

The following essay is my assessment of the economic impacts of the Minnesota deer management program on the State of Minnesota, and also on the farmers and business owners of this state. It is my belief that a great deal of money is lost in this state because of the way that our deer herd is managed. The dollars that we are losing are measured in lost opportunity costs as well as in real dollar losses, and are easily in the millions of dollars and over time in the billions. In this essay I have outlined the resource, its past performance and its current and future potential. I have also outlined the performance of this resource from an economic point of view in relation to the rest of the country and also in relation to other individual states, especially our neighboring states. In all of these cases, we are doing very badly. I have also included an anecdotal story to illustrate the losses that individual businesses suffer in a personal way. Considering the difficult times that our state is currently in, and considering the highly competitive business environment of the private sector, it makes no sense to me that the managers of this resource would be content with the economic results that we are currently having. The deer resource that this state has is of great value, is of world class potential quality, and is badly underutilized. I believe that this essay is the first time that the economic impacts of the way this resource is managed have been considered. I ask that you take the time to read this essay or at least the first few pages of it.

Thank you for your time;

Michael Sieve  
July 19, 2010

## THE ECONOMICS OF MINNESOTA'S DEER MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Two main points;

1. That the deer herd in Minnesota is a valuable and renewable natural resource.
  - A. Resource description.
  - B. Minnesota's past performance.
  - C. Minnesota's current performance.
  - D. Minnesota's future potential.
  
2. That because of the way the Minnesota DNR manages this resource the state of Minnesota loses millions of dollars every year, and the businesses of this state lose many millions of dollars more.
  - A. A Minnesota-National comparison.
  - B. A Minnesota-Regional states comparison.
  - C. A comparison between Minnesota and its closest neighboring state (Iowa).
  - D. An in-state comparison of resource usage (hunting and fishing).
  - E. The economics of a high doe population.
  - F. Our national image.

A personal story

Conclusion and my personal assessment of the proposed changes.

A few relevant quotes and facts.

A flow chart of the Minnesota deer management plan, with changes and results over time.

What you can do to help

## THE ECONOMICS OF MINNESOTA'S DEER MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

My critique of Minnesota's deer management program and its economic results can be summarized by making two main points and then by outlining the evidence that supports these two points. The two points and the evidence are as follows;

### 1. THAT THE DEER HERD IN MINNESOTA IS A VALUABLE AND RENEWABLE NATURAL RESOURCE OF WORLD CLASS QUALITY.

#### A. RESOURCE DESCRIPTION

Whitetail deer are the most popular and the most valuable big game animal on earth. There are more hunters hunting them than there are for any other species of big game. These hunters put in more time, they harvest more animals, and they spend more money doing so than they spend on any other big game animal. There are more books, magazines and newspaper articles, more photos taken, more videos and more TV shows about deer hunting than there are on hunting any other animal. There are more products developed, marketed and sold to deer hunters, and there is more research done on deer by more biologists than there are on any other hunted species. Whitetail deer generate more money for state game departments and generate more jobs in the private sector than are generated by any other big game animal. In brief, in an economic sense, whitetail deer are the most valuable big game animal on earth. No other animal even comes close to them.

#### B. MINNESOTA'S PAST PERFORMANCE

Twenty years ago Minnesota was the number one state, including the Canadian provinces and Mexico in the Boone and Crockett\* record books. Our state was so far ahead of any of the other states that biologists, outdoor writers and others speculated that no other state would ever catch up with Minnesota in the total number of bucks entered into the books. This was a source of pride in the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) at that time and was considered to be a reflection of the strong genetics of our deer herd, our habitat and the deer management practices in place at the time. Minnesota was the top deer state in the nation, and the popular thinking was that it would stay that way forever.

\*Boone and Crockett is a conservation group with roots going back to the turn of the last century. From their earliest days they encouraged hunting regulations and conservation practices that would benefit all of the North American big game species, many of which were facing possible extinction at the time. Among other things, they established the Boone and Crockett Record Book to keep an ongoing record of the most impressive examples of each species. They accept animals taken by hunters, as well as animals killed in any other way or animals that have died by natural mortality. Their book is still the most widely accepted record book for North American big game animals. I personally consider the record books to be a good reflection of the relative health of a species in the past as well as in the present, its habitat, and how well that species is managed.

### C. MINNESOTA'S CURRENT PERFORMANCE;

The framework of the current Minnesota deer management plan was put in place in the early 1970s and was designed to shift the hunting pressure away from the does and onto the bucks. By the mid to late 1990s our state was still in the lead in the Boone and Crockett record books, but other states were quickly catching up. Sometime around 1999 we lost the top spot to Iowa. Since then several more states have passed us up as well. In the most recent years, we have fallen to about number 8 or 10 in the Boone & Crockett books, and we continue to fall.

