



MANAGING HUNTING FOR OPPORTUNITY OR MATURE BUCKS

Fact Sheet #24

OVERVIEW

The definition of a quality hunting experience is different for everybody. Many hunters find satisfaction in simply the opportunity to experience the hunt and to provide meat for their families, while others are serious about finding and harvesting a mature buck. Wildlife agencies strive to provide hunting experiences for diverse interests by implementing various management strategies to provide a lot of hunting opportunity or the chance to harvest a large-antlered, mature buck. Trade-offs among management strategies are often at odds with each other and can create conflict among some hunters and managers. Implications and benefits of both strategies need to be considered within biological constraints of mule deer and their habitat.

BACKGROUND

Hunting has changed from the days when people hunted primarily for meat to today when a growing number of hunters are willing to forgo putting meat in the freezer for a few years to harvest a large-antlered, mature buck. Demand for more large-antlered bucks has changed the management landscape for state and provincial wildlife agencies responsible for managing mule deer populations and hunting opportunity. Agencies attempt to provide ample opportunity while ensuring mule deer populations are sustainable for generations to come. Providing diverse opportunities can be difficult from a socio-economic perspective. Wildlife agencies work to balance hunter expectations while ensuring hunter recruitment and retention is maintained and mule deer management programs are adequately funded.

MANAGING FOR MATURE BUCKS OR MORE OPPORTUNITY

The number of bucks is a measure of whether a herd is managed for abundant hunting opportunity or mature bucks. In most jurisdictions, buck numbers are evaluated annually and expressed as the number of bucks per 100 does. Areas managed for opportunity generally have easily obtained licenses and management goals that allow for lower buck to doe ratios, generally younger aged bucks, and higher hunter densities. Conversely, when areas are managed for more mature bucks, hunting opportunity must be significantly reduced to meet goals of more, older bucks, higher buck to doe ratios, higher harvest success rates, and fewer hunters in the field.



TRADE-OFFS BETWEEN OPPORTUNITY VS. MATURE BUCK MANAGEMENT

There is no doubt everyone who has pursued mule deer has thought about, or dreamed of, taking a large-antlered, mature buck or to hunt where there are few other hunters. Managing for abundant hunting opportunity or more mature bucks are both legitimate hunter expectations and both management strategies can sustain mule deer populations. Although desire for more areas with proportionately more mature bucks may be increasing, it is typically advocated by an avid and vocal minority of the hunting public. Numerous deer hunter surveys have shown most hunters primarily want the opportunity to hunt every year and care much less about antler size. These hunters, including an increasing number from the “millennial” generation, find satisfaction in the outdoor experience, a closer connection to nature, and a chance to fill the freezer.

There are trade-offs to be considered when balancing management strategies for hunting opportunity and mature buck hunting experiences. When weighing trade-offs between these management strategies hunter recruitment and retention are primary considerations. Many young or novice hunters began their big game hunting experiences pursuing mule deer with licenses that were easy to obtain every year. Management to increase mature buck numbers nearly always results in fewer deer licenses to maintain or increase the buck to doe ratio and buck age structure, and reduce hunter densities. This scenario results in less opportunity to draw a license and participate annually. Increasingly restrictive opportunity often discourages people from starting and staying engaged in hunting. For young and seasoned hunters alike, if they can't draw a license every year, they are more likely to drop out of hunting. Finally, hunter displacement from these areas to those where hunter opportunity is emphasized often results in higher hunter densities, poorer deer hunting experiences, and more dissatisfied hunters. In the long term, fewer hunters results in less support and funding for wildlife management programs.



Mature buck management can also create unrealistic expectations of large-antlered bucks behind every tree. By 4 years of age, antlers reach about 80-90% of their peak size, so allowing bucks to continue to grow old has diminishing benefits for production of big antlers. Antler size is also heavily dependent on genetics and nutrition, which can't be improved by restricting buck harvest. Managing for a higher proportion of bucks in a population may result in more bucks lost to non-hunting mortality sources such as harsh winter, starvation, diseases, predation, and vehicle collisions. Another consideration for managers is Chronic Wasting Disease, which is more prevalent in mature bucks. Also, bucks compete with does and fawns for forage and this may reduce fawn production and survival. Management for large-antlered, mature bucks may also deemphasize doe harvest, which is often necessary to sustain herd health, maintain quality and productivity of habitats, and minimize mortality events associated with too many deer on the landscape.

Most wildlife agencies balance management strategies to provide ample hunting opportunity throughout much of the state or province and more opportunity to harvest mature bucks in select areas. For example, Wyoming strives to manage for no more than 25% of statewide mule deer herds as special management units that have more than 30 bucks per 100 does.

IN SUMMARY

There is an expectation for wildlife agencies to provide hunters with frequent hunting opportunity or the chance to harvest a mature buck. Providing both in the same area is difficult as they are usually at odds with one another. Certainly, wildlife agencies must strike a balance between those who simply want to hunt deer every year and those who only want to hunt mature bucks. Of course, both these options and their trade-offs need to be considered within the biological constraints of mule deer and their habitat.

More information on mule deer can be found at www.muledeerworkinggroup.com

*A product of the Mule Deer Working Group - Sponsored by the Western Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies.
Produced with support from the Mule Deer Foundation (www.muledeer.org) - Approved January 2018*