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WHAT'S WORKING AND WHAT'S NOT

An Overview of Approaches to Management for Quality Hunting¹

John P. Weigand
Chief, Research and Technical Service Bureau, Wildlife Division
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Richard J. Mackie
Professor of Wildlife Management
Montana State University

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INTRODUCTION

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Upon being asked to summarize "What's Working and What's Not" for this session, we sent a brief 3-question appeal to each of the State/Provincial wildlife agencies that are members of the WAFWA. We asked: 1) whether [agency] considers "quality" hunting to be a priority management concern; 2) whether [agency] has developed any strategies or specific programs addressing "quality", and the nature of these; and 3) whether the programs/results have been evaluated, especially as concerns "what's working and what's not." We also asked for any reports outlining agency concerns and efforts with respect to quality hunting management and/or the outcome of program efforts to date. Written responses were received from all 13 western states; several agencies were also contacted by telephone. We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of all who participated in this effort. This evaluation is a contribution from Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Projects W-100-R and W-120-R.

RESULTS

Priority

Based on written and verbal responses, about half of the agencies consider "quality" a priority management concern at this time. About one-third have developed specific policies for consideration of "quality" in management programs. Generally, those that did not give specific program priority to "quality" recognized the need for or noted that the quality aspect of the hunt and hunter satisfaction figured highly in management.

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Respondents for several agencies noted that basic management priorities or policies provided for quality management without being spelled out as such. This was especially the case in management of big game other than deer and elk (e.g., pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, and moose) where hunting is normally limited and controlled via special permit.

Strategies and Programs (What's Being Done)

Currently, all of the States have established, or include in their big game management programs, at least some effort or consideration relating to "quality." General strategies vary widely from formal policies and guidelines established in strategic plans and other documents adopted by Game Boards or Commissions to simply managing a number of units for mature animals. Arizona's strategic plan for big game, 1987-1991, for example, spells out 3 basic strategies: 1) basic management for sustained yield and maximum recreational opportunity; 2) alternative management designed to provide for increased quality through high male:female ratios, reduced harvest, and increased hunter success; and 3) vulnerable species management (Arizona Game and Fish Dept., Federal Aid Proj. FW-11-R, April 1987. 132 pp.). Conversely, Montana's current strategic plan for wildlife addresses the issue of quality only as "The Department can best ensure 'quality wildlife experiences' by providing a wide variety of wildlife-recreational experiences and by managing the distribution of hunters and other wildlife users in time and space" (Mussehl, T., J. Gaffney, and D. G. Conklin. 1986. Design for tomorrow, 1985-1990. Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Helena. 88 pp.).

The goals or objectives of "quality" hunting management efforts also vary by state or agency as well as by species, region, or unit within agencies. In general, however, efforts are directed toward 1) diversification of hunting opportunities (something for everyone) and/or 2) specific efforts to a) reduce hunter numbers, b) provide more males, and/or c) provide more mature/trophy males. Other cited objectives include helping sustain harvests within resource constraints, meeting increasing public demand, increasing hunt aesthetics, providing special or unique experiences, and providing income for management. In some cases basic biological/ecological objectives such as maintaining or increasing total numbers, numbers of males or sex ratios, reproduction or age ratios, or percentages of sex/age classes in the harvest were noted to simultaneously provide for "quality" management.

As might be expected, current approaches or practices applied in quest of quality center on limitation and constraint. They most generally include:

- establishment of special management areas
- limitation of hunting permits or quotas to levels below the norm for general harvest management

- limitation of antler or horn size
- special early/late/back-or high-country hunts
- separate seasons or time periods for hunting different species.

Other approaches included restricting hunters to applying for a single permit hunt (species/area), preventing permit holders from applying for another similar permit for periods of years, altering season starting or ending dates and length, road closures or otherwise restricting access, restriction of weapon type or size, requiring a guide, establishing special fees for special quality hunts, and preparing special publications on "quality" hunting.

What's Working and What's Not

All of the respondents indicated that specific strategies, policies, and/or practices applied in relation to quality hunting were working. However, few have been in effect long enough to be evaluated quantitatively, if at all. Also, most were designed and applied to meet specific needs of individual states, areas, habitats, species, etc., and can be evaluated only in sense that they meet the objectives of the particular situation in which they were used. Because most provided for some measure of limitation on hunting pressure or for increased escapement of animals through hunting seasons, all would be expected to "work" to some degree.

The most noted exception to the general satisfaction was in use of antler point restrictions to increase the number of males/larger mature males in deer and elk populations. Two states provided quantitative evaluations and at least two others cited negative experiences (the use and effectiveness of antler point restrictions in big game management is also being discussed in another session of this meeting). Although results varied with specific situations, antler size restrictions (i.e., 3- or 4-point or better deer seasons) by themselves apparently do not result in reduced hunter numbers or greater numbers of mature or "trophy" males in populations. Indeed, the opposite often occurs. As several responses or reports noted, "the only way to have trophies is to not kill them - that means limiting hunter numbers."

