

Successful Quality Deer Management

By: Mark Connor

How would you like to hunt in an area where bucks are nearly as numerous as does and half of the bucks you see are 3 ½ years old or older? Sound like a dream? Well, it's not if you are hunting an area that is managed under the principles of Quality Deer Management or QDM. QDM requires restraint in harvesting young males combined with adequate harvest of does and results in healthy deer herds and healthy deer habitat. Under QDM, deer will be in good physical condition, the sex ratio of the herd will be near 1:1, there will be numerous mature males in the herd, and because deer are in balance with the habitat there will be plenty of food and cover for the deer. Most deer hunters are familiar with these concepts, but many don't understand where this management philosophy originated, how it can be implemented or how successful it can be. As the manager of Chesapeake Farms on the eastern shore of Maryland, I have 14 years of first-hand experience with Quality Deer Management and I would like to share with you what I have learned about this fantastic program.

Hunters and biologists first learned about QDM when the book, "Producing Quality Whitetails" by Al Brothers and Murphy Ray was published in 1975. This book explained the concept of QDM and demonstrated how to apply the technique. The book was a hit in the deer management community and stimulated the imagination of a South Carolina deer biologist named Joe Hamilton. Joe believed in the QDM concepts detailed in the book and began applying them in his deer management programs. Joe believed so strongly in QDM that he founded an organization called the South Carolina Quality Deer Management Association in 1988. In time, this organization grew and became known as the Quality Deer Management Association. In 2008, QDMA passed the 50,000 member mark and held its 8th annual national convention. More than 1,200 people attended the convention and more than 15,000 attended the White-Tail Expo that was held in conjunction with the convention. Clearly QDM is growing in popularity among deer hunters and managers.

Chesapeake Farms is a 3,300 acre DuPont facility located near Chestertown, Maryland. Numerous activities take place at the Farms including corn and soybean farming, research plots for DuPont Crop Protection® and Pioneer Hi-Bred International®, wildlife management and research and deer and waterfowl hunting. Deer hunting at Chesapeake Farms is done primarily by invited guests who are customers of the various business units of DuPont. Deer are hunted primarily during the 2-week firearm season that is restricted to shotguns with slugs only. The hunting is done from tree stands located in the 1,700 acres of woodlands on Chesapeake Farms. For years, our deer hunting followed a traditional program. Hunters could harvest any buck and few does were harvested. Prior to 1985 less than 10 does were harvested each year. Between 1985 and 1993 the average number of bucks and does harvested was 30 and 85, respectively.

To improve the hunting for our guests, I implemented a QDM program in 1994. For the first 3 years, all bucks with less than 7 points were protected from harvest. In addition, doe harvest was increased to an average of 120 per year. As a result, the percentage of yearling bucks harvested declined from 57% to 35% and the percentage of bucks at least 3 ½ years old increased from

13% to 29%. Overall the buck harvest declined falling from an average of 30 before the QDM program was implemented to 24 during the 3 years of the 7-point restriction. In addition to harvesting fewer bucks, I noticed that many of the yearling bucks being harvested had 8 or more points. Harvesting these deer that might have great genetic potential seemed like a bad idea.

Beginning in 1997, harvest of bucks was restricted to those bucks with antler spread greater than ear-tip width or about 16". This restriction protected all yearling bucks and some older bucks from harvest. We again increased the harvest of does to an average of 148 during the years 1997-2002. During the same years, the antlered buck harvest averaged 29. More importantly the age structure of the bucks harvested changed dramatically. Yearling bucks now comprise only 13% of the harvest while bucks 3 ½ and older comprise 58% of the harvest. Success! We now have a deer herd where most of the bucks harvested are at least 3 ½ years old! We also have a program where we harvest as many mature bucks under QDM as we had harvested young bucks under traditional management. Our dream came true! The few yearling bucks harvested each year usually have broken antlers and are mistaken for does by hunters filling antlerless harvest quotas.

In addition to the changes in the deer harvest there were dramatic changes in the deer herd. Our hunters keep track of the deer they see and hours they hunt while on stand. Before QDM, 1 out of every 12 or 8% of the deer seen on the first 2 days of the firearms season was an antlered buck. Since 2005, 1 out of every 4 or 25% of the deer seen have been antlered. This percent translates to a sex ration of at least 1 buck: 1.5 does. At the same time, the number of antlerless deer seen per hour of hunting decreased by 25% from 2 to 1.5 while the number of antlered deer seen increased from 0.2 to 0.6 per hour.

Can your dream come true? Can you have a successful QDM program on your hunting area? The answer is yes, if you are willing to follow some basic guidelines. First, protect all yearling bucks from harvest. Talk to a biologist who can make a recommendation about what antler restrictions are needed to protect these bucks. Second, harvest an adequate number of does. Achieving doe harvest quotas can be the most difficult part of your program. Be sure to consult a biologist about how many does to harvest and then follow those recommendations. It may be necessary to assign a quota to each person who hunts your property to achieve doe harvest goals. Before the season begins make sure that each hunter is aware of the number of does he or she is expected to harvest and that there is a place to donate any unwanted deer that are harvested. Third, you must be patient. At Chesapeake Farms, it was the 5th year of the program before we saw significant improvement in the number of older bucks that were harvested. On any area it will take time for the buck population to change from one comprised of mostly young males to one with numerous adult males. Remember that Chesapeake Farms is 3,300 acres but is shaped irregularly. Thus, hunting by neighbors has an effect on deer and deer management at Chesapeake Farms. This affect reveals the last recommendation for your successful QDM program. Work with your neighbors to create a QDM coop where similar antler restrictions and doe harvest goals are in place. You can learn more about how to form a coop and QDM in general by visiting the QDMA website at www.qdma.com

Once your QDM program is up and running you will enjoy the dream come true of great white-tail hunting!