### D. MINNESOTA'S FUTURE POTENTIAL;

In a recent article "Finding the Big Bucks" (Fair Chase, fall 2009), Greg Sanders divides all of North America into 182 ecoregions. These are areas with common and/or unique geological and ecological features within each region. These areas are then analyzed and ranked according to their relative potential to produce record book deer. Parts of Minnesota lay in seven different ecoregions. Four of these ecoregions are among the top ranked areas of North America; only parts of the far west and the northwest corner of the state are not among the best regions of the continent. The number one ecoregion in all of North America, however, is region 52. This area is called the 'driftless zone', and includes parts of southwest Wisconsin, northwest Illinois, northeast Iowa, and southeast Minnesota. In Minnesota this is the area along the Mississippi River from the Twin Cities to the Iowa border. Deer hunters know it as zone 3. My home town, Houston, Minnesota, is almost dead center in the middle of the driftless zone. Therefore, I live and hunt in the area of the highest whitetail deer trophy potential in all of North America.

2. THAT BECAUSE OF THE WAY THE MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGES THIS RESOURCE, EVERY YEAR THE STATE OF MINNESOTA LOSES MILLIONS OF DOLLARS, AND THE BUSINESSES OF THIS STATE ARE LOSING MANY MILLIONS OF DOLLARS MORE.

A. MINNESOTA-NATIONAL COMPARISON

A good way to see how well a state is doing in managing it's resources is to look at the ratio of resident to non-resident hunters in a state and compare that number to other states. In other words, to see how many hunters are willing to travel to Minnesota from other states to hunt, and compare that to the number of hunters who are willing to travel to other states to hunt. In that comparison, Minnesota is performing very badly! Here are the numbers; The national average resident/non-resident sales ratio of all hunting licenses, fees, hunting stamps, and permits sold across the country is 9.1 percent. One well known state, notable because of its low non-resident hunter numbers is California. Their ratio is 1.9 percent. This is not surprising, California after all, is not known as a hunting destination state. I know a lot of people who have traveled there on vacation or for many other reasons, but I personally don't know anyone who has ever traveled there to hunt...and I'll bet you don't know anyone either. California is simply not a destination state for hunters. So what is Minnesota's resident/non-resident sales ratio? Sadly it is only about 2.5 percent, not much better than California, and far below the national average. In fact Minnesota is number 47 of the 50 states. There are only three states with a resident/non-resident hunter ratio lower than is Minnesota's. At 2.5 percent. we are currently ahead of California but just barely. We are, however, far behind Florida and Hawaii as a state where people are willing to travel to in order to hunt. Their ratios are 4.6 and 5.2 percent respectively. Roughly double that of Minnesota. It is hard to understand how a state that once was number one in the record books, and still has the highest potential for producing record book deer in the country, can rate so low as a place where people would be willing to travel in order to hunt, but sadly it is so.

B...MINNESOTA-REGIONAL STATES COMPARISON

The next question then is how well is Minnesota doing in its resident/non-resident sales ratio in comparison to our four neighboring states. They are North and South Dakota, Iowa and Wisconsin. The answer to that question again, is very badly. The average resident/non-resident ratio of our closest neighbors is over 19 percent. At 2.5 percent our state ratio is far below the national average and even worse when compared to the average of our closest neighbors.

Regional states R/NR ratio average.....	19 percent
National R/NR ratio average.....	.9.1 percent
Hawaii R/NR ratio .....	5.2 percent
Florida R/NR ratio .....	4.6 percent
MINNESOTA R/NR ratio .....	2.5 percent
California R/NR ratio.....	1.9 percent

### C. CLOSEST NEIGHBORING STATE COMPARISON;

How do we compare in the amount that we are able to charge for a license with our neighboring states? In this important economic area Minnesota falls far behind all of its neighbors, but the difference is greatest with its neighbor to the south; Iowa. Minnesota currently charges non-resident hunters \$140 to hunt deer in this state. These tags are issued over the counter and are unlimited. Iowa, in comparison charges about \$550 for their non-resident deer license. These licenses are limited by drawing and the waiting time for a license in some areas is as long as three years. Preference points to maintain one's place in line to insure future success in the drawings are \$50 per year. When the preference points are factored in, it costs me over \$600 to hunt deer in Iowa, about four times as much as it costs an Iowa resident to hunt deer in Minnesota. Last year Minnesota issued about 16,000 non-resident deer licenses and in doing so brought a little over \$2 million dollars into the state treasury. If we were able to charge as much for a license as Iowa does, Minnesota would have made over \$9 million. But we can't charge that much, the market place would not allow it. When Minnesota lost its top place in the Boone & Crockett record books a decade ago, we also lost the ability to charge top dollar to hunt deer here. Iowa now holds that position...and can charge accordingly. Therefore Minnesota just lost over \$6 million dollars! But that is just a straight dollar comparison between the two states. If we factored in the differences in the size of the deer herd in each state how would that affect these numbers? There are about three times as many deer in Minnesota as there are in Iowa. If every deer in our state were as valuable as every deer in Iowa, then the six million dollar potential that we have already lost would be about \$18 million. Now let's figure in the difference in quality deer habitat between the two states. Iowa is a much smaller state and only has about 15 percent year round deer habitat. The rest is mostly farmland. There is at least 10 times as much year round deer habitat in Minnesota as there is in Iowa. That also has to be worth something, so bump that \$18 million loss up once again. And finally let's look at the vast difference in the amount of public lands available for the non-resident hunter to come to our state and to hunt on. Iowa has one of the lowest percentages of public lands in the country, about 1.5 percent. Minnesota has far more land available in percentage as well as in total acres. For example; here in Minnesota we have a large number of both state and national forests available to non-residents, with vast numbers of acres in both. We also have many state and national wildlife refuges, wildlife management areas, waterfowl production areas and many state parks that are now open to deer hunting. We also have many wildlife areas that are owned by various conservation groups, local and regional parks, military bases and huge areas of private timber company lands that are available for the non-resident hunter to hunt on and to enjoy. These vast lands have to be worth something as well, so raise that \$18 million loss up yet again. I don't know what the final number that is lost by this state would finally be, at some point it's anyone's guess. But for a state with budget deficits like we currently have, it is a substantial amount of money to say the least! When one considers our past history, the genetics and the size of our deer herd, the quality and amount of habitat in this state, and the amount of lands that are available for anyone to hunt on without even asking permission, the losses that this state suffers on account of its deer management practices are simply staggering. These economic losses are not an accident. The responsibility for these losses should sit firmly on the doorstep of the Commissioner of the DNR, the professional resource managers and the deer biologists who have been given the opportunity to manage this resource on behalf of the citizens of the state of Minnesota.

