

Child Restraint:

SHOULD KIDS *Let 'em Grow?*

Critics of Quality Deer Management often claim the “Let 'em Go So They Can Grow” philosophy discourages youngsters from hunting.

Such accusations lack evidence and ignore QDM’s positive influences on youth participation.

By Patrick Durkin

The long-awaited day had arrived for my daughter Leah, then 12. It was opening morning of Wisconsin’s 1997 firearms deer season, and she sat beside me with her .243 bolt-action rifle.

To be clear, this wasn’t Leah’s first hunt. It was the seventh straight opening day she sat with me in our tree stand. But by Wisconsin law, she couldn’t hunt with a firearm until age 12. Still, she had long enjoyed being part of my hunt, and took pride in seeing, hearing and pointing out deer as they jumped the gurgling creek in the valley below, or hopped the barbed-wire fence on the hillside above.

On that morning, however, I was first to spot the 6-point buck browsing toward us along the fence line. I tapped Leah’s shoulder and nodded to her left. I then turned on the video recorder and followed the yearling in the viewfinder as it walked broadside at 50 yards.

“Any time now,” I thought while bracing my elbows atop the stand’s plywood wall, hoping not to flinch when Leah fired.

The shot never came. The buck disappeared into the oaks and prickly ash on the neighbor’s property. As I lowered the camera and arched my eyebrows in mild surprise, Leah answered my unspoken question: “He’s too young. Let’s keep hunting.”

Her decision caught me off-guard. Then again, maybe it didn’t. When she was 7 years old, and a young buck passed our stand, I complied when she urged me to shoot. Since then, after I explained why we would shoot only does or a mature buck, “we” had shot only antlerless deer during our shared hunts. And when she became the chief triggerman in November 1997, she followed our unwritten rule with neither urging nor reminders.



Tyler Morris of Missouri, age 15, killed his first whitetail on opening day of Missouri’s youth season last October. A yearling buck was the first deer for most veteran hunters, including the leaders of the QDM movement.

False Concerns?

I’ve recalled that moment often in the years since, usually when critics of Quality Deer Management preach that the “Let 'em Go So They Can Grow” slogan is an unfair standard for youngsters. They don’t stop there. Many further assume that harvest restraints deter kids from deer hunting. Some critics even conclude their sermon by saying they can’t embrace any practice that might worsen the nation’s participation rates for hunting.

Although I can respect such worries, I can’t help but suspect multi-layered assumptions, especially when folks say they’re only concerned “for the children.” The fact is, rural sociologists and wildlife managers can cite plenty of research that links our increasingly urban, time-strapped, high-tech society to decreasing participation in hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities. No one, though, can cite research that shows how a specific – not to mention variable and multi-

nanced – harvest guideline is hurting youngsters’ satisfaction and reducing their participation in hunting.

Unfortunately, thin supporting evidence seldom slows emotional arguments. When asked about criticisms of “Let 'em Go So They Can Grow,” Joe Hamilton, QDMA’s Southern Director of Education and Outreach, said such comments often come from adult hunters who project their beliefs onto young hunters.

“Before giving that criticism any credibility, we need to hear more from the youngsters about what they expect from the hunt,” Hamilton said. “I’ve never heard that complaint from a young person. The youngsters I hear from are generally more inclined to embrace QDM than the experienced guys. I can’t begin to tell you

how many times I've heard stories about kids who passed up a young buck because they wanted to wait for a better one."

Dr. Gary Alt, who once ran the bear and deer programs for the Pennsylvania Game Commission, echoed Hamilton's thoughts. When Alt crisscrossed the Keystone State in the late 1990s to encourage increased doe harvests and reduced buck harvests, hunters often opposed him, saying it would be unfair to ask children to pass up an antlered buck.

"But you know what? We had kids walk up to the microphone every night and explain our program to the adults," Alt said. "The kids were setting the example and teaching their parents. Give them some credit. They heard our message. You can't keep trying to raise more deer than the land can support. It leads to habitat destruction and the loss of the very resource we're all charged with managing. Kids understood this is about their future as deer hunters. They get behind that with no problem."

