences of shed antler hunting can, and should, be reduced to ensure this recreation opportunity does not affect overwintering mule deer and other wildlife. Education is needed to help ensure the public engages in this activity in an ethical, safe, and compatible fashion.

**More information on mule deer can be found at [www.muledeerworkinggroup.com](http://www.muledeerworkinggroup.com)**

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