

HUNTING BIG GAME OVER BAIT

Three years ago, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department decided to no longer allow hunting big game over bait on its 200,000 acres of state wildlife management areas.

This was not an unprecedented nor impulsive change in philosophy. Game and Fish is not the only public agency with land responsibilities to prohibit hunting over bait. The North Dakota State Land Department and its 700,000 acres of state school lands, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its 500,000 acres of waterfowl production areas and national wildlife refuges, also do not allow the placement of bait to attract animals, for hunting or any other purpose.

Two years before Game and Fish put its new regulations into place, the agency initiated public discussion on hunting over bait at spring 2003 and subsequent district advisory board meetings.

In addition, in this same column in August 2003, Game and Fish outlined some of its concerns, as well as reasons some hunters feel hunting over bait is an acceptable practice.

Since then, the topic of hunting big game over bait has generated much discussion around the state. The gist of the conversation is not so much that public agencies *should* allow hunting over bait on their lands, but whether the state as a whole should allow this practice at all.

In fact, in each of the last two sessions, the state legislature has considered bills that would have prohibited hunting big game over bait statewide, which would have made North Dakota's laws consistent with those of our neighboring states. Across the country, 24 states currently prohibit hunting big game over bait entirely, and another dozen have varying restrictions in place.

And the discourse continues. This is an issue that generates strong reaction from hunters on Both Sides. Here's a few excerpts from recent postings on two of North Dakota's popular website forums.

One Side

- *"Honestly, I don't think any deer kill is legit if it's over a bait pile."*
- *"For deer, if you hunt over a bait pile, that isn't even hunting, there is no challenge to it. I wouldn't consider it fair chase at all. I call it shooting, not hunting. I always give my friend a hard time because he baits."*



• *"I don't believe in baiting deer or any other animal for killing. It kind of sounds like the lazy type of hunting to me. What happens to those who scout starting in July and the person that baits starts baiting in October and all of that work from the guy that scouts is lost. I'm sorry, but that sounds like unfair chase. That's just me, though."*

The Other Side

- *"Here is my take on bait hunting ... I don't do it, but I don't care if others do. I am just happy people are out hunting. As long as they are doing it legally."*
- *"Here is an example: On one farm I have 30+ apple trees, in the fall the apples fall to the ground, the deer come in and chomp away on them. If I set up a stand and hunt, the anti-baiters say this is perfectly ethical and would be allowed. If I pick those apples up and take them to my other farm and put them under some nonfruit trees and set up a stand, this is not ethical. Give me a break, all this is about is jealousy, and ethics for some."*
- *"Ethics?? Come on guys. Food plots, buck lure, rattle horns, grunt tubes, picked corn fields, rifles that shoot 400 yards, compound bows, tree stands, heated shooting houses, trail cameras. Tell me where to draw the line. We all have the right to choose, and should be able to do it without condemnation."*
- *"It (baiting) is a very efficient way to help execute a clean kill, not to mention bring other critters in for viewing pleasure."*

While ethics generate a good share of the discussion between hunters, the Game and Fish Department has other relevant concerns about hunting big game over bait. To understand these concerns, it is also important to understand the definition of bait and how it relates to hunting.

In Game and Fish regulations, hunting big game over bait is defined as *"The placement and/or use of bait(s) for attracting big game and other wildlife to a specific location for the purpose of hunting. Baits include but are not limited to grains, minerals, salts, fruits, vegetables, hay or any other natural or manufactured foods."*

It is important to emphasize that grain spilling out of a grain bin, grain hitting the ground behind a combine, hay or other foods used to feed cattle, natural food plots, and scents or lures used to attract deer are not considered bait.

It is one thing to plant habitat that is used by a variety of wildlife and to hunt there. It is an entirely different matter to take food from that habitat – corn, sunflowers, apples, etc. – and place it outside a blind at the edge of a grazed out pasture, next to the neighbor's woods.

One Game and Fish Department concern is that bait sites can reduce opportunity for hunters to access deer, which are a public resource. Bait sites can and do draw both whitetail and mule deer from public lands, taking away public hunting opportunity. For some, public land is their only place to hunt.

Bait sites also attract deer from one piece of private land to another, and that reduces opportunity on surrounding land. To keep up, neighboring landowners may start hunting over bait themselves, or increase the size of existing bait sites.

Second, the increasing presence of bait sites may affect the ability to manage the state's deer. Artificial food sources influence what deer eat and how they move, often changing their distribution, sometimes significantly.

When deer are distributed fairly evenly, it promotes an adequate harvest. If you have a lot of deer attracted to one place, and only a few people have access to them, harvest is limited.

Disease is also a consideration. The potential for disease to spread is increased when animals are concentrated. Disease can be spread by the exchange of saliva, mucous, feces and other body fluids between animals. This includes animals touching noses, eating food contaminated with nose drippings, or direct ingestion of particles of feces that other animals have deposited on a pile of food.

The placement of bait for hunting purposes is a practice that promotes this situation. This is one reason why the Game and Fish Department, in addition to prohibiting hunting over bait on wildlife management areas, has also removed feeders from WMAs to reduce the potential for concentrations of deer.

One disease that has far-reaching implications for deer and the livestock industry if it reaches North Dakota is bovine tuberculosis. Bovine TB is an expanding problem in northwestern Minnesota, and its presence in cattle limits markets for producers whose cattle don't have it, or requires herd destruction when the disease is identified.

Cattle can transmit the disease to deer, and deer can pass it on to each other and back to cattle. Since May 2005, more than 10 cattle herds in northwestern

Minnesota have been identified with TB, including at least four new ones since October 2007.

This is occurring within 50 to 100 miles of North Dakota's border. If TB crosses the border via an infected cow or deer, every food source that congregates deer adds to the risk that the disease will spread.

Disease outbreaks require action and action includes testing and monitoring. This is a costly venture and in Minnesota, taxpayers, the cattle industry, and the Department of Natural Resources are footing the bill.

Hunters also pay the price for TB. Since deer are reservoirs and can carry the disease to cattle, deer must be reduced to the greatest possible extent in any area where TB is found. In the core area in Minnesota, the white-tailed deer population has been reduced by approximately 50 percent through increased licenses and by authorized sharpshooters. In March 2008, the Minnesota DNR got approval to allow landowners in the TB zone to shoot deer without permits. The DNR also issued permits for landowners to shoot wild elk that have come in contact with cattle or livestock feed.

This same strategy will be employed if TB comes to North Dakota and spreads within the deer population. Routine Game and Fish functions would go on the back burner as fighting disease would become a priority.



While social concerns or ethics are not at the top of the Game and Fish Department's list, they warrant mention. A question to consider is how do nonhunters evaluate hunting over bait versus not hunting over bait?

Another question is, does hunting over bait mean lost opportunity for teaching kids about natural deer behavior, identifying sign, scouting and all the hard work

that goes into a gratifying hunt?

There is little dispute that hunting over bait can increase success for deer hunters. Otherwise, it wouldn't have become so popular.

The concerns related to this method, however, continue to provide a catalyst for discussion, **From Both Sides.**

***What Do You Think?** To pass along your thoughts, send us an e-mail at ndgf@nd.gov; call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.*

To view a video presentation of the Game and Fish Department's concerns, visit our website at gf.nd.gov.

