THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

FACT SHEET

Captive Cervid Breeding

The massive antlers of a farm-bred deer illustrate what some wildlife professionals call "hornography" – the breeding of deer to create "trophy" animals for fenced shoots.

Expanding commercial demand for members of the family cervidae (e.g., deer) and their products has prompted growth of a for-profit captive industry that raises animals in privately-maintained facilities with the purpose of producing cervids to be sold as breeding stock for "farming" operations or for "canned shoots". Issues related to these practices include spread of wildlife diseases; genetic mixing; privatization, commercialization and domestication of public wildlife resources; misperceptions of fair chase and hunting; and a potential future decline in ecological stewardship.

TWS and the North American Model[10]

In 2007, TWS adopted the following seven principles that serve as the bedrock for the Model to guide and provide input on wildlife management policy:

- Wildlife as Public Trust Resources
- Elimination of Markets for Game
- Allocation of Wildlife by Law
- Wildlife Should Only be Killed for a Legitimate Purpose
- Wildlife Are Considered an International Resource
- Science is the Proper Tool for Discharge of Wildlife Policy
- Democracy of Hunting

Captive deer breeding operations violate and compromise all of the seven components of The Model.

Background

Captive cervid breeders use artificial breeding to produce larger animals for meat production and males with large antlers and sell semen, impregnated does, and live animals to other cervid farming operations or captive shooting facilities for profit. The latter facilities promote situations in which clients pay for guaranteed kills under non fair-chase conditions in small, enclosed "hunting" areas that may contain only a single target animal or contain an artificially high density of deer.

Currently, there are nearly 10,000 for-profit deer breeding operations estimated in North America with more than 500 facilities each in Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin.[1] Proponents have introduced state-level legislation that includes relaxed facility regulations and, in some cases, removing aspects of deer management authority from state wildlife agencies.

Captive cervid breeders and high-fenced shooting facilities privatize public trust wildlife for private gain, threaten wildlife health and public perceptions of hunting, and violate principles of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation which call for the science-based management of wildlife held in public trust.

Captive White-tailed deer like these on a farm in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, are sometimes bred to produce "trophy" deer for fenced shoots. (Credit: Intelligencer Journal/Lancaster New Era)

Risks Posed by Captive Cervid Facilities

Disease and Genetics

Infectious diseases are a concern whenever animals are maintained at high densities due to increased efficiency of pathogen transmission. Disease transmission between captive animals and wild populations is a documented, and growing, concern. Captive operations commonly involve transport of cervids throughout North America, increasing risk of disease transmission within and among states and provinces. Captive operations routinely experience escapement, wild animals entering private enclosures, or both.[2] Pathogens may also be transmitted from captive to wild deer through fence to fence contact. As a result of these and other opportunities for transmission, diseases such as chronic wasting disease (CWD) and bovine tuberculosis (TB), have become more widespread among captive cervid facilities and in wild populations across North America.

CWD, a fatal, transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) that was first recognized in mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus sp.*) in the late 1960s, and also affects white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), elk (*Cervus canadensis*), and moose (*Alces alces*), is of particular concern.[3,4] There is no vaccine available, it is 100% fatal, and there is currently no known way to decontaminate an environment once CWD prions are present.[5,6] Distribution maps of CWD suggest the disease spreads to new states and provinces through transportation of live cervids and is facilitated by presence of captive cervid breeding facilities.[3,7] As of late 2012, CWD has been detected in 22 U.S states and 2 Canadian provinces.[8]

The critical issues with regards to disease transmission include lack of early detection, high costs of proactive surveillance programs, inability to successfully eradicate diseases once present in wild populations, and costs and consequences of managing diseases in wild populations.

In addition to disease, transfer of maladapted genetic traits from escaped captive cervids to wild populations is of serious concern. Genetic mixing can have long-term and unpredictable consequences for wild populations (e.g., lower birth rates) that may require intensive management actions by state or provincial agencies that further jeopardize wildlife as a public resource.

Threat to the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation (The Model)

Conversion of wildlife as a public resource to a privately-owned commodity jeopardizes the legal foundation for wildlife conservation and is a fundamental issue with captive cervid and high-fenced deer shooting facilities.

The Model is a critical construct of law, policy, program framework, and scientific investigation that has led to conservation and restoration of wildlife populations in the U.S. and Canada. The Public Trust Doctrine is essential to the foundation of modern wildlife management in North America and forms the cornerstone of The Model by establishing

wildlife as a public resource held in trust by the government for the benefit of the common good.

