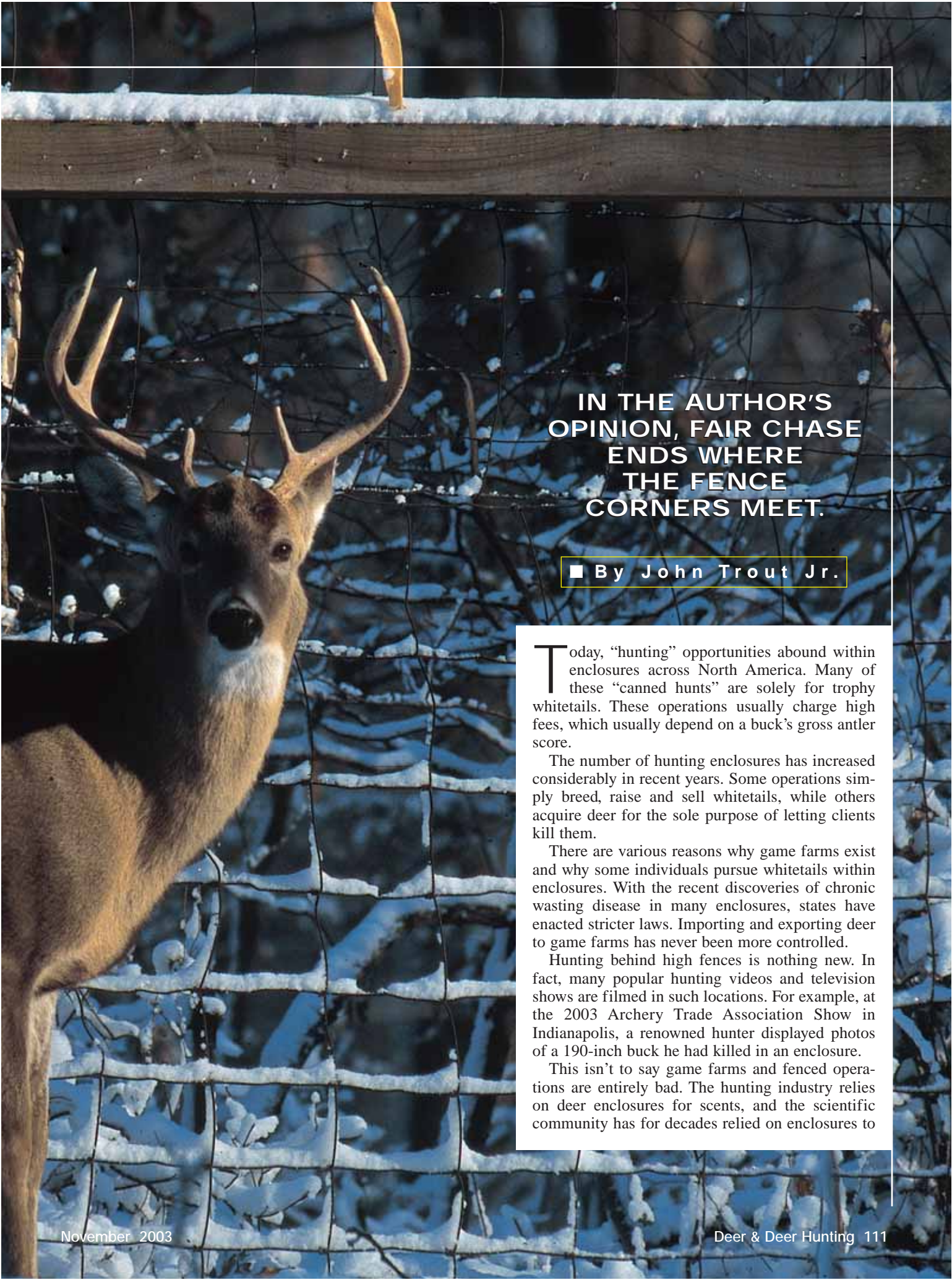


opinion

# You Call **THIS** Hunting?



**IN THE AUTHOR'S  
OPINION, FAIR CHASE  
ENDS WHERE  
THE FENCE  
CORNERS MEET.**

■ **By John Trout Jr.**

Today, “hunting” opportunities abound within enclosures across North America. Many of these “canned hunts” are solely for trophy whitetails. These operations usually charge high fees, which usually depend on a buck’s gross antler score.

The number of hunting enclosures has increased considerably in recent years. Some operations simply breed, raise and sell whitetails, while others acquire deer for the sole purpose of letting clients kill them.