While most approaches "were working" and agencies, or at least respondents, were satisfied with outcomes to date, attainment of quality hunting goals by the methods employed to date also generated a mixture of problems. Those most frequently given were: 1) reduced or restricted hunting opportunities and associated activities; 2) reduced hunter success and satisfaction in some cases; 3) reduced program income and economic benefits to others; 4) increased program complexity and costs; 5) increased sportsman-landowner and resident-nonresident conflicts.

DISCUSSION

That all western states and provinces are addressing the quality hunting issue in some form is evident. On the other hand, its priority varied. Within agencies, priority sometimes seems to be related to the particular perspectives of individuals at different levels of administration. In one state, for example, the director, in overview, stated "quality" hunting was a high priority issue. A member of his staff, viewing the effort from the standpoint of implementation in a program that has always incorporated some element opportunity for "quality" hunting, stated that it was not. One measure of whether quality hunting is a high priority is the existence of written administrative policy. The lack of such a policy for most agencies might suggest that, while the issue is of importance, it may not be as high priority overall as some would believe.

As many respondents and most others who have addressed the issue have noted, quality hunting embraces a plethora of problems and definitions of quality. Quality means something special about an object that makes it what it is; a characteristic or attitude; position or relation; fineness, merit, or excellence. This array of meanings clearly projects the subjectiveness of quality and it's basic comparison of the value of one thing vs another. It also makes it imperative that, before addressing the problem or issue of quality hunting and attempting to employ any management approach, specific goals and objectives should be identified and appropriate strategies for achieving those ends must be developed.

Some states, like Utah and Wyoming began their assessments with surveys concerning hunter preferences (Hancock, N., P. Shields, and J. Farringer. 1985. Special Report on Quality Hunting. State Interagency Committee, and Doll, G.F., S.T. Mast, and J. Denison. 1986. Deer hunter perceptions and preferences, Wyoming 1986. Inst. for Policy Research, Univ. of Wyoming, respectively). In some cases, detailed literature reviews and/or evaluations of data on the effectiveness of various "quality hunting" strategies have also been conducted. Such studies may provide interesting and useful results.

In the Utah survey, for example, 50% of the deer hunters responding favored more restrictions, even if it meant less hunting opportunity; 53% preferred restrictions to be imposed on a management unit rather than statewide basis; 52% favored fewer hunters afield; and 60% would tolerate more hunters in some management units if there were fewer hunters in others. However, 84% were satisfied with current deer hunting seasons and 56% preferred to harvest a smaller buck each year to bagging an older buck less frequently. For elk, 73% of the respondents were satisfied with current hunting opportunities and only 52% favored more restrictions to provide opportunity for hunting older bulls. However, 93% favored restrictions on a management unit basis and 33% wanted fewer hunters afield.

Although such results did not show a mandate for sweeping changes in management philosophy or direction, they did indicate the necessity to provide a variety of hunting opportunities and to systematically explore options to maintain and/or consciously increase factors that contribute to quality experiences.

Many of the respondents to our survey indicated that providing quality hunting requires careful evaluation of opportunities and constraints relating to individual management situations. Numerous biological/ecological, social/political, and economic factors must be considered in such evaluations and ultimately must be balanced acceptably in decision making.

Biological/Ecological

Biological and ecological factors, individually or in various combinations, provide the basic criteria for determining feasibility of quality hunting in an area. As several respondents noted, not all areas or habitats are equal in their ability to produce or sustain quality animals or to provide for quality hunting. Factors such as topography, vegetation, climate, land use/management, and occurrence and management of other species in a area; animal distribution, movements, and habitat use, growth rate, longevity, reproduction, other mortality, and perhaps genetics; and population characteristics and dynamics must all be considered.

Habitat/environmental factors determine the availability of resources required by the animals. These, in turn, determine how animals use a particular area (e.g., distribution, movements), their biological characteristics (e.g., growth, longevity), and ultimately population characteristics and dynamics. They also influence access and the vulnerability of animals to hunters and harvest. Because no two areas are exactly alike, strategies for management will vary such that each individual animal population and habitat unit must be assessed with respect to potential for producing "quality" animals and providing "quality" hunting. Sometimes both can be provided, at other times neither is possible.

Social/Political

The basic involvement of social and political factors and considerations in quality management was noted by nearly all respondents. Such factors influence demand, when and where harvests are desirable, the nature and extent of the harvest, and how it is distributed among the hunting population.

The least restrictive format of regulations will provide the greatest amount of hunting opportunity, but usually can be enacted only in areas away from human population centers or where other factors limit hunter numbers and harvests. As noted above, increased restrictions mean reduced hunting and recreational opportunity, and reduced hunter success and satisfaction.

Tradition and the alternative hunting regulations to which hunters have become accustomed are important considerations. In some states, such as Arizona and Nevada, hunting is entirely by permit, and hunters apparently have accepted such restriction in deference to the total loss of hunting opportunity. In others, such as Montana, hunters are accustomed to long, liberal seasons in which all may participate, at least for more common and widely distributed species like deer and elk. Although most hunting of antlerless deer and elk and almost all hunting of other big game species is by permit only, the notion of restricting all hunting to permits only is still considered socially, economically, and perhaps politically unacceptable. The fact that surveys in several states have shown the majority of hunters satisfied with current management might also indicate it best not to tamper extensively with existing systems. If specific quality hunting options are to be initiated, they should be approached cautiously with every option or plan explained to the hunters along with the costs and consequences of each option.