Willing to Pass

Kip Adams, QDMA's Northern Director of Education and Outreach, agrees, but stressed that QDMA has never mandated harvest-restraint for youngsters or new hunters.

"Our perspective is to let them shoot whatever the law allows," Adams said. "If you look at all the people in the QDM movement, almost all of us have shot basket-racks in our past. We'd be hypocrites to say 'No, you can't do that.' But when kids have the opportunity to make that choice, no one should be surprised when they hold out for a bigger deer."

Brian Padgett, vice president of the QDMA's Cape Fear River Branch in North Carolina, also serves as the educational chair for the Branch's QDMA Mentored Hunting program, now five years old. This Branch's program allows beginning hunters to shoot a young buck, but mentors and instructors discuss QDM principles and goals with their fledgling hunters during pre-hunt workshops so they understand the group's long-term goals.

Padgett believes new hunters – whether youths or adults –

are more interested in learning about wildlife, woodsmanship and hunting skills than they are in debating what size buck to shoot.

"We educate them from the get-go and they readily accept our guidelines," Padgett said. "I don't know of any instance where someone was itching to shoot a buck and nothing else. We're not that strict about passing up young bucks. We're pretty lenient. We just ask why shoot a young buck if you can shoot a doe? Most

students pass on young bucks, but if a student shoots one for their first deer, we only ask them to refrain from shooting another one during their next hunt."

Padgett believes bigger issues and attitudes are hurting hunting participation rates. After all, the merits of "Let 'em Go So They Can Grow" usually aren't relevant to people until they're actually hunting. The topic simply isn't on their "radar screen" until then.

"The whole reason we started our Mentored Hunting Program was because we realized hunter numbers are declining nationwide," Padgett said. "I was lucky to have a father who taught me the ropes, but lots of kids don't have a parent who hunts. Once we started the program, we found that a lot of adults also needed someone to learn from, so we included them in our program. At that point, they become aware of the subject."



TES RANDLE JOLLY

QDMA member Tes Randle Jolly of Alabama (left) celebrates a first-ever deer for her niece, Mariah Randle. To recruit and retain young hunters, hunting should be fun, it should be a learning experience, and "success" should not be defined as killing a deer, no matter which harvest regulations apply to young hunters.

Societal Shifts Hurt Hunting

In studying recent hunting trends, it makes sense that we have many adults interested in hunting. The nationwide decline in hunting numbers that began in the 1980s coincided with an accelerated population shift from rural to urban settings, and reduced and less convenient access to hunting lands.

With those shifts came less acceptance and understanding of firearms. No longer were youngsters likely to strap their dad's long-gun to their bicycle frame and pedal out to the neighbor's woods or marsh. And when they were old enough to drive, they certainly didn't follow previous generations by keeping dad's

Continued.

gun in the car trunk so they could squeeze in a hunt after school. Although firearm ownership in rural homes is common and accepted, guns typically inspire alarm among urban residents.

Besides, youngsters growing up after the 1970s had little time to themselves. Their free time was usually scheduled into group activities like soccer and karate lessons, and supervised by parents and other adults. Unsupervised activities involving one, two or three adolescents became the exception.

America had also become a nation of workaholics by then, so even the parents with hunting backgrounds often couldn't find time to hunt. As lapsed hunters, they didn't take time to instruct and indoctrinate their kids into hunting, let alone spend time with them in a deer camp, deer hunting's time-honored incubator. But that doesn't mean those kids swore off hunting forever. When groups like the QDMA's Cape Fear River Branch offer mentored hunts, those dormant hunters seek instruction.

Convenient Scapegoats?

But given those huge shifts in society's norms, why do some folks blame QDM for fewer hunters? Well, hunters who remained active hear plenty about declining hunter numbers. When they look for possible causes, they look first to changes they experience firsthand, even though it often "puts the cart before the horse." Those changes could be new regulations or a new paradigm for deer management.

