White-tailed Deer Management Continuum in the USA: A History of Slippery Slopes and Potential Diminishing Returns

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White-tailed deer (deer) have long been recognized as the most popular and economically important game species in the USA. In recent decades, as the appetite for deer hunting increased, the intensity of the tools used to manage deer herds in many states grew, as well. The continuum of deer management practices is broad, ranging from what could be described as traditional practices on one end of the continuum, to extreme practices on the other end of the continuum. Emphasis on growing bigger antlers to supply hunting markets has been the impetus behind the integration of some of the more extreme practices into commercial deer hunting programs. Some of these practices include captive propagation of deer in small pens, line breeding strategies, artificial insemination, sexing of semen, use of various performance enhancing medicaments, embryo transfer, and bottle-feeding fawns. Though these practices have pushed antler sizes that now exceed 600" on the Boone & Crockett measuring system, there has also been a degree of chaos that has been created among the hunting community due to many of these extreme practices being perceived as controversial and antagonistic to the greater good of hunting and wildlife conservation. Further, there are also concerns that some of these controversial practices lead to erosion of support for hunting by the non-hunting community. All of this does beg the question of whether there are points along the deer management continuum that yield diminishing returns, resulting in decreased participation in deer hunting, decreased support for hunting, decreased financial economies associated with deer and deer hunting, and compromised sustainability of conservation funding that benefits all terrestrial wildlife in this country.