#### D. AN IN-STATE COMPARISON OF RESOURCE USAGE;

The question here is this; how well does Minnesota manage its hunting resources relative to how well this state manages its fishing resource. For that I have turned to a survey done by a coalition of major hunting and fishing organizations that include the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, The National Shooting Sports Foundation, Safari Club International, The National Marine Manufacturers Association, the National Assembly of Sportsmen's Caucuses and more. Their 2006 report on trends in hunting and fishing compares the national ranks of these two industries within Minnesota as well as with the other states of the nation. Here is what we can learn there. Let's look at fishing first; With 1.1 million anglers, Minnesota is the 5<sup>th</sup> ranked state in the nation for resident fishermen. We are 4<sup>th</sup> ranked for non-resident anglers, 3<sup>rd</sup> ranked for spending on fishing, and 3<sup>rd</sup> ranked for fishing jobs created. Those four rankings, as close as they are to each other, indicate a well-managed resource that produces consistent and high results that are, if anything, slightly better than would be predicted based on the resource itself. Now let's look at hunting; with 508,000 hunters, Minnesota is ranked 6<sup>th</sup> in resident hunters. In non-resident hunters we are ranked 32<sup>nd</sup> (2006). In hunting spending we are ranked 12<sup>th</sup>, and in hunting jobs created we are ranked 13<sup>th</sup>. For a moment let's just focus on the differences in spending on fishing as compared to spending on hunting in order to bring this issue into sharper focus. We are 3<sup>rd</sup> in the nation on fishing spending at \$2.8 billion. We are 12<sup>th</sup> in the nation on hunting spending at \$637 million. That is a staggering difference of over \$2 billion between fishing and hunting spending. To the businesses of rural Minnesota, these numbers represent huge losses. Remember fishing and hunting are ranked 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> in the nation respectively in terms of participants numbers. The wide differences between the numbers in the four fishing and the four hunting categories indicate to me that our hunting resource is a poorly-managed resource in an economic sense. These numbers reflect the earlier numbers cited, but they also indicate the impact of Minnesota's deer management program on the private sector rather than the economic impact on the finances of the state of Minnesota itself. I don't know what these numbers mean in terms of actual dollar losses to any individual businesses in rural Minnesota, but I believe that it's safe to say that if you have a business that could benefit from our deer resource, the way the DNR manages that resource is costing you a lot of money. This would be an interesting project for a master's thesis for some student someday; either in business, economics or in natural resource management.

## E. THE ECONOMICS OF A HIGH DOE POPULATION

So far I have described the losses this state suffers because of the way the buck herd is managed. Even though these costs are very real and very large, they are mostly lost opportunity costs. On the doe side of the equation, however, both the costs and the profits are very real. Let me explain;

The first time that I know of that the DNR confronted the under harvest/overpopulation problem was in the early 1990s. In the years since then, a number of practices have been used to control the deer population. The list is long and includes extended firearms deer seasons, first one and then multiple bonus tags for antlerless deer, the long overdue phase-out of the zone 3 'bucks-only' season, free landowner deer damage permits, an October antlerless deer season, and more. None of these solutions to the overpopulation problems have been successful on their own, taken together however, they have been fairly successful. It is the sale of extra bonus tags that I want to focus on here;

The first bonus tags were issued in 1994. Hunters in overpopulated areas were allowed to purchase one bonus tag that first year. That year there were 19,308 tags sold. In the years that followed, the areas that were overpopulated, and were therefore eligible for bonus tags, grew steadily larger. In those years the deer populations within those areas grew larger as well. And the number of bonus tags that an individual hunter could purchase went up also. Eventually, hunters in many areas were allowed ,and even encouraged, to take up to five antlerless deer. In 2008 the DNR issued 190,165 bonus tags, a tenfold increase from the first year. By then the DNR had issued a total of 1,396,460 bonus and intensive management (I.M) tags. Over the years those tags were issued at a reduced cost, currently it is \$12.50. At that price, in their efforts to control the overpopulation of the deer herd that they manage, the DNR would have pocketed over 17 million dollars.

