

## Sportsmen of Maryland should band together

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By Andy Aughenbaugh, Carroll Outdoors |

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Wildlife and Heritage Service has finalized the hunting and trapping season and bag limit regulations for the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 seasons. I attended the stakeholders meeting in February and witnessed the exchange of ideas, requests, and concerns of all interested parties in attendance. Having been at the meeting, I'm not totally surprised at the outcome.

"We are very pleased with the outstanding level of thoughtful input we received during all aspects of the public comment period," said Pete Jayne, DNR Associate Director for Game Management. "It's always productive for us to hear from so many passionate supporters of Maryland's rich wildlife resources. Overall we received more than 450 comments on the proposals via two public meetings, e-mails, letters, phone calls and the online forum."

Dennis Britton of the newly formed Maryland Crossbow Foundation came to the table with a well-prepared written statement requesting that DNR allow the use of crossbows to hunt game during any season where a vertical bow may be used. While I found some of his argument off base with regard to the complexity of the current regulations and their wanting crossbows allowed in order to simplify hunting regulations, I did and do agree with their request. I see no reason not to allow crossbow use during regular archery season. The comments made during the review phase of the proposed change were overwhelmingly in favor of allowing the use of crossbows.

It appears that finally the crossbow argument has run its course and can be put to rest. I only hope that those sportsmen, who have battled so strongly, representing both sides of the argument, can accept the outcome and once again reunite as sportsmen. As united sportsmen, we can overcome imposing obstacles. Divided, however, sporting heritage, wildlife and the environment as a whole suffers.

The Wildlife Advisory Commission (WAC) did not approve one hotly discussed topic of the regulation proposals. The proposal to extend archery deer season by opening earlier (Sept. 5) was not approved and has been withdrawn by the Wildlife and Heritage Service.

At the stakeholders meeting Maryland Bowhunters' Society (MBS) proposed moving the opening date of deer archery season from Sept. 15 to Sept. 1, claiming the archery-only deer season has been shortened over the years. An increase in muzzleloader and firearm deer seasons has encroached on dates once reserved only for archers. Currently Maryland bow hunters are permitted to hunt deer from Sept. 15 through the end of January including during the other seasons. A review the comments posted on the Internet during the review phase of the approval process reveals that most hunters were in favor of this proposed earlier opening.

Following an internal discussion within DNR following the presented proposal in February, they elected to set the new earlier opening date of the season at Sept. 5. Subsequently WAC expressed concern over too much bow-hunting opportunities verses other opportunities for hunters and non-hunters, thus did not approve the request.

I question this decision based on the reason provided. In the last few years, waterfowl hunters have experienced increased opportunities with the growth of resident Canada goose hunting that currently opens on Sept. 1, and the introduction of an early teal season also in September.

In 2004 Maryland saw an increase of several hunting opportunities, all approved by WAC. Rabbit season was expanded by one week at the end of the season. Squirrel hunters experienced a huge increase in time afield with the new season structure opening on the first Saturday in September and extended to the end of February. During the same time, the October muzzleloader deer season and bag limits were expanded.

Given all of the recent increases of hunting opportunities in Maryland over the last ten years, why has the WAC and DNR not seen it prudent to appease the request of bow hunters in their simple request to extend the season two weeks earlier? Currently the very long archery deer season in Maryland coincides with most other hunting seasons in the state. Could there possibly be another reason why the archery deer season was not extended? Could it be a result of how MBS, as an organization, one I am a member of, represents themselves and interacts with other hunting groups of the state?

At the stakeholders meeting, I learned that it is common for rabbit hunters to wait until deer archery season is over before heading out into the woods. Rabbit season opens in November, but to not interfere with the deer hunters, they wait. But in response to learning this fact, MBS was unwilling to trade the last two weeks of the archery bow season for the two earlier weeks in September.

I believe there is a bigger problem faced by Maryland hunters than what appears on the surface. At the table during the stakeholders meeting sat organizations representing waterfowlers, archery deer hunters, rabbit hunters, predator hunters, crossbow advocates, and even an organization representing a coalition of Western Maryland gun clubs, each with its own niche interest. But most notably absent was the interest for the Maryland sportsmen as a whole.

Maryland has become a state with outstanding sporting opportunities for all sportsmen. And maybe that is what is being overlooked by the narrow-vision niche groups. If we as Maryland sportsmen want to continue not only enjoying the woods and waters of the state but foster improved opportunities for all residents of the state, maybe we need to join as a group working together and not segment ourselves as we are doing.

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