

The great de-bait

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By JOHN L. SLOAN, June 15, 2011

The use of bait for hunting deer is controversial and involves a complex set of biological, social, and ethical issues. Biologically, population influences related to baiting can be important in the dissemination and maintenance of disease and can affect the natural movement, distribution, and behavior of deer. Baiting can also influence survival and reproduction of deer, particularly when it moves towards supplemental feeding.

Finally, concentrations of deer at bait sites may lead to effects on other species, habitats, and ecosystems.

From a social standpoint, baiting can create conflicts between hunters due to real and perceived unnatural partitioning of the deer resource. Legal baiting for deer can create illegal baiting situations for other species (e.g. migratory birds) that may cause conflict between local user groups. Finally, baiting may simply pit groups against one another from a philosophical standpoint.

This from a study done on the effects of baiting in South Carolina. South Carolina allows baiting in half the state and it is illegal in the other half. This makes it a perfect place to evaluate the effects of baiting both biologically and socially.

So what about baiting? -- A man makes wildlife feeders for a living. He sells them all over the country. Of course, he is in favor of baiting deer and turkeys and anything else that will come to feed. His biggest state for sales is Texas. No surprise there. Baiting is a way of life in Texas. It has made liars out of thousands of hunters who have their name in the various record books of organizations that refuse entries of animals killed over bait. Those organizations do not consider it fair chase.

Another man is on the board of directors of an organization that does not consider baiting of

wildlife to be fair chase. It is his contention that killing animals coming to bait is not even really hunting, it is just shooting and should never be allowed. Why sure he opposes baiting.

Two distinct viewpoints, both with merit. One is based on economics and one is based on an ethical perspective. Before I go any further, let me answer the automatic question . .

Where do I stand on baiting? -- From a personal point of view, just for myself only, I am opposed to it and do not think it is fair to the animals and is also, in all likelihood, a contributor to the spread of various diseases because it concentrates animals in one, relatively small area.

HOWEVER, I could care less what you do. If baiting were to come to a vote of Tennessee hunters, I would vote against it but don't care one bit how you vote. I have hunted over bait on two occasions. I was not impressed.

On one occasion, it was somewhat sickening and I had to be ordered to shoot the animal by my then, boss. On the other, No one forced me and I did kill a relatively nice buck, not a big one, but nice and I was not terribly proud of it. There was not one bit of skill involved. It was...just shooting. But as I said, that is just my personal feeling.

Baiting is extremely effective on even mature bucks in two distinct areas. It works in areas where there is little or no natural browse and it works in areas where climate-deep snow-forces animals to yard up and suffer from lack of food.

That describes Texas for the former and many areas of the North, especially Canada for the latter. Although I have hunted Canada and Texas many times, only twice, once in each place have I hunted over bait. Do I care if you do? Not one bit.

Do I think an animal killed over bait should be eligible for entry into the various record books? I do not care in the least because I don't agree with the record books in general. If the name of the hunter was left out of the book, only the score of the animal and location killed, then I would be in favor of them.

But I do not and will not look down upon a hunter who has an animal in the books right now and certainly will not if baiting were approved.

What else is there about baiting that causes discussion? For one thing, in areas where there is plenty of forage, areas like Tennessee, after one year, very few mature bucks will be killed hunting over bait. Why? Simply because they are not stupid. They come to the bait only after dark. They react to pressure.

What about the economical impact on a man who owns some property, loves to hunt and does not bait. However, his neighbor does. Should the non-baiting landowner be forced to compete? Should he be forced to spend money to compete with the attraction of wildlife that belong to all of us? It can get expensive. Something to think about.

So how does bait differ from hunting a food plot or a magnet oak tree? -- That argument is heard often. There are some differences. A food plot does not concentrate animals in a small, specific area. It allows them to spread out. It is also possible for animals to feed in large food plots and not offer the hunter a shot. You have no idea from where the animal will come. That is about the main difference. Of course, you also don't know if the animal will come. Kill a couple and odds increase he will not; at least during daylight. The same is true of a magnet tree.

I have never seen just one magnet tree. You may easily be hunting the wrong tree. But there is a major factor in both baiting and food plots that is the same. Hunting either one requires no hunting skills at all. You simply go to a predetermined place and sit down and when the deer you want walks out, you shoot.

Feeding in my view, is done to benefit wildlife in times of poor forage. Baiting is done to benefit killers in times of poor ability. It is done strictly to attract wildlife so they can be killed. Remember, that is just my opinion and I truly do not care if you legally bait and hunt over it.

There is no scouting involved, no need to determine travel patterns. There is no sense of satisfaction in having matched wits with one of nature's smartest animals and won. You shot well. That's it.

But what about hunting bear over bait?

I know it sounds strange because unless you are the one picking the bait site and doing the baiting, there isn't much skill involved in bear hunting over bait, either. Maybe it is the fact I only hunt them with a bow. I don't think much of rifle hunting baited bear.

A bow makes it a little more challenging and maybe it is because over bait is only way to hunt bear where I go. I know they are accepted for record book entry so there must be something to it. I can't answer that question.

Therefore, while I oppose baiting for me, excepting bear, I sure don't care if you wish to do so as long as it is legal.

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