The next question then is this. How much does it cost the farmer and the landowners to feed that herd? I certainly don't have the answer to that question, but for many years I have asked farmers to try and answer it. When I would ask them; 'how much do you think it costs you to feed a deer for a year'? they would not know either, but the number they often came up was about \$100. None of them ever guessed as low as \$12.50. But it really doesn't matter what the exact cost to a farmer is, the real question is this; is it worth it? Does it make any economic sense that the DNR would bring so much money into their department by managing the deer herd for high numbers of the least valuable and most problematic deer (does), while at the same time the farmer loses so much money feeding those same deer? Does it make any economic sense that the DNR has encouraged, or at least allowed high deer populations to continue, while at the same time they have allowed the bucks in the deer herd to be continuously over-hunted? Those bucks could be the most valuable deer in the herd to the farmer, to the business owner and to most hunters, and yet they are systematically over-hunted. The DNR once metaphorically described the deer herd as a pasture full of cows. The cows make money for the farmer, not the bulls. The bulls were expendable. That is the kind of old school thinking that has cost this state so much money. The DNR makes millions, the farmers and business owners lose millions, and the hunters are frustrated. Go figure!



On a side note; several years ago, a motion was passed by Bluffland Whitetails Association that called for the money that was raised by the DNR through the sale of bonus deer tags, not to go into the DNR's budget, but instead to be used for one of the following purposes;

1. Either to be used to reimburse farmers for crop losses due to deer damage because of deer overpopulations.
2. To be used to fund a 'Feed the Hungry' program.
3. Or to fund a hunter access program in order to both increase hunter access to hunting lands and also to help to control the overpopulation of deer.

I don't know if this motion was presented to the DNR at the time or ever since, but it sounded like a pretty good idea to me. It sounded like an idea whose time had come. Why after all should the DNR profit so handsomely from a problem they are expected to control? Where is the incentive for them to change?

## F. OUR NATIONAL IMAGE;

In the late summer of 2008 I was having a conversation with a friend about these issues and he remarked to me about how few times Minnesota seemed to be mentioned in the hunting press. Hunting magazines in particular never seemed to write about Minnesota. I didn't know if this was true or not, so I decided to try and find out. And so I picked up the October 2008 issue of 'North American Whitetail'. This is a dream magazine for any serious deer hunter, and is arguably the most popular of the many deer hunting magazines on the market today. In order to see just how high our profile was in this magazine I decided to record every mention of every state including Minnesota that I could find in this magazine. Next I would divide these mentions into one of two separate categories and count them. They would be recorded according to either their editorial/article content, or according to their advertising content. And so I read every page of the October 2008 issue of North American Whitetail, cover to cover, and I circled every state that was mentioned in any way whatsoever. In this magazine I found a total of 116 mentions of all states and provinces including Minnesota. Minnesota was mentioned in only three articles, and was mentioned in only one ad. Just as telling, the most prominent mention of our state in an article was a piece entitled "Days Gone By." This was a story about the good old days of Minnesota deer hunting's past, at the turn of the last century. If this were any indication of what the hunting press thought of our state, it would be safe to conclude that Minnesota was a state with a great and interesting past but now was an insignificant deer hunting state. A has-been deer hunting state! A few months after I did this, I had the opportunity to show this magazine to a high ranking DNR official. It didn't go well. I got the strong impression that he thought that I had cherry picked that magazine to get the results that I wanted, regardless of the truth. With only one example to point to, I couldn't really say much in my defense. And so I waited until the fall of 2009, exactly one year later, and picked up a total of twelve hunting magazines. Enough for a better sample size I hoped. Some of these magazines were well known to almost anyone who hunts or lives in rural America. They were well-established, traditional hunting magazines. Others were more recent magazines that were entirely dedicated to deer hunting. The list included fall issues of Outdoor Life, Sports Afield, Field and Stream, North American Whitetail, Deer and Deer Hunting, and more. Like the year before, I read them all. Cover to cover. Once again I circled and recorded every mention of every state in any context. The conclusion was obvious. The October 2008 issue of NA Whitetail was not cherry picked. That magazine was not an aberration in any way. If anything it was the best representation of any of the magazines that I surveyed in either year. In contrast to the relatively good showing in 2008, the 2009 numbers were much worse. For example, in the October 2009 issue of NA Whitetail, exactly one year after my lone "cherry picked" magazine from the year before, there were a total of 260 mentions of all the various states in all the articles in that magazine. Of those 260 mentions Minnesota was not mentioned a single time. Our state's total was zero! There were also 46 mentions of various states in the advertising content of that magazine. Minnesota did slightly better here, but was mentioned only twice. To give a brief summary of all twelve magazines surveyed in the fall of 2009, here it is; there were a total of 1,569 mentions of all states in both the articles and in the ads in these magazines. Minnesota was only mentioned 37 times. There were virtually no articles of the kind that would say 'come hunt deer in Minnesota'. The mentions that we received were universally half hearted or insignificant at best. Examples include the name of Minnesota on the edge of a map of Iowa, a mention of Minnesota's decline in the record books, a trail camera photo or ads for Arctic Cat snowmobiles, or a jewelry

