

# Quality Deer Management (QDM) Defined

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Quality Deer Management (QDM) has continued to gain in popularity the past four decades. More hunters practice QDM on more acres today than ever before. This has resulted in healthier deer herds, healthier habitats, and enhanced hunting opportunities throughout the whitetail's range. However, many QDM critics, and even some advocates, misunderstand the QDM approach and how it should be applied to their specific area. The QDMA was founded to provide guidance and accurate information to hunters practicing QDM, and the organization has been doing that for 23 years now, but our educational mission is ongoing as new hunters encounter the philosophy. Recent magazine articles and Web forum threads suggest a new article defining Quality Deer Management would be timely.



## A Quick Background

Al Brothers, a wildlife biologist from Texas, is widely referred to as the “father of QDM.” He started the movement in south Texas in the early 1970s and coauthored the landmark book *Producing Quality Whitetails* in 1975. Al was the first to formally recognize the importance of protecting young bucks, shifting harvest pressure to antlerless deer, and educating hunters. In 1982 Joe Hamilton, then a wildlife biologist with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, invited Al to be the keynote speaker at the Southeast Deer Study Group meeting in Charleston, South Carolina. The Southeast Deer Study Group is the largest deer biologist, manager and researcher conference in the United States and it has been held annually since 1979. Al brought the QDM movement to South Carolina, and Joe founded the QDMA six years later in 1988. Due in large part to the efforts of Joe, now the QDMA's Director of Development, and the QDMA, this novel approach toward deer management has spread throughout the U.S., Canada, Australia and elsewhere and continues expanding today.

## Will The Real QDM Please Stand Up?

Misconceptions are a fact of life, but QDM seems to attract more than its fair share. From the myriad of inaccuracies attached to QDM here are two of the more popular ones: QDM is just about big antlers, and QDM requires killing numerous does. Let's start by defining QDM and then we'll address each misconception individually. By definition, QDM is a management approach that protects young bucks and harvests the biologically appropriate number of antlerless deer to balance the deer herd with what the habitat can adequately support. When applied correctly, this results in the proper number of deer for the area, balances the herd's adult sex ratio and age structure, and provides fantastic hunting opportunities. When applied improperly, it can result in disappointment, frustration, criticism and disagreement among hunters.



### **Myth 1: QDM is Just About Big Antlers**

Antlers are cool. With respect to prehistoric art, it is clear we have been fascinated by antlers for at least 50,000 years.

While some modern hunters take this fascination too far, the majority do not. Thus, we don't need to apologize because we enjoy viewing, photographing, measuring or collecting antlers. However, QDM is not just about bucks of any size or even just about deer at all. QDM involves Four Cornerstones and includes herd management, habitat management, hunter management and herd monitoring. QDM is about managing the deer herd to have the proper number and age class of each sex, managing the habitat to provide high quality forage and cover, educating hunters to be better natural resource stewards, and collecting data on the herd, such as harvest or observation data, in order to make wise management decisions (such as the proper number of antlerless deer to shoot each year). Thus, QDM is more encompassing than just focusing on deer, and especially on only large bucks. From a buck perspective, QDM strives to provide a full complement of age classes rather than only having young animals.

When applied correctly, QDM results in the proper number of deer for an area, a balanced adult sex ratio and age structure, and a sustainable level of enjoyment and satisfaction for the hunters involved.



### **Reference & Research**

In simplest terms, you can accomplish this by protecting the majority of yearling (1½-year-old) bucks annually. Yearling bucks are generally the easiest adult deer to kill during the hunting season, and affording them protection during the year they grow their first set of antlers goes a long way toward improving the age structure of the herd. You can go ahead and start shooting 2½-year-old bucks as part of your QDM program. Compared to yearlings, they are more difficult to harvest, so you're far less likely to overharvest this age class. That means some will slip through to become 3½ years, 4½ years, and older, so you should have a full complement of age classes by just protecting yearling bucks. This is where all QDM practitioners begin their journey. Some managers will then choose to also protect 2½-year-old bucks. Is this still QDM? Yes, and it's still QDM if he/she advances one step further and protects 3½-year-olds. However, trying to protect all bucks up to and including 4½-year-olds gets more difficult because bucks die of many causes. More acres under management will be needed, more effort must go into habitat improvement and doe harvest, and fewer hunters will be satisfied with the rate of buck harvest success. This range of management intensity is often referred to as trophy deer management, and relatively few hunters have what's necessary to achieve success and remain satisfied with results over time. Here is where some of the QDM confusion arises. From a buck harvest perspective, all QDM programs strive to protect the majority of yearling bucks, but it is up to the individual manager whether he/she starts harvesting bucks at 2½, 3½, or 4½ years of age. This flexibility is



one aspect making QDM applicable to such a wide array of hunters and deer herds. Do you need to protect every yearling buck? Absolutely not! The QDMA fully supports youth hunters having the opportunity to shoot any legal deer; yearling bucks included. Taking some yearlings is fine as long as you protect the majority of them. Fortunately, protecting yearling bucks is much more common today than in past decades. In 1989, 61 percent of the antlered bucks shot in the U.S. were only 1½ years old. By 2010 that number had dropped to 38 percent!

### **Myth 2: QDM Requires Killing Numerous Does**

Many QDM pioneers have been quoted as saying, "Shoot every doe you can, and then shoot three more." Such statements were generally true when spoken, but times and situations change, and as managers we need to adapt to current conditions. In the past, many programs benefitted from aggressive antlerless deer harvests, hence the recommendation to shoot all available does. However, as deer herds are reduced, similarly aggressive harvests are less necessary or advised. In addition, predator populations are increasing in many areas of the U.S. and Canada. Expanding coyote, black bear, bobcat and wolf populations are important mortality sources, and in some cases new mortality sources, for deer herds (see the 2010 *Whitetail Report*). The take-home message is the appropriate antlerless harvest for a property should be determined locally. The local deer density, habitat quality, mortality factors (predators, winter severity, vehicle kills, etc.) and landowner goals all impact the number of antlerless deer that can or should be harvested. These factors vary annually and thus antlerless harvest goals should also be determined on an annual basis. Based on the above factors, some QDM programs will require large antlerless harvests, some will require moderate antlerless harvests, and some will require minimal or even no antlerless harvests. It's as incorrect to state that all QDM programs require large antlerless harvests as it is to state that all hunters hunt from a vehicle, or over a food plot, or in a swamp.



### **In Conclusion**

QDM encompasses much more than just antlers or even shooting deer. Herd management is only one of the Four Cornerstones of QDM. Many critics incorrectly equate QDM to antler restrictions, trophy deer management, or excessive doe harvests, but hopefully you realize those accusations are false and are now better armed with information to refute such assumptions. Also, these claims completely overlook the efforts expended on the other three Cornerstones. Millions of acres of improved wildlife habitat, more educated sportsmen and women being better ambassadors for hunting, and all the deer data collected to establish realistic buck management goals and determine appropriate antlerless harvest rates. Hopefully, even those who disagree with protecting yearling bucks can appreciate a QDM practitioner's habitat management, hunter education and herd monitoring efforts. The appropriate antlerless harvest for a property should be determined locally. Some QDM programs will require large antlerless harvests, some will require moderate antlerless harvests, and some will require minimal or even no antlerless harvests.

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