There are various reasons why game farms exist and why some individuals pursue whitetails within enclosures. With the recent discoveries of chronic wasting disease in many enclosures, states have enacted stricter laws. Importing and exporting deer to game farms has never been more controlled.

Hunting behind high fences is nothing new. In fact, many popular hunting videos and television shows are filmed in such locations. For example, at the 2003 Archery Trade Association Show in Indianapolis, a renowned hunter displayed photos of a 190-inch buck he had killed in an enclosure.

This isn’t to say game farms and fenced operations are entirely bad. The hunting industry relies on deer enclosures for scents, and the scientific community has for decades relied on enclosures to

## Videomakers Promote '100 Percent Fair Chase'

Some members of the outdoor trade promote the "fair chase" slogan on their television shows, products, advertisements and seminars.

Will Primos, owner of Primos Hunting Calls, is one of the most vocal hunting celebrities to promote hunting ethics. In fact, about six years ago, Primos added the motto "100 Percent Fair Chase" to his *The Truth* series of hunting videos. However, Primos has promoted public awareness of fair-chase hunting for more than a decade.

"We started the '100 Percent Fair Chase' slogan on the video covers to bring more attention to that aspect," Primos said. "Our competitors were getting a lot of attention from some successful-looking hunts, but they were done within enclosures. From day one, my motivation was to do a video just like we saw it when we went hunting, because we loved it so much. Of course, that's also why we chose the name, *The Truth*."

Primos recalled seeing a video of a penned turkey whose foot was tied to a tree with a string. Although that 1980s video does not necessarily compare with hunting white-

tails in enclosures, he claims it was repulsive to know someone shot this animal and then marketed the product to hunters.

Primos has produced 11 deer hunting videos and numerous others on hunting turkeys, elk, predators and waterfowl. *The Truth* series has sold more than 15 million copies, but production hasn't come easy.

"We have sacrificed a tremendous amount of time, energy and heartache to do it the way we have," Primos said. "In the early days, we were not able to do a deer video every year, as I did not have access to the quality places that I do now, nor did I have the expense budget to travel to states where there was better-quality hunting. For about

the last seven years, we have been able to produce a *Truth* deer tape every year. It takes five full-time crew members with five cameras running all the time, as well as some part-time help."

It's important to note there are many members of the outdoor trade that do not hunt within enclosures, even though they don't mention it on products, ads, etc. That includes everyone from manufacturers and salesmen to outdoor writers. And there are others that promote fair-chase hunts as adamantly as Primos.

One example is Drury Outdoor Productions, headed by brothers Mark and Terry Drury of Missouri. Their popular

*Whitetail Madness* and *Dream Season* deer hunting video series have included the slogan "100 Percent Wild. 100 Percent Fair Chase" for many years.

— John Trout Jr. and Daniel E. Schmidt



conduct important deer research. Enclosures are also used by photographers to capture deer behavior on film.

In the grand scheme of things, those types of uses are for the greater good. But what about hunting? You probably already have an opinion about hunting penned deer. However, there's much to consider when discussing fenced hunts.

Personally, I'm against hunting in enclosures, but that's not to say that

other members of the outdoor trade follow suit. I know of a couple of pro-staffers for various companies who have enjoyed success behind a fence for the sake of an accomplishment. I don't mention this to condemn anyone. I'm simply stating a fact. However, I would never shoot a penned deer and claim it to be a legitimate hunt.

Granted, pursuing bucks in an enclosure consisting of several hundred or even 1,000 acres might not be

easy. However, after discovering how some deer are put into enclosures and how big bucks are manufactured within the boundaries of an enclosure, I have concluded there's a big difference in pursuing a wild deer and a penned animal.

There's also the ethics factor. My conscience cannot deal with shooting a deer in an enclosure, be it 100 square yards, or 2 square miles. This brings up the "fair chase" adage.

### What is Fair Chase?

For many years, deer hunters have heard the term "fair chase."

What separates fair hunting from unfair hunting? First, let's consider the requirements for entering a buck into Pope and Young Club or Boone and Crockett Club records. Naturally, there's a minimum score. The clubs also state that a hunter must have taken the animal legally and within the boundaries of all game laws for that area. Hunters are also required to comply with the clubs' rules of fair chase. Both clubs define various and similar characteristics of an unfair chase.