distributor based in Burnsville, Minnesota. These are typical examples of the kind of coverage that we get. There were no full-feature articles in these magazines that showcased Minnesota in the same way that states like Iowa, Wisconsin and others get on a regular basis. My friend was right; Minnesota just doesn't get much press in the media of the hunting world. Like Rodney Dangerfield—we get no respect! But don't take my word for it, you can do your own survey. This evening or any other evening if you want to. Just turn on your TV, find a hunting channel, watch a few deer hunting shows and count how many times Minnesota is featured in them. I'm guessing that you will get just about the same results that I got. My conclusion...Minnesota really has become a backwater deer hunting state. Our state is a state with a great past but very little relevance, importance or economic value today to the deer hunters across America. Minnesota has become the Rodney Dangerfield of the deer hunting world.

On a side note; some of you may remember the August 13, 1973 issue of Time magazine. There was a photo of Minnesota Governor Wendell Anderson on the cover of that magazine. He was holding up a fishing rod in one hand and a nice northern pike in the other. The sky was blue, he had a big smile on his face and the caption read..."The Good Life In Minnesota." Now that's the kind of publicity that the bait shops, the resorts, the restaurants and the small town businesses of northern Minnesota love to see. Magazines like that are good for business. They almost scream to the viewer; "COME TO MINNESOTA!!!" The stack of hunting magazines that I looked at last fall says just the opposite. Don't come here is the obvious message. Go to another state. Take your business and your money somewhere else where the deer hunting is better than it is in Minnesota. And the sad fact is, that's exactly what the deer hunters of this country are doing. They are going to other states. They go there in greater numbers, and they are willing to pay more when they get there. Whether we know it or not, and whether we like it or not, our state and the businesses in this state are paying dearly for that.

## A PERSONAL STORY;

In making this critique of the Minnesota system of deer management and the losses our state suffers because of it, I have tried to stick with facts and numbers. But there is also room in this discussion for at least one anecdotal story to illustrate my case in a personal sense. Here it is;

The last time I hunted Iowa was in early November of 2007. I would be staying with a good friend at his hunting cabin and hunting with him on his land in southern Iowa. But I also had an invitation to hunt a nearby property the week before my friend arrived. And so I drove down to southern Iowa a few days early and decided to get a motel room until my hunting buddy got in. The first town I looked for a room in was Albia, Iowa. Albia is the town where a deer known as the 'Albia buck', lived and was killed a few years ago. That buck was harvested by a 15-year-old high school student named Tony Lovstuen during the Iowa Youth season in 2003. This deer, now known as the Lovstuen Buck, was eventually scored at 319 points and stands as the largest whitetail deer ever taken by a hunter. It is also the Boone and Crockett non-typical record deer for the state of Iowa. In the years since the 'Albia Buck' was killed that town has been on the top of the list as a deer hunting destination for a great many serious deer hunters. And so when I stopped to try to get a room in town I was not really surprised to find that all of the motel rooms in Albia were filled. No problem I thought. I would drive a few miles south to the town of Moravia and get a room there. Moravia is a much smaller town, but is only about 5 miles from where I would be hunting, so this would be more convenient anyway. Except that all the rooms in the only motel in Moravia were taken also. However, there was a B&B in town where I could have a room, but for only one night. After that it was reserved for a group of out-state hunters. And so I decided to drive on to Centerville, Iowa. Centerville is the county seat of Appanoose County, and is about the same size as Albia. There are three motels in town; two were full but I got lucky at the third one. The Motel 6 had a room open but the lady behind the counter laughed when she told me about it. It was the last room in town she said, and it was called 'the dungeon'. The entrance to 'the dungeon' was around the back, down a narrow flight of cement stairs...no lights of course. The room was under the second floor walkway, so I was warned not to expect much sleep either. There were no windows, the carpet and the furniture were threadbare 1970s-era shag, and the room was damp and musty. It smelled like old smoke. I gladly took the room, but I was told that I could only have it until the weekend. That's when another group of hunters had it reserved. Deer hunters were about the only ones who ever stayed in this room it seemed, and they often had it reserved a year in advance. This was all fine with me; I would be staying in my friend's cabin in a few days anyway.

So I got settled in, and then went down to the local Wal-Mart to get some scent control spray. At first I thought they didn't stock it; the shelves were empty. But the guy behind the counter in sporting goods told me that they were simply sold out. The last of the second shipment went out the door that same day. The third shipment of the season would arrive later in the week if I could wait that long. Next I headed down the street to try and find a restaurant and grab a bite to eat. I soon spotted a Chinese buffet. There were lots of trucks in the parking lot; most of them had deer stands, deer decoys and all kinds of hunting and camping gear in their back ends. A couple of them even had TV names and logos on the doors and on the sides. So this is where those TV celebrity deer hunters go to eat! Inside I quickly found myself having dinner with a couple guys from somewhere out east who were as happy as I was to be deer hunting in Iowa. I'm sure that there were a few locals eating there also, but the

restaurant seemed to be nothing but deer hunters to me. Most of them seemed to be from out of state. It looked to me like deer hunting is pretty good for business in Iowa.

