

TROPHY HUNT MANAGEMENT - NEW MEXICO STYLE

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INTRODUCTION

My objective in this paper is to discuss the mechanics of operating trophy big game hunting operations on private ranches. Although the example I will use is elk hunt management on a New Mexico ranch, the basic operating procedures are equally applicable to the management of trophy whitetail hunts in Texas.

History

Vermejo Park is a 392,000 acre ranch in northeastern New Mexico, and part of the famous 1.7 million-acre Maxwell Land Grant of 1841. Hunting, fishing and wildlife management have historically been important aspects of the ranch's management. Previous owners, interested in improving the hunting and fishing on the property, developed lakes, constructed a fish hatchery, and built numerous guest lodges. In 1911 elk were reestablished with a transplant from Wyoming. These were the first elk to be reintroduced into New Mexico after the species had been exterminated from the entire state in the late 1800's (Barker 1976). In 1926 Vermejo Park was purchased by a group of Los Angeles businessmen who organized an elite hunting, fishing, and recreational retreat known as the Vermejo Club. Membership in the club was by invitation only, and the cost of a lifetime membership was \$5,000. Members included such personalities as Herbert Hoover, Calvin Coolidge, Cecil B. DeMille, Thomas W. Warner, and Andrew Mellon.

Today Vermejo Park is owned by Pennzoil Company, and is operated as both a working cattle ranch and a hunting and fishing resort.

Hunting Program

Guided hunts are offered for elk, mule deer, antelope, black bear, mountain lion, and wild turkey. Unlike many hunting resorts, Vermejo Park is not a game farm. Wildlife is not kept in pastures enclosed by game-proof fences. All animals are completely wild and free-ranging, and all hunting is done in accordance with regulations established by the State Game Commission.

Economically, the most important big game species at Vermejo Park is elk. Revenue generated from elk hunting is comparable to that from the livestock operation. The elk herd, estimated at 4,000 animals, accounts for the majority of the hunting activity. Currently, over 500 elk hunters are accommodated each fall. This compares to approximately 30 deer hunters and a dozen antelope hunters.

The objective of Vermejo's hunting program is to selectively harvest the herd so as to maximize the sustainable yield of trophy bulls. Hunter success averages 65% (range 50-100%), with half of the bulls taken being at least 6 x 6 (6 antler points on each beam). To the best of my knowledge, these statistics are unequaled on public land elk hunts anywhere in North America.

SEASON STRUCTURE AND HUNTING FEES

New Mexico's elk season is stratified into several hunt periods. A hunter purchases a license for a specific hunt and is limited to hunting only during that period. Six bull hunts and 3 cow hunts have been authorized for Vermejo Park by the State Game Commission. The first 4 bull hunts are held during October, the fifth and sixth hunts during late November and early December, and the cow hunts during late December. The bull hunts are each of 5 days duration, and the cow hunts are each 4 days in length.

The first hunt of the season is designated by the ranch as the Trophy Hunt. This hunt usually occurs during the rut, when large trophy bulls are running with the herds. The bulls are less wary that time of the year, bugling makes the animals easier to locate, and in general the hunting is much easier than after the rut. The success rate on the Trophy Hunt ranges from 75-100%, and most of the bulls taken are mature 6 x 6 trophies. There is a high demand for this hunt, and it is usually booked two years in advance. As with most products, price is influenced by supply and demand. The price of the Trophy Hunt is \$5,000 per hunter. This fee includes ranch trespass fee, room and meals at the ranch lodge, guide (one guide per hunter), the use of a four-wheel drive vehicle and/or horses, state hunting license, state sales tax, and field care of the game.

The price of the second hunt is \$4,000 per hunter, and the remaining bull hunts are \$3,350 per hunter. All of the services provided on the Trophy Hunt are also included in the cost of the other bull hunts, with the exception that guides are furnished at the rate of 1 guide per 2 hunters.

The cow elk hunts are primarily a management tool, and thus are operated differently than are the bull hunts. The price is \$200 per hunter. However, this is only a trespass fee, and the services provided for the bull hunters are not included in this price. The cow hunter has two options available to him. He may camp at a designated location on the ranch and hunt without a guide, or he may stay at the ranch lodge and hire a guide. Cow hunters who stay at the lodge pay a daily rate of \$85 per person for their accommodations, plus a daily guide fee of \$75 per guide. Up to 3 hunters are allowed to share one guide and split the guide fee.

BOOKING PROCEDURES AND DEPOSITS

We accept deposits on hunts for up to 2 years in advance. Some hunters ask to book 3 or 4 years in advance, but we have learned that a high percentage of reservations made that far in advance are cancelled, resulting in excessive administrative paper work.