For example, you cannot enter an animal if it was helpless in a trap, snow or on ice. Both clubs also state that it's unfair to kill an animal with the use of a motor-powered vehicle, by jacklighting or with the use of tranquilizers or poisons. There are many

## Defining What's Fair Isn't Always Black & White

Although the Pope and Young Club's policy on fair-chase hunting forbids hunters from entering deer killed in enclosures, it provides a few exceptions. For example, in Texas it's not uncommon for landowners to erect high fences around much — but not all — of their properties. Deer killed in such scenarios could, in some situations, qualify for P&Y records.

I bow-hunted such a property in the 1990s. The landowner, who was also a cattle rancher, erected a 9-foot fence around three sides of his four-sided "parcel." That term is deceiving, however, when you consider he owned more than 18,000 contiguous acres. I was unaware of the fences until after I arrived at the camp.

The fence certainly wasn't erected for the cattle. The rancher built it to keep deer on his property and to let bucks grow old and big. However, although the deer for all practical purposes were livestock, they weren't technically confined because the north property line wasn't fenced. That property line, however, was miles away from the south line, which was fenced. Were these deer "wild?" They certainly acted like it. Was this a fair-chase hunt? I wasn't sure. Therefore, I decided not to fill my buck tag. I did, however, kill four does at the landowner's request, because he said other hunters had no interest in helping

him manage his deer herd. The meat was donated to a local food pantry.



This example brings up an interesting question. If — and that's a big "if" — some types of hunts behind high fences can be deemed as fair chase, where does one draw the line? Does fair chase cease when all four sides of a property are fenced? If not, how big must a property be before

"hunts" are considered fair? Is it 40 acres? 80 acres? 500 acres? 1,000 acres? Or more? What about three-sided fences?

We could easily debate the merits of other situations. What about hunting deer on small islands? Is that fair chase? After all, they could theoretically escape a hunter by hiding or swimming back to the main land.

Game preserve owners argue that not all enclosure hunts are guaranteed. The rules of several operations state that a hunt is considered successful if the hunter merely gets a shooting opportunity. Preserve owners also argue that they're doing nothing illegal and that they're just trying to make a living. They also say critics are hypocrites, because they rely on penned deer for other things such as scents, venison, shed antlers and photography subjects.

There aren't any easy answers in this long-running debate. In the end, as long as it's legal, some people will continue to shoot deer in enclosures. Is that ethical?

Only you can answer that question by asking another one:

"If I did it, would it prevent me from sleeping at night?"

— Daniel E. Schmidt  
Editor, *Deer & Deer Hunting*

other rules, too. Each club's fair-chase affidavit points out what is unsportsmanlike, including the whereabouts of the kill.

One rule of the Boone and Crockett Club states, "Hunting game confined by artificial barriers, including escape-

proof fencing; or hunting game transplanted solely for the purpose of commercial shooting," is unfair.

Meanwhile, Pope and Young Club's rule is short and to the point. It forbids hunters from entering animals "...while confined behind fences as on

game farms, etc."

Of course, hunters have their own opinions about fair chase when it comes to hunting deer in enclosures. However, let's consider the size of the enclosure and the transplant of animals.

### Little Pens and Big Acreage

Most ethical hunters frown upon shooting deer in an enclosure. But what about a deer ranch that advertises several hundred, or even thousands of acres? Does this necessarily make hunting more challenging? Some claim it does. However, let's consider the foundation of the large hunting enclosure.

I recently read an ad for a 1,000-acre whitetail ranch that includes 500 acres of woods. The other half consists of agricultural fields. No doubt, this area offers a superb diversity of suitable whitetail habitat, and it's quite possible the deer are as elusive as free-ranging whitetails.

However, the owners claim that 300 bucks on the ranch would score between 125 and 200 inches (imagine coming up with such a statistic in the wild per 1,000 acres). Additionally, the

farm supplementally feeds one ton of food per day, and it is particular about its breeding stock.