Now I thought that I knew a little bit about motels and restaurants in small towns during deer season, so all of this really surprised me. I have a son and two daughters who all three have worked in motels and restaurants back home, and it sure isn't like this in Houston, Minnesota! There is a motel in Houston where I live. It is called the Sawmill Inn. It's almost new and is spotlessly clean and very nice in every way. Its theme and décor reference the hardwood forests and the logging industry that are a big part of the economy of southeast Minnesota. My son, Eric worked there from the day it opened about 5 years ago until he got out of college and moved away from home to make a life of his own. One of my twin daughters Hannah also worked there in high school, and still works there on weekends and in the summer when she is home from school. The motel is charming and clean, and the prices are incredibly low in my opinion. And yet my kids tell me that they are rarely full with deer hunters except for a couple of weekends during the shotgun seasons in November. They are almost never full during the week. The owners, John and Eileen Loken, have expressed their concerns and disappointment about the lack of business from deer hunters to me several times in the past. And the restaurants in Houston are no better off than the motel is. Hannah's twin sister Heather works at one of the restaurants in town. She works at Sub-Zero Pizza owned by Terry and Deb Chiglo. Like Hannah she works there on weekends and in the summer. And like Hannah she tells me about who comes in to eat. Deer hunters are a small part of the business there also, like they are at the Sawmill Inn. Considering that Houston is located in the middle of the best potential deer hunting in all of North America (remember the Driftless Zone), and considering Minnesota's past as the top deer hunting state in the record books, and also considering all of the state forests and public lands in this area for non-resident hunters to come here to hunt on, it is a real shame that the deer resource in this state is able to contribute so little to the economy of the small town where I live or to the other small towns of rural Minnesota.

The story I have just told took place in Iowa a couple of years ago, but it is far from the only story of that kind that I could tell. I also remember a bow hunt to Stockton, Kansas a year or so earlier with a good friend of mine named Rick Boyer. Rick and I stayed in a very small motel in a very small town in central Kansas. The country was fairly flat with very little woods but lots of mature bucks in the area. It didn't look like trophy deer country but it sure was. When I asked the lady who owned and ran the motel how important deer hunters were to the success of her motel she stated flatly, "I couldn't stay in business without deer hunters."

## CONCLUSION;

Despite Minnesota's past history, and despite the world class resource potential of the deer herd in this state, the current deer management practices are in my opinion, an economic failure. A strong case has been made in the past and continues to be made against the DNR and its deer management program based on the biological, the social, the aesthetic and the political failures of the way this resource is managed. The economic case and the need for change based on the economic failures that I have described here is a fairly recent one, and even now continues to be developed. Minnesota has always taken pride in its image as a leadership state. In the area of deer management, however, our state has been behind the curve for well over a decade now. Across this country many states have moved their management practices ahead in order to keep up with the changing conditions and times and the changing expectations of the deer hunting community. In that same time, the Minnesota DNR has been a clear standout in their stubborn resistance to those changes. Criticisms, observations, and suggestions have usually been treated as public relations problems by the DNR, or more often simply ignored. Changes that were made have been directed at the low hunting pressure that we have put on the does and the overpopulation problems that have resulted. Little or no attention has been given to the problems caused by the high hunting pressure that we have put on our buck herd. The idea that changes should be considered that could address the broader range of problems in the current plan are never even discussed. I once asked one of our deer biologists about the broad range of deer management successes in Iowa and contrasted those to the problems we have here in Minnesota. His response was to simply shrug his shoulders and tell me how he didn't know anything about Iowa. I may have been disappointed in that answer, but I certainly wasn't surprised. Even as many individuals like myself and others, and as many conservation groups such as the Bluffland Whitetails Association, the Quality Deer Management Association, Quality Deer Management of Minnesota the Southwest Minnesota Deer Coalition and others have lobbied and worked for progressive deer management changes, the Minnesota DNR, both the leadership and the biologists, have ignored or resisted the changes that have been suggested. They have never proposed changes or even encouraged any kind of real discussions that might lead to the broad kinds of changes that could restore Minnesota to either its past glory or to its current potential. Indeed the greatest obstacle to progressive change in Minnesota has always been the DNR itself! The economic failures that I have described in this essay are the predictable result of a generation of resource mismanagement.

Recently, however, a series of changes have been presented to the hunting community by the DNR and will go into effect this fall. These changes should help to improve the current situation. Starting in the fall of 2010, in some experimental areas of the state, a management practice called 'antler point restrictions' (APRs) will go into effect. The goal is to have a higher number of yearling bucks survive until they are two years old, or possibly even older. Minnesota currently leads the nation in the number of yearling bucks in their annual harvest, and is also the state with the lowest number of older bucks in its annual harvest. The vast majority of bucks in this state die before they are three years old. These are not the kind of deer harvest numbers any state deer manager would want. APRs should help to turn these numbers around.

Another change, due to go into effect in the fall of 2010, is the elimination of the cross tagging of bucks in some parts of the state. This practice is also known as "party hunting." Starting this fall in certain experimental permit areas, hunters will only be able to legally shoot

one antlered buck. Until now there was no limit to how many bucks a hunter could shoot provided that hunter could find other hunters who were willing to let that hunter use their tags. Minnesota is among the last of the states to allow this outdated and widely abused practice to continue.