Realize, too, this isn't the only case where well-intentioned hunters make faulty assumptions about declining youth participation. During the 1990s, many hunting advocates assumed kids raised by mothers in single-parent homes were less likely to hunt. Some clung to that belief even though University of Wisconsin research 20 years ago by Thomas Heberlein and Elizabeth Thomson found no difference in hunting participation among males and females in households led by mothers. Research by Responsive Management in West Virginia later found that single mothers often seek uncles, friends or neighbors to take their kids hunting.

No doubt many factors play important roles in hunting participation and satisfaction. However, except for state-wide or region-specific antler restrictions – whether it's a 6-point, 8-point or earn-a-buck requirement – most QDM-type rules are property-specific. Therefore, it's tough to assess their actual impact on overall hunting participation, even when researchers detect dissatisfaction. That is, do hunters truly dislike a specific restriction, or are they angry with the state for imposing it on them? Or both?

Even then, it's difficult to know if people actually quit hunting because of a rule or if they simply use that as an excuse. Anecdotal evidence from license-buying records in Wisconsin and Minnesota suggest far more people threaten to quit than actually do. In addition, it's tough to ascertain what critics actually want. Many hunters are unhappy when 90 percent of the buck

population is yearlings with their first "rag-horn" antlers, but then oppose programs that address their complaints.

Powers of Positive Persuasion

One thing seems certain, however: Positive experiences in the field recruit and retain more hunters than do negative experiences. And positive experiences usually involve people and their attitudes more than policies and their application.

Grant Woods of Woods & Associates in Reeds Spring, Missouri, thinks the secret to hunting satisfaction is making youngsters feel welcome and part of the group. He said a young



TES RANDLE JOLLY

A young person's sense of achievement – or disappointment – depends more on their mentors' attitudes than what they shoot. They like to eat with them, dress like them and be part of the group's program.

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"I have mixed feelings about asking kids to pass immature bucks, and I would gladly let my daughter harvest a yearling buck on our place," Woods said. "But I don't think kids want or expect a different set of harvest rules than their mentors. They know most activities have rules and guidelines. It's three strikes and you're out in Little League and the Major Leagues. I'm not sure bending the rules for children sets a good precedent or realistic expectations for them in life. The 'anything you want, anywhere you want' approach usually isn't good for anyone."

Woods also noted that harvest restraint is nothing new to

deer management.

"There's millions of hunters like me who started hunting when does were totally off limits," Woods said. "Because fawns are lumped into that group, more than half the herd was off limits to us, but that didn't discourage us. It made us feel like one of the adults; one of the team. We were united in doing what we perceived was best for the deer herd. I was proud to be one of 'the hunters.'

"That may be why I have remained so passionate about hunting all these years. I was treated with respect. It certainly wasn't because of frequent harvests. There weren't many deer in the Ozarks 40 years ago, and very few hunters – adult or child – harvested a deer. Many hunters didn't even see a deer during an entire season, myself included."

In fact, Woods believes deer hunting should not be the primary indoctrination to hunting. He thinks new hunters should first hunt squirrels, rabbits and other small game, and build up to deer – America's No. 1 big-game animal.

"Requiring children to sit down, shut up and watch a green-field for three hours is about as much fun as chicken pox for most kids," Woods said. "With small-game hunting, you can talk, walk around, laugh out loud and take some spontaneous target practice when you feel like it. When I hear people say harvest rules discourage children from deer hunting, I have my doubts. Is it that, or is it the confinement and lack of activity in our most common forms of deer hunting? Watching wheat grow isn't something most kids want to do again and again."

Make It Fun

Everyone interviewed for this article stressed the importance of making the hunt a fun, constructive learning opportunity. After all, where's the benefit in teaching fledgling hunters that a rule or guideline deprives them of a harvest? Who will view hunting as a positive experience that's worth repeating if they're made to feel they're victims deprived of opportunity?

Woods senses many parents and mentors are more concerned than the children regarding whether the kid gets a deer.

"I feel sorry for the kid who is taught, intentionally or not, that the hunt's fun or success is based on the harvest," he said.