A 10% deposit is required to initially book a hunt. An additional 40% is required by April first, and the balance is due by July 15th. On reservations made after July 15th, a 100% deposit is required.

HUNT MANAGEMENT

Pre-Hunt Correspondence

Hunt management, or more accurately hunter management, begins long before the opening day of hunting season. Six weeks before the hunt begins, each hunter is mailed a "hunter information packet" which contains a personal cover letter, ranch hunting rules, important state game laws, general information regarding the hunt, a list of suggested equipment, and a hunter questionnaire.

The hunter is requested to complete and return the questionnaire (Appendix A) at least 2 weeks prior to the hunt. The main purpose of the questionnaire is to assist in guide assignments. It would not be appropriate to assign a strong, healthy, young hunter, who wanted to do most of his hunting afoot, a guide who was physically unable to hunt that strenuously. On the other hand, it would be foolish to assign our best back-country guide to a hunter who refused to hunt more than one-hundred yards from the vehicle. The pre-hunt questionnaire has proved to be a very effective aid in proper matching of guide and hunter, and has helped to eliminate most of the hunter-guide incompatibility problems.

Ranch Hunting Rules

Rules and guidelines are necessary for the smooth operation of any business, and a hunting ranch is no exception. We have established certain rules (Appendix B) in order to ensure the safety of our guests, improve their chances for a successful hunt, and to facilitate achievement of herd management objectives.

A good working relationship with the State Game and Fish Department is essential to the success of our operation, and we insist that ranch hunters and guides obey all state game laws and hunting regulations. We have found that the vast majority of our hunters are highly supportive of this policy and we have received numerous compliments regarding the ranch's support of state game laws and hunting regulations. Unfortunately, there are always a few bad apples, and we reserve the right to ask any hunter who refuses to abide by ranch rules or state game laws, to leave the ranch.

Guides

All hunters are required to be accompanied by a ranch guide, except during the cow hunts. All of our guides are experienced hunters and are thoroughly familiar with the ranch. Most are full-time employees who work in other aspects of the ranch operation the remainder of the year. Additional guides are hired from surrounding communities to meet our total guide requirements. Sometimes as many as 35 guides are employed at one time.

It is important that all guides be thoroughly familiar with the ranch hunting rules and state game laws. We have found that once the rules are explained to the guides, they become enthusiastic supporters of them and do everything possible to ensure that their hunters abide by the ranch rules and state regulations.

Guides are assigned to hunting parties on the following basis:

group of 2 hunters - 1 guide
group of 3-4 hunters - 2 guides
group of 5-6 hunters - 3 guides
group of 7-8 hunters - 4 guides

An extra \$500 "private guide fee" is assessed for parties of only one hunter, except during the Trophy Hunt when all hunters are provided private guides at no additional cost. We do not mix single hunters from different groups and assign them to hunt together with the same guide.

Hunting Areas and Methods

The ranch is divided into 22 hunting areas. Each hunting party (1 guide plus 1 or 2 hunters) is assigned to a specific hunting area each day. Areas range in size from 5,000-25,000 acres, depending upon terrain, game density, hunting potential, and accessibility. Areas are rotated daily to give each hunting party a fair chance to hunt a variety of locations. The hunting-area system allows us to disperse hunting pressure throughout the ranch, know the approximate location of each hunting party, and gives each party an undisturbed hunting area to themselves.

Traditionally, elk hunting is associated with saddle sores, since many western elk hunts are pack trips into wilderness areas. This certainly is not the case at Vermejo Park. There are several hundred miles of ranch roads, including numerous old logging trails. Since elk are wide-ranging and sparsely populated (in comparison to deer), the more country a hunter can cover, usually the better are his chances of locating a good bull. A popular hunting method is to slowly drive the roads in a four-wheel drive vehicle, stopping often to glass the surrounding hillsides and meadows. Once a herd is located, the guide plans a stalk to get the hunter within shooting range. This is a particularly effective technique at Vermejo, since much of the ranch is relatively open forest, large meadows, or oakbrush hillsides which

provide good visibility for both hunter and elk. Therefore, animals must be spotted at a considerable distance so as not to spook them.

Some hunters prefer to do most of their hunting afoot. These hunters are usually assigned to the more rugged inaccessible hunting areas, which are better suited to foot hunting than to vehicle hunting. However, minimal use is made of horses even in these cases. Access to the general hunting area is by vehicle, then the actual hunt is made on foot. We have found the combined use of vehicles and foot hunting to be the best hunting method.