These two changes are the first time Minnesota has taken steps that are specifically designed to improve the buck quality in this state. These changes are in many ways a step into the future, but they must be qualified by the reality of this situation as well. Here's what I mean by that. First of all, APRs and the elimination of the cross tagging of bucks will only be used in a small part of the state, the vast majority of the state will continue to be managed the way it has been. Across most of the state, nothing will change. Also, these two changes will only be implemented for three years, and then on an experimental basis only. The DNR can cancel them at any time. After three years they will be evaluated by the DNR, and then the DNR may or may not expand or even continue with them. I have no doubt that the number of yearling bucks that will survive until the next year will go up with the implementation of APRs, possibly even a lot. But those bucks will then need to survive for a couple more years in order to reach their full maturity. The firearms deer seasons in zone 3 where I live and hunt are currently thirty days long, and with another change that the DNR is also putting in place this year, the firearms seasons will be even longer. The chances that a buck will be able to endure that kind of hunting pressure until he reaches maturity are slim at best. Minnesota needs to encourage more older, fully mature trophy class bucks in its deer herd if we want to reverse the economic failures that we see now. I simply don't see the limited APRs that will soon go into effect as being nearly enough to do that. There are also real reasons to be concerned about APRs from a biological perspective as well, but I want to address only the economic problems in this essay.

Taken together and seen as a first step, these changes are for the better, but I don't think that they are enough to put Minnesota back on the map as a deer hunting destination state, or to generate the kind of economic benefits that the deer resource could generate in this state. More than anything else, they indicate a change in attitude within the DNR towards a better future. Gene Merriam, the Commissioner of the DNR, in Governor Tim Pawlenty's first term took a big step towards effective population control when he phased out the 'bucks only' season in zone 3. Now Commissioner Mark Holsten has taken the first step toward a better balanced buck herd. Marrett Grund, a deer research biologist with the DNR and Lou Cornecelli also deserve praise for these changes. But these changes will go away in three years unless the DNR decides to continue with them. We clearly need more changes in the years ahead.

My Assessment;

So here it is, my personal assessment of the changes due to go into effect in the fall of 2010;

1. Antler point restrictions; A big first step in moving Minnesota into a brighter future. In the short term, there will be an obvious improvement in the age structure of the buck herd, but more needs to be done.

2. The elimination of the cross tagging of bucks; another big step forward into the world of modern deer management. Too bad it's not statewide.

3. Lengthening the zone 3A firearms season by two days. This is clearly a step in the wrong direction and is, in my opinion, nothing more than a political calculation designed to appease those who support the deer management plan as it currently exists, and who are opposed to change. The hunters in this season are the ones who kill the highest percentage of bucks in their annual harvest, who kill the lowest percentage of female deer in their harvest, and who are the most responsible for the tragic overkill of yearling bucks that we see every year. The access problems that these hunters complain about will almost certainly get worse as other hunters migrate towards this season as they seek the best possible odds to kill a buck. This is the most problematic deer season in Minnesota, and is at the very core of the economic problems that I have described in this essay. There is also a host of other biological, social and aesthetic problems that this state suffers from that are associated with this season. By giving in to these hunters' demands, the DNR will only serve to continue the failures of the past as well as to draw attention to the lack of leadership and courage within the DNR itself.



## A FEW RELEVANT QUOTES and FACTS;

“You can judge the health of a local deer herd by the number of trophy bucks that come out of a particular area.”

Willy Suchy  
Iowa Department of Natural Resources deer biologist  
Iowa Game and Fish magazine  
October 1999

“The season framework emphasizes the taking of bucks. The opening dates are set during the time of peak breeding activity when bucks are most vulnerable.”

The Whitetail Deer Handbook  
Department of Natural Resources  
2000 edition

Starting as early as November 3 and continuing throughout the peak of the rut Minnesota has the earliest firearms deer season in the Midwest and possibly the earliest season in the nation

Minnesota has the longest firearms season in the Midwest, 30 days in zone 3. A DNR sponsored change will add two days to the 2010 deer season.

“This has resulted in a shift in the age structure of antlered deer toward younger deer, reducing the number of older bucks.”

The Whitetail Deer Handbook  
Department of Natural resources  
2000 Edition

Minnesota now has the HIGHEST percentage of yearling bucks killed in its annual deer harvest of any other state in the nation...67 percent.