Kip Adams echoed that concern. "Even if you allow first-time hunters to shoot yearling bucks, you should be careful not to pressure them to shoot *something*, which I think is very common," he said. "Adults often push kids to shoot by saying things like, 'You need to get one under your belt.' That just reinforces the idea that you need a harvest to be successful."

Hamilton agreed. "I'm not comfortable with pushing a kid into just harvesting a deer," he said. "When you do that, you can diminish that deer's significance. They might pull the trigger just because their parents wanted them to do it. If that's the case, they probably didn't learn anything from the experience."

Adams often takes part in QDMA mentored hunts, and said youths try to learn all they can about hunting and wildlife. "They want to understand the big picture," he said. "They want to learn all they can about woodsmanship, which direction the deer will come from, why are they coming from that direction, and where are they going and why? They have a real curiosity about the area's resources and the environment. Those are powerful teach-

ing opportunities."

Padgett said the focus of the Cape Fear River Branch's mentored hunts is hooking kids on the outdoors.

"When we start working with youths, we're not worried if they buy into our QDM philosophy," he said. "Our priority is making sure they learn what it takes to hunt safely the rest of their lives. If they enjoy the hunt, maybe they'll become a QDM manager a few years from now. But we realize mentored hunts are a golden opportunity to pass on our ethics and philosophies. We hope that stays with them, too."

Excitement in Education

Part of that philosophy is providing a well-rounded education that explains deer habits, anatomy and behaviors with help from photos, videos and direct observations. Padgett said when new hunters pass up a deer – buck or doe – they often watch it as long as it's in sight. Passed shots thus become opportunities to teach them how to distinguish buck fawns from doe fawns, yearling spikes from does, and good shooting angles from high-risk angles.

Hamilton said those "lessons" often become the most memorable part of a hunt.

"There's much more to this package than pulling the trigger," he said. "The key word in all this is 'opportunity.' If you're on well-managed land and practicing QDM, you know there's a buck out there that will make your heart pound. Kids know it, too, because they've seen the trail-camera photos, they've ridden around the property, and they've seen bucks other hunters harvested."

"That property carries an excitement factor because the herd is properly managed," Hamilton continued. "I'm sure every young hunter would choose that experience over the one I grew up with. We always hoped, but deep down we knew there probably wasn't a buck in the entire county that would make our heart pound."

Padgett said part of a young hunter's education is learning basic facts like antler size and a buck's age.

"I'm not sure the average hunter knows most bucks shot in many areas are only 1½ years old," he said. "If you show them pictures of older bucks on the property and what those yearlings will become, you might not get 100 percent buy-in, but you'll be close. Most folks accept the program in our initial classes because we explain QDM's benefits and show them what's possible in older bucks."

Four Key Stages

Hamilton believes a well-managed QDM property fosters an atmosphere where the land, deer and hunters' attitudes provide hunting experiences newcomers enjoy and want to repeat.

"Fully appreciating QDM is a multi-step process," Hamilton said. "First there's awareness of the program, then there's enlightenment about what it can achieve, then there's understanding of how it works. Finally, there's respect. When you get to the respect stage, it's respect not just for your quarry, but also the habitat, your fellow hunters and the people who indirectly deal with deer. You understand your role as a manager, not just as a hunter."

"There's many positives to that approach," Hamilton con-

Continued.

tinued. "It's incumbent upon us to make it part of our mentoring program, and stress it through everything we see and write. There's no time limit for each stage, and some people might even skip a step. You need to bring new hunters along at a pace that's comfortable for them."

Likewise, Padgett believes QDM is much more likely to inspire cooperation and shared satisfaction than most management systems.

"I've had some real bad experiences with leases when there's a lot of guys, a lot of pressure, and everything is super competitive," he said. "That's not a good environment for young hunters. A lot of guys are only worried about themselves. In some cases, they don't have time for their own kids. They want the best stands, they don't share information, and it's every man for himself. That reminds me that the biggest problem for new hunters isn't harvest restraint; it's dealing with other hunters' attitudes."



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