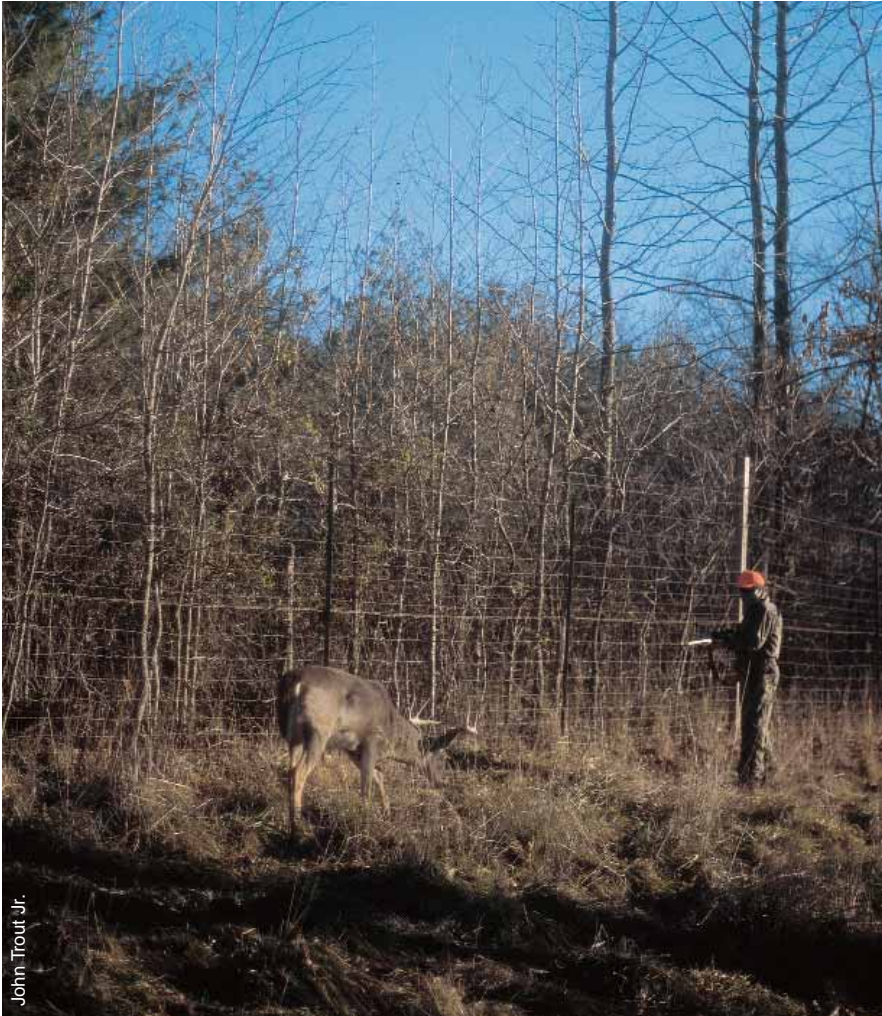
Many ranches offer large areas to pursue deer. Some include many square miles of wild and wooly country, but how can this contribute to a fair, ethical hunt when genetics are hand-picked for the area, and a supplemental feeding program increases the possibility that bucks will reach trophy status?

In some cases, ranches dictate which deer you can shoot, and others go as far as sending a guide with each hunter. The guide sits on stand with the hunter and points out deer that are acceptable for "harvest."

I realize high-fence proponents say programs like quality deer management — which often include the use of food plots, supplemental feeding programs and strict rules on buck harvests — use some of the same strategies. That's a weak argument, because there are no guarantees when managing free-ranging deer.

#### Crossing the Line

Raising whitetails is big business. I know, because I've done it for the past 15 years. I do not raise deer for direct profit, or to contribute to canned hunts. My operation has been a research and study enterprise, as well as an opportunity to photograph white-tails. The deer have also become pets, and I have never owned a record-class buck.



John Trout Jr.

**DOES THIS "HUNTING" SCENE seem unbelievable? That's what the author thought — until he learned that such scenarios actually take place at some shooting preserves, where white-tailed bucks are pen raised and sold to the highest bidder.**

Many folks who raise deer want them for one reason. Just like the cattle farmer who depends on animals for income, so does the deer farmer. A huge buck in a pen can breed many does. The does give birth, and the fawns are sold to those offering canned hunts, or they're stocked on site for future breeding or shooting purposes. Each fawn has the megabuck's genetics. And the bigger the buck, the more money the fawns bring.

Animal auctions are held once or twice a year in many areas. Some specialize in trophy whitetails and breeder bucks. Big-buck buyers might use the buck for breeding, but the animal usually has a higher price tag for its antlers.

One businessman told me he often sells a buck before it's released. He

claimed that on one occasion, "An individual shot the buck as soon as it was let out of the horse trailer that brought it to the farm." Apparently the man wanted a 180-inch buck and was willing to pay the price without spending any time "hunting" it.

The price to shoot a buck in an enclosure varies. You can search on the Internet, but some ranches don't provide prices until they talk to you personally. I heard of one individual who traded a new \$25,000 pickup truck for the right to kill a penned buck that scored 200-plus inches. When money is no object,

some folks would rather "hunt" when the results are guaranteed. After all, the chances of ever seeing a record-class buck in the wild are slim.

Nevertheless, for a moment, forget about money and consider the ethical status of shooting a deer in an enclosure. Just how wild is the deer you shoot? And even if you hunt out of a tree stand and spend hours waiting for a buck, does it warrant hunting in an enclosure?

#### Wild Deer?

Now let's get back to fawns. Deer ranchers often buy fawns for hunting

## Legislators Seek to End Canned Hunts

Although most states allow people to shoot animals in enclosures, the tide is slowly changing. California, Indiana, Maryland, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Wisconsin and Wyoming have laws prohibiting the hunting of exotic mammals in enclosures.

Oregon recently banned the practice of keeping exotic mammals in enclosures for the sole purpose of killing them for recreation and profit. The issue came to a head in 1994 when a landowner allowed an African lion to be shot in a corral.

The government of Manitoba, Canada, also recently prohibited canned hunts, drafting legislation that prohibits the opening of new operations and requiring those in existence to close within two years. Before leaving his post to join the Bush Administration, Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson, a longtime whitetail hunter, proposed a similar law. That legislation died in committee, but was reintroduced six times by assemblyman DuWayne Johnsrud. A watered-down version of the law was passed in 2001. Although canned hunts are still legal for cervids and game birds, the law bans enclosure hunts for hogs, sheep, goats and other exotics.

Several anti-hunting organizations, including the Animal Planet, Humane Society of the United States and the Fund for Animals, have vehemently lobbied for legislation to ban canned hunts.

— Daniel E. Schmidt

and breeding. Most fawns are bottle-fed. Fawns are usually left with the doe for 36 to 48 hours to ensure they get needed colostrum. They are then raised by people and kept in an enclosure until weaned. The weaning period typically lasts 90 to 100 days. By the time they are weaned, these fawns prefer to socialize more with people than with other deer.

There's good reason for deer farmers to rear fawns. Whitetails are one of the most difficult species to work with. If they are not bottle-fed and accustomed to humans, their anxiety often leads to injury, and sometimes death. The high price of whitetails makes it more practical and economical for people to raise fawns. Transporting a large buck that isn't bottle-fed is dangerous for both the deer and the owner, because full-strength tranquilizers cannot be used. Tranquilizers often kill deer, because they slow the heart rate too much. Therefore, handlers must use low doses of sedatives and work with deer while they're still somewhat coherent.

Most deer in shooting preserves are

placed there. Granted, some are born in the enclosures and reared by tame does, but they will never possess the wildness of deer outside an enclosure. Supplemental feeding deletes a total fear of humans, as does being alongside of does that were previously bottle-fed.

I know a deer farmer who has a 200-acre enclosure. He will soon begin hosting hunts in a rugged, hilly area. He has been stocking the area with quality whitetails for a few years and is now ready to turn his investment into a profit-making venture. Unfortunately, he has one problem. Every evening, many of the deer come into his huge back yard to feed. They pay no attention to him and other humans. He has used explosives to frighten them. It caused some of the deer to run a short distance at first. However, the deer have become used to the blasts and only flinch a little when the explosive device goes off.



Mike Searles

**RECORD-CLASS bucks — like this 8-pointer with a 30-inch spread — command top dollar at shooting preserves.**

### Conclusion

It's somewhat understandable why canned hunts are on the increase. Consider the loss of hunting areas. More land is being subdivided every day. Leases are also on the increase, taking away private lands that were once available to more hunters. Public lands are often too crowded to make hunting enjoyable.

Many individuals will probably disagree with many of the points I have made in this article. Some will also claim that even fenced hunts help the hunting economy overall. However, I've only provided the facts about what goes on behind some high fences. What counts is your opinion of hunting in an enclosure. I admit that some bucks will never be easy to kill, even in an enclosure. It's also true that killing a certain trophy whitetail in a pen might feel well-earned.

However, I can't deny the facts. Deer are bought for breeding purposes and to stock enclosures. Deer are often supplementally fed in enclosures. Kills are regulated to make sure hunters can shoot trophy bucks. Some penned deer have little fear of humans. Then it comes down to the two coldest and hardest facts:

1. Sharpened hunting skills are not a requirement to be successful in an enclosure, and
2. Success is guaranteed, and money governs the degree of that success.

The bottom line? You are hunting when you pursue a deer one-on-one in the uncontrollable elements outside of an enclosure. On the inside, there's no hunting. You're only killing.

I hope that the future of whitetail hunting won't become dependent upon enclosures. Because the whole idea of killing a penned animal for "sport" or to satisfy an ego is just plain wrong.

— *John Trout Jr. is a free-lance writer, photographer and book author who specializes in white-tailed deer hunting. He hails from southern Indiana.*

