

boone and crockett club position statement

Deer Breeding and Shooting Operations

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Situational Overview

There are currently commercial deer breeding farms that raise in captivity native, North American cervids (primarily white-tailed deer and elk) for sale to escape-proof, fenced, put-and-take shooting operations, often called hunting preserves by this industry. Through selective breeding and artificial manipulation, these animals are raised to grow unnaturally large sets of antlers. For years, hunters and non-hunters alike have questioned the appropriateness of such breeding and shooting operations and the motives and ethics of people who choose to shoot these animals. The recent growth in this trade of captive-reared wildlife is testing the public's historic support of hunting, has revealed new and growing threats to the health of wildlife at large, and is raising urgent questions as to how these captive animals should be managed and the industry regulated.

The majority of North American sportsmen and sportswomen adhere to the belief that hunting should involve a challenging and respectful pursuit of wild, free-ranging animals attuned to their natural environment. These sportsmen appreciate their opportunity to hunt and recognize both the diversity of local customs within the hunting community and the rights of others to choose how they wish to hunt. The wildlife conservation and management community is becoming increasingly concerned, however, that growing trophy deer and elk and then shooting these animals in fenced shooting facilities reflects negatively on hunting and will weaken the public support for the type of fair chase hunting they cherish. In our democratic society the majority of citizens must be supportive or at least neutral toward any activity, including hunting, in order for it to be allowed to continue.

Historically, non-hunters have proven to support hunting when it is conducted ethically and show less support for hunting when it is viewed as unethical or just killing for a trophy. The purpose of breeding and shooting operations is to provide their customers with more assured kills of unnaturally grown, large-antlered trophies; their motivation is profit. The customer pays based on antler size; their motivation is collecting trophies. Anti-hunting groups, in order to confuse and rally the public to accept their views, often misrepresent hunting as the shooting of penned deer and elk; their motivation is the elimination of all hunting. There is a distinction between breeding and shooting operations and the ethical hunting of wild, free-ranging game that needs to be made clear to the non-hunting community.

The captive-cervid industry uses selective breeding, artificial insemination, regimented feeding, and pharmaceutical drugs to achieve unnaturally large antlers. Such intensive manipulation of the natural characteristics of a wild deer and elk is a major departure from what occurs in nature, and it challenges our common understanding of the terms wild and wildlife. It does not appear that breeding and shooting operations considered the ethical implications of how far they should go in manipulating wildlife to satisfy the desires of a few. Nor did they think about the value the rest of society places on wild creatures and natural systems. The sole purpose for vastly exaggerating antler size to reach proportions that could never be attained in nature was commercial gain. The decision to drug wild animals also raises a valid question if this meat is safe to eat.

In North America the number of breeding and shooting operations has increased to such an extent that traditional wildlife management, jurisdiction, and regulatory authority are all being challenged. Since the early 20th century, wildlife has been considered not a private, but a public resource that

belongs to all citizens equally. This concept arose from a U.S. Supreme Court decision and is known as the Public Trust Doctrine. In recent years, the deer breeding industry has lobbied for white-tailed deer to be reclassified from wildlife to livestock, with the objective of privatizing a public resource and transferring regulatory authority from fish and game departments to departments of agriculture to obtain oversight more favorable to their industry. In jurisdictions where such transfer has occurred, regulation and oversight of captive-cervid facilities has deteriorated, which has led to increased escapes and enhanced risk for transmission of diseases to free-ranging wildlife. Converting a public resource like wildlife into a commodity has long-term ramifications and is a decision that deserves broader input and consideration.

Another significant threat to wildlife is the transport of captive cervids within a state or across state or provincial lines. Such transports have been linked to the spread of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD). There is currently no practical live animal test for CWD and symptoms can take over a year to manifest themselves, therefore captive animals cannot be effectively tested for infection prior to transport. Furthermore, there is no cure for CWD and yet increasing reports of the disease infecting new regions leave little doubt that CWD is expanding its range in North America.

Position

The Boone and Crockett Club maintains that selective breeding and artificially growing deer and elk with unnaturally large antlers to be sold and then shot in a put-and-take situation is not representative of traditional hunting, and these practices should be discouraged. The captive-cervid industry is ignoring the fact that society rightfully expects hunting to be conducted ethically. If hunting is perceived as less than fair (i.e., less than desirable, reputable, and legitimate) our society may no longer tolerate hunting in any form.

Those who choose to pay a fee to shoot captive animals in put-and-take shooting operations are free to make that choice where such shooting facilities are legal. Even though the Club believes the shooting of selectively bred and artificially enhanced, captive wildlife is not ethical, is not hunting, and serves no useful public purpose, it has no desire to dictate choices and behavior for every person or industry. The Club will speak out when necessary to defend hunting and its value to conservation. This includes pointing out activities that undermine the public support of hunting.

The Boone and Crockett Club supports the Public Trust Doctrine and opposes any legislation sponsored by the captive-cervid industry that allows them to privatize native wildlife or transfer management authority over their industry from state, provincial, or tribal wildlife agencies to other management authorities such as agriculture departments. The Club recognizes and endorses the importance of private property rights, but maintains that what is best for wildlife is for it to remain a public and not a private resource.

The Boone and Crockett Club maintains that the threat of spread of CWD by the escape and/or transport of captive animals is a real and documented problem. The Club seeks to reduce the spread of CWD and other diseases to both captive and wild cervid populations, and consequently supports those states and provinces attempting to do so by: (1) prohibiting or restricting the establishment of new breeding and shooting operations; (2) adopting stricter regulations, including importation bans, governing the transport of captive cervids; and/or (3) prohibiting the release of captive animals from fenced breeding or shooting operations into wild, unfenced habitat as the danger to native wildlife from CWD is overwhelming.¹

The Boone and Crockett Club recognizes that not all deer and elk raised in captivity are artificially

enhanced to create trophies or are sold to put-and-take shooting facilities. The Club further recognizes that an escape-proof fence around a property does not in itself imply, unethical intentions by the landowner regarding the condition or treatment of the wildlife contained there, or how animals are pursued.

The Boone and Crockett Club contends that wildlife has far greater value to more people if it remains an untamed expression of the natural world. There is a distinct difference between the altering of wildlife and natural systems by the captive-cervid industry and managing wildlife in service to conservation, and the two should not be confused. The practices of deer breeding and shooting operations should not be accorded the same level of public acceptance as the ethical hunting of wild, free-ranging game that is the foundation of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation and forms the tradition of the Club and the majority of hunters. The benefits that hunting brings to conservation, wildlife management, wildlife health, and land stewardship, and the opportunity for future generations to freely hunt wild species is worth much more than an industry seeking short-term profits.