Our hunters do not have to ride horseback to reach good hunting areas, nor do they sleep in tents on the hard ground. First class accommodations are provided at the ranch lodge, including dining room meal service.

Game Handling

The ranch is responsible for proper field care of the game. All of our hunting vehicles are equipped with two-way radios. When a kill is made, the guide field dresses the animal and radios his location to ranch headquarters. A game hauling truck (or a wrangler and pack horses if it's an inaccessible area) is dispatched to the location. The elk is loaded and taken to the game barn where it is skinned, quartered, and stored in a refrigerated truck. This service is included in the base price of the hunt.

For several years we have worked with The Flagg Group, Inc., a commercial game processing and taxidermy firm from Dallas, Texas. We contract them to provide the skinning crew and refrigerated truck. In addition, they are available to handle the taxidermy and meat processing needs of the hunters. Taxidermy and processing arrangements are made directly between the hunter and The Flagg Group, Inc.

ELK RESEARCH AND MANAGEMENT

The elk herd is a valuable ranch resource, and every effort is made to ensure its proper management. This necessitates the collection of extensive biological data. A long-range population ecology study of Vermejo's elk herd is currently in progress (Wolfe 1980). Although a complete review of the ranch's research program is beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to discuss some of the data collected from hunter-killed bull elk, and illustrate how this information is used to develop management objectives.

Both central incisors are removed from each elk harvested. The animal's age can be estimated by examining a thin section of the tooth's root under a microscope, and counting the rings of cementum annuli (Keiss 1969, Matson 1981). This is similar to determining a tree's age by counting its growth rings.

Specific antler measurements are also recorded to evaluate the relationship between age and antler development. Measurements taken include number of antler points, antler weight, antler length, antler circumference, and Boone and Crockett Club Score.

Comparison of age data and antler measurements indicate that maximum antler development in Vermejo Park elk occurs between 7 and 10 years of age (Wolfe 1983). Since the goal of our elk management program is the maximum production of trophy bulls, this data suggests that we should maximize the number of 7 to 10-year-old bulls in the herd. One of the management techniques used to accomplish this goal is the reduction of hunting mortality in the younger age classes. This gives the bulls a better chance of living long enough to reach the older age classes where they have the potential of developing into trophy animals. We have applied these research results to our management program by requiring that our hunters take no bull smaller than 5 x 5. This protects the yearlings, most of the 2-year-olds, and many 3-year-old bulls. Although this program has been in effect only three seasons, we have already begun to see an increase in the number of bulls in the older age classes.

ADVERTISING

Vermejo Park has been in the hunting business for many years, and we rely primarily upon our longstanding reputation, repeat business, and "word-of-mouth" advertising. There are, however, several advertising techniques that we believe to be beneficial.

1. A well written article in a quality outdoor magazine is much more effective than are small advertisements in the back pages. This is accomplished by inviting reputable writers from nationally known magazines to participate in complimentary hunts. However, it should be made clear from the beginning that the ranch expects a quality article in return for the hunt.
2. Another good way to publicize your hunting operation is to attend the annual conventions of major hunting organizations such as Game Conservation International and Safari Club. Commercial exhibit space is usually available, but not required for a successful promotional trip. There are numerous opportunities to meet and talk with hunters at these meetings, and a good photo album documenting your hunting operation is a valuable asset.
3. Good high quality informational brochures are invaluable. They can be distributed at conventions, sporting good stores, or to select mailing lists. Be sure to give a handful to your hunters and ask them to distribute them to their hunting friends. Because when it's all said and done, the very best advertising is a satisfied customer.

CONCLUSION

My experience at Vermejo Park has convinced me that quality big game hunting is in high demand. Unfortunately, many land owners are "missing the boat" by not properly managing and marketing their wildlife resource. Revenue generated from hunting can be a significant source of additional income for the rancher, possibly even more profitable than his livestock operation. A successful hunting operation requires sound land and wildlife management practices, a basic understanding of hunters and their expectations, long-range planning, organization, a marketing program, and good business practices.

LITERATURE CITED

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Appendix A. Vermejo Park Hunter Questionnaire.

1. NAME: _____ AGE: _____

2. HUNT: _____ Oct. 7-11 _____ Oct. 30-Nov. 3
_____ Oct. 15-19 _____ Nov. 26-30
_____ Oct. 23-27 _____ Dec. 3-7

3. General Physical Condition: _____

4. Preferred Method of Hunting:

_____ Vehicle _____ Foot _____ Combination

5. Hