

Outdoors

The almighty 'Book'

Many are the changes in deer hunting that I've seen in my 60 years of chasing whitetails.

Many of these changes have been for the better. We have a lot more deer in the woods these days and deer where there were none during my boyhood.

State management efforts are far more enlightened now, being based on better scientific research. Seasons and bag limits are more generous. We have access, for a price, to hundreds of thousands of acres of prime whitetail habitat today that in 1959 I'd have bet you good money would never be commercially hunted.

We have guns, hunting equipment and clothing today that we could hardly dream of in the '30s when I made my first deer hunt. This surely is the Golden Age of trophy whitetail bucks (even if many of them are behind deer-proof fences, munching high-protein deer yummys).

But there are negatives, too. Those high fences are one. During the 1940s, my father and a few friends leased a 1,500-acre ranch in Colorado County, year-round, with the right to build a permanent camp, for \$250.

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John Wootters

Those days are gone forever. Available good leases, at any price, are few and far between.

Maybe the most prominent (and distressing) change of all, in my opinion, is the mind-boggling emphasis on something called "the book." If you're a deer hunter, you understand the reference to the Boone & Crockett Club "Records of North American Big Game." For many a Texas hunter, the Holy Grail in life is seeing his name in print among the august listings of this revered volume.

Nothing wrong with that, except that for a few people it becomes a driving obsession, something for which they'll do anything, including violation of state and federal game laws, perjury, poaching, armed trespass and stealing. I have not heard of a killing yet — of a human, I mean — but I will not be

astonished when I do. Many fine bucks (and bulls, boars, rams, etc.) lose their lives illegally for a spot in the book.

This is not the fault of the Boone and Crockett Club, which hates such practices and which has been a leader in promoting ethical hunting by fair chase. Through no fault of theirs, their "book" has simply become too prestigious. Under such pressures, hunting ceases to be a contest between man and animal, or even between a hunter and himself, and becomes a competition between men, with the death of the animal a mere side-light to the drama.

This inevitably results in abuses of the game. Guides have told me of "hunters" who shot a buck thinking it would "book," and who, when the antlers came up an inch or two short, would offer them big money to hide the carcass and leave it to rot while they went in search of a bigger one. This demeans a magnificent animal, and smears the whole hunting sport, including the honorable and ethical hunters who are the vast majority.

When I sat on the NRA board of directors, I chaired

the Hunting and Wildlife Conservation committee. At that time, NRA published the Boone & Crockett Club books, including the record book, so my committee and I worked closely with the B&C officer in charge of records keeping. Some of the stories he told about what so-called hunters would do to make the "book" would turn your stomach.

For this reason, I will not enter a trophy of mine in that almighty book or any of its competitors, published by Safari Club International, Rowland Ward or other hunting organizations. If you ever find my name in

any of these publications, you can be assured that I didn't pay or apply to put it there. In fact, several of my African trophies would place high in the Rowland Ward record book — except that they have never been and will never be officially measured.

Like everybody else, I often refer to Boone & Crockett scores, because that's the language big-game hunters use to describe trophies and not because I've got my eye on a slot in the "book." If I like a head well enough to shoot it, and somebody puts a tape on it, adds up some numbers, and draws

the conclusion that I should have waited for a bigger one, I figure that's his problem, not mine!

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Peterson's hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for "Shooting Times," "Rifle," "Handloader," "Guns & Ammo" and Peterson's "Hunting."