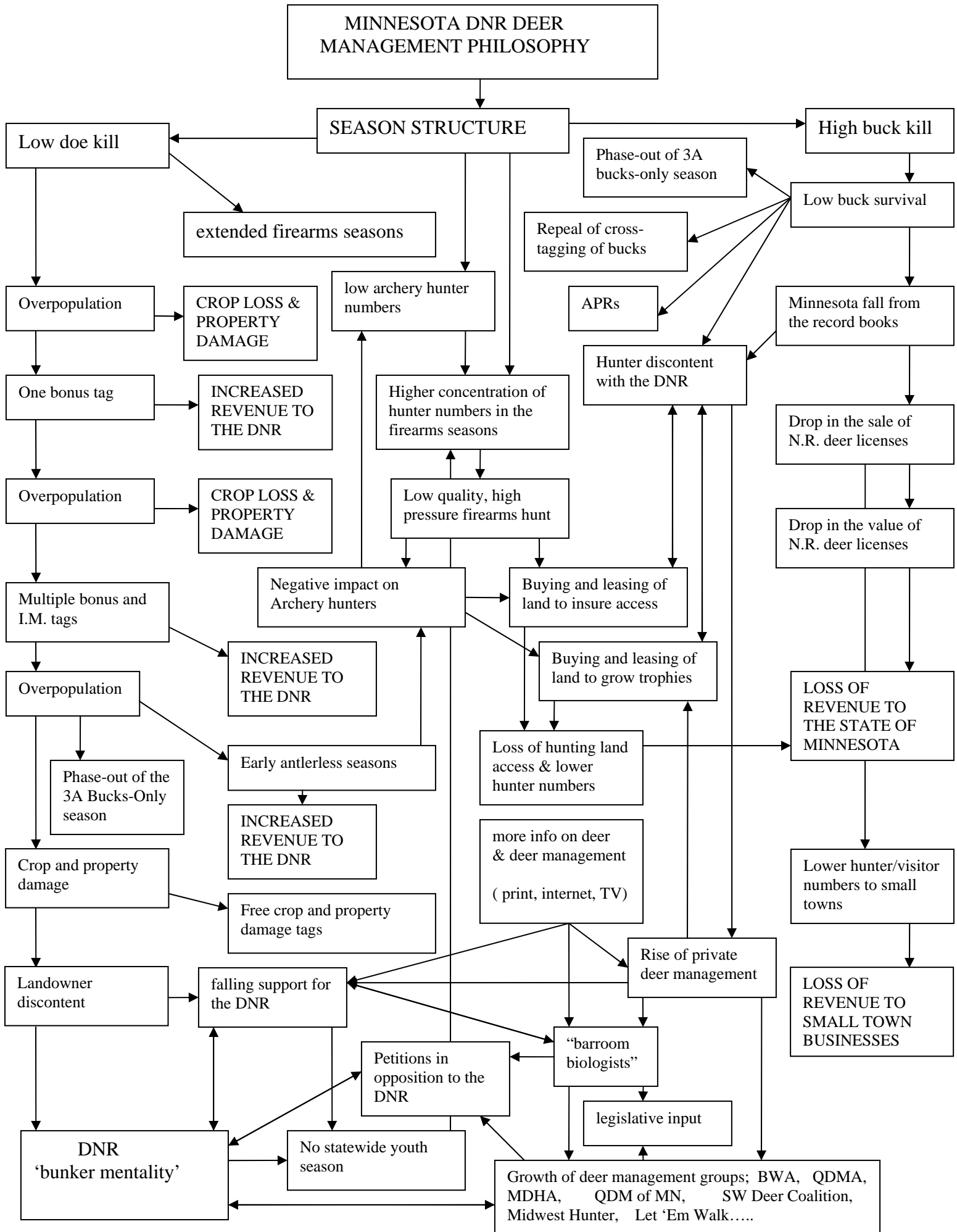
Minnesota now has the LOWEST percentage of 3½ year old and older bucks in its annual deer harvest of any state in the nation...10 percent.

87 percent of bucks in Minnesota die at 2½ years old or less.

“Just as any cattle farmer can tell you their production is dictated by the number of cows in their pasture, not the number of bulls.”

The Whitetail Deer Handbook  
Department of Natural Resources  
2000 edition

Despite the importance of effective population control, Minnesota consistently kills more male deer than female deer during its annual deer hunting seasons, and as far as I know, has never had more female deer than male deer in its annual harvest.



## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP.

The changes that the DNR has put in place for the 2010 season are for three years only. Soon we will have a new governor and almost certainly a new Commissioner of the DNR. The situation that I have just described should be among the first things that the new commissioner is made aware of. As far as I know, no one before has ever made the case for changing the Minnesota deer management system based on economics. The new commissioner should hear this case early on, not three or four years into the next term. Also, in the three-year window of opportunity between now and the expiration of the changes that I have described, I would like to urge the DNR to adopt a sincere plan to educate the public about all of the management options that could be used in Minnesota as well as the risks and the benefits of each option. Perhaps a special commission could even be set up to look at the current deer program. What is working and what isn't. What practices served us well in the past but have become outdated by today's standards. Minnesota is a large and very diverse state that should be considered as well. Goals, timetables and fixes should be discussed if new ideas are considered. A commission like this should include all interest, hunters, landowners, sporting and conservation groups, and tourism and business interests. The idea should be to move Minnesota's deer management ahead as quickly as possible in order to take advantage of the great potential of the world class natural resource that our state is blessed with in our deer herd.

If you want to help, please contact;

The current Commissioner of the DNR, Mark Holsten.

The next Commissioner of the DNR in 2011

Your state legislators; Senators and Representatives.

Your local County Commissioners.

Local, regional, and state tourism agencies and organizations.

Interested business groups.

Conservation and hunting organizations.

Friends, hunters or business owners who might be interested.

TV, radio and newspapers.

Outdoor, business, and tourism writers.

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