Juxtaposition of special management or "quality" hunting areas appears to be a key factor in general acceptance or success of such efforts. Hunters denied opportunity to hunt big game in one area will likely hunt in a different area. Severe limitation on numbers of hunters in one area can result in overcrowding in nearby areas at the expense of hunter satisfaction, safety, and the wildlife resource, and hunting quality over a much broader area than prior to implementation of the "quality" hunt.

Landowner tolerance of restrictions on harvest is another important consideration in areas where most big game occurs on private rather than public land. Demands for trophy/quality hunting must be balanced with needs to avoid wildlife depredations. In some areas, like eastern Montana, where deer numbers may fluctuate 6-7-fold each decade, discussions around maintaining excessive deer populations for any reason could trigger a landowner revolution.

Economics

Economic considerations relating to establishment and acceptance of quality hunting programs center around income generated and costs to the wildlife agency, the hunter, the private landowner, and the community.

In general, income from hunting license and permit sales should provide adequate funding for managing the target species. As noted earlier, costs tend to increase for more complex and special management programs, while income declines as fewer hunters are accommodated. Attempts to increase license fees tend to be resisted unless opportunities to hunt are also increased. Fifty-eight percent of the hunters responding in the Utah survey said they were not willing to pay more for hunting licenses and permits if numbers of hunters were restricted. Similarly, in Wyoming, 56% of the deer hunters statewide were unwilling to pay an additional fee to hunt bigger bucks.

Auctioning limited numbers of permits for special "high quality" hunts can provide much needed funds for managing select big game species while meeting quality hunting goals. In recent years, several states have auctioned a bighorn sheep license through the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep for amounts up to \$109,000. Issuing agencies received 90% of these revenues for acquisition and maintenance of sheep winter ranges, trapping and transplanting sheep to new locations, and evaluating sheep management problems. The use or success of similar fund raising for more abundant species like deer, elk, or antelope was not reported.

Fee hunting is a potential remedy to current demands for trophy hunting. At least one state, California, has implemented a program encouraging development of wildlife management on private land, including provision for establishing special regulations for quality hunting with fee. Rights to hunt big game on private lands can be leased in the western U.S., but as lease or trespass costs increase, they may become less desirable or available to a smaller proportion of hunters with greater pressures directed to public and other open lands.

Many private landowners currently absorb costs related to monitoring hunter activities. Those costs could be significantly reduced, or turned into profit, by providing quality hunts at a price that offsets cost. Several large ranches in southwestern Montana have leased hunting or provide guided hunts for bull elk. While residents are not excluded from these "quality" hunting opportunities, the bulls are harvested almost entirely by non-residents. Legislation prohibiting such operations is being delayed by the ranches allowing harvesting of several hundred antlerless elk each year at no cost to the hunters. At least 90 percent of the antlerless permits are held by residents. There is, however, much resentment over the lack of resident opportunity to hunt or harvest the bulls, and it may be only a matter of time before residents react toward placing further restrictions on non-resident hunters.

Reducing season lengths, bag limits, and numbers of hunters can also adversely impact income to motels, restaurants, service stations, sporting goods dealers, and others. Such adverse impact can escalate to social, political, and economic impacts on the wildlife agency. On the other hand, effective management that provides maximum diversity of opportunity to utilize wildlife resources and stimulate economic gains to individuals as well as communities may also provide greater incentive to maintain or enhance wildlife habitats and populations.

CONCLUSIONS

The current demand for quality hunting is the "new kid on the block" in big game management--a concept seeking a niche in existing management schemes. Our overview of this relative "newcomer" shows it has positive and negative aspects as well as

many unknowns. Questions about its character and the manner and extent to which it should be incorporated in established programs have generated anxiety in wildlife professionals charged with implementation. They are being challenged concomitantly to incorporate the benefits, neutralize detriments to the extent possible, and uncover and evaluate the unknowns. Success in this endeavor could reveal an already present or add another dimension to the diversity of hunting options now available in the west.

Unfortunately, this review of present policies and practices has not produced firm conclusions as to what's working and what's not. Perhaps here, as in many other aspects of big game management, few, if any specific conclusions or guidelines of general application are possible. On the other hand, as noted early in this paper, very few quality hunting programs and practices have been in effect long enough to be evaluated quantitatively if at all. Only time and future, more detailed and comparative assessments will resolve those questions.

We agree with the conclusion probably common to all of those who have examined this issue. That is: quality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. In this respect we also agree with Crowe (1984, in: Hancock, N.V., P. Shields, and J. Farringer. 1985. Special report on quality hunting presented to the Utah Board of Big Game Control. 80pp.) that "we would all do well not to try to define quality for another", and that "there is no reason to believe that one person's idea of quality is any better than another's." Because of this, perhaps the only conclusion we can reach to "ensure quality hunting in the face of increasing demands" is, whenever possible, provide the most widely diverse opportunities for hunting consistent with the resources we have to work with within an area or agency.