



The road well traveled

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I HAVE DONE and still do a lot of traveling inside and outside the state. Some routes are burned into my brain, such as the 110 miles to State College or the 160 miles to Harrisburg. And there are other roads that I have traveled I'm not as intimately acquainted with. The history of deer management in Pennsylvania is like traveling the turnpike. The exits and mile markers are well established and painfully familiar.

The science of deer management took root in the 1960s and '70s. Reams of data were collected and indices were developed. As a result of this improved knowledge, antlerless allocations climbed to account for varying deer reproduction, habitat and harvest success in different areas of the state. Yet people questioned them. But under this "new" system things were working just fine. In 1965, hunters killed more than 65,000 bucks, shattering the 1957 high of 49,000, and then eclipsed the new record two years later, with a harvest of more than 78,000.

In 1976, the Game Commission adopted a new deer policy recognizing "that deer belong to all citizens of the commonwealth and that recreational hunting is a privilege, not a right." Then, in 1979, after years of collecting deer population and habitat data, deer density goals were established based on forest stage (seedling/sapling, pole and saw timber). Oh, boy, this was not going to go over well. With policy set and goals in hand, the Game Commission got on the deer management turnpike.

The rising tide of deer hit 900,000 in the early '80s, with densities surpassing 50 deer/forest square mile in some areas—way above any habitat-based goal. In 1983, the antlerless allocation was above 500,000 for the first time. Can you guess what happened next? Hunters and lawmakers cried foul and accused the Commission of selling out to farmers and foresters. But, amazingly enough, the antlerless allocation continued to rise until 1991, until the familiar howls of the disgruntled rose above common sense.

Over the next six years the allocation steadily declined as hunters griped about seeing too few deer. But despite the claims of no deer left, Pennsylvania hunters harvested nearly 400,000 deer in 1997, the fourth highest harvest in history, despite an allocation that was the lowest it had been in the previous nine years. We have been traveling together through Pennsylvania's deer management history for the past eight months. I think you know the road by now.