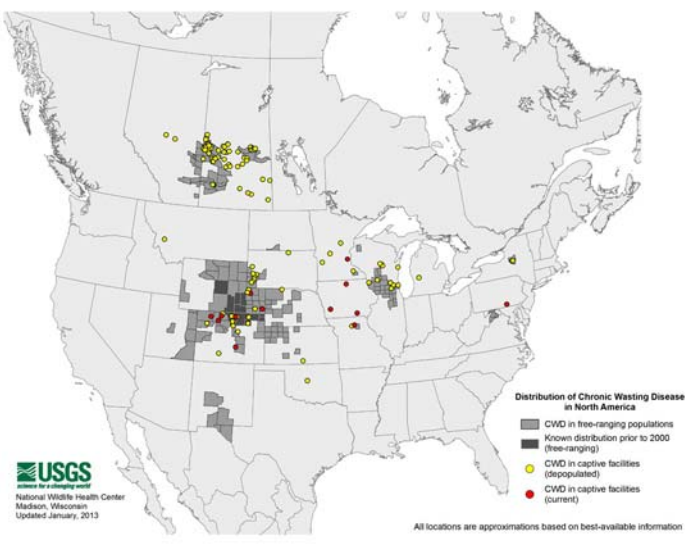
Captive deer breeding operations and confined shooting facilities that place a monetary value on wildlife and their parts threaten the Public Trust Doctrine because the markets created from this industry may provide incentive for privatization, illegal take, trafficking, and exploitation of publicly owned wildlife. These incentives can promote unethical practices to supply markets created by privatization.

Transfer of Authority over Wildlife

Once public trust resources become commercialized, they often become categorized as livestock or alternative livestock, transferring management authority from state, provincial and federal wildlife agencies to state or provincial departments of agriculture. This transfer of authority could potentially cause confusion regarding management authority for cervids and may erode authority of wildlife agencies relative to wild cervid populations. Additionally, this transfer blurs the lines between wild and captive animals, threatening other elements of The Model.

Threat to Fair-chase Hunting Heritage

Fair chase, as defined by the Boone and Crockett Club, is the ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit and taking of any free-ranging wild, native North American big game animal in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper advantage over such animals.[9] The roots of fair chase evolved from the Public Trust Doctrine and are fundamental to ethical hunting - addressing a balance between hunter success and animal avoidance. Confined shooting operations severely limit the animals' potential for escape throughout the activity and provide the shooter with unfair advantages, violating the principle of fair chase, threatening ethical hunting heritage and public acceptance of hunting.



This map depicts the distribution of Chronic Wasting Disease across North America. (Credit: USGS National Wildlife Health Center)

TWS on Ungulate Confinement[11]

TWS recognizes the serious biological and social issues associated with confinement of wild ungulates and captive cervid breeding. We support state and provincial wildlife agencies as the primary regulatory authority over native North American ungulates, including those confined by high fences. State and provincial wildlife agencies should work cooperatively with other state, provincial, and federal agricultural, wildlife, and health agencies; hunting and conservation organizations; private landowners; and managers to reduce the potential for problems such as disease transmission and genetic exchange among native wildlife and captive animals.

Captive deer breeding facility in North Carolina. (Credit: North Carolina Wildlife Resources)

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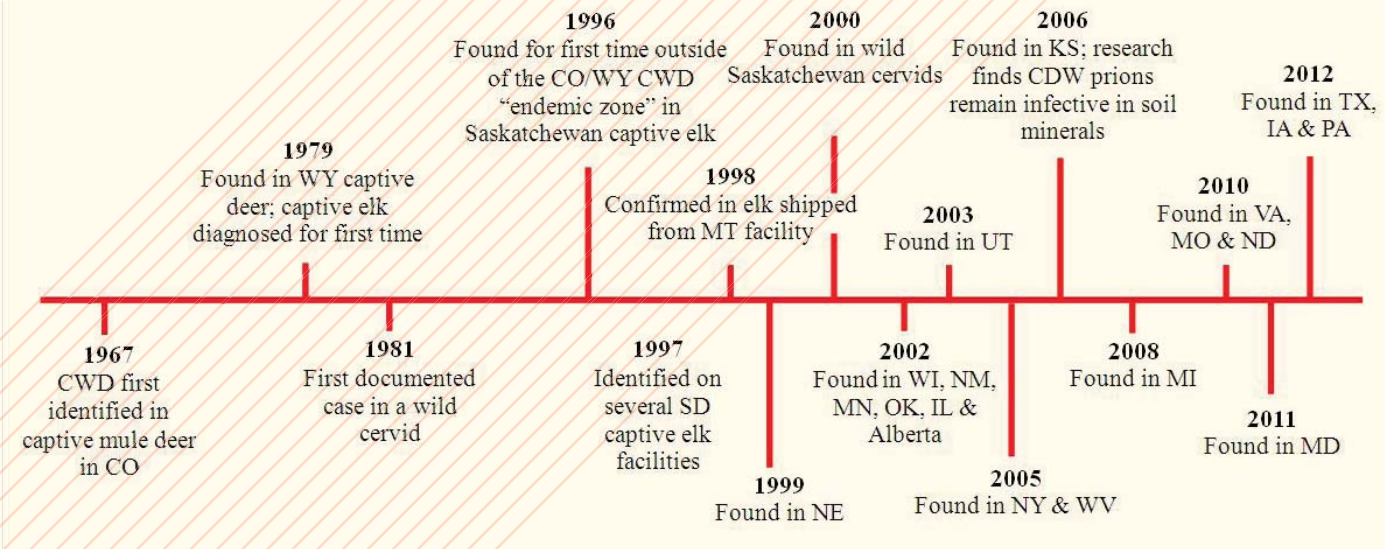
Chronic Wasting Disease Timeline

The following timeline depicts the discovery and spread of Chronic Wasting Disease across the North American landscape.

(Adapted from Chronology of Significant Events in the History of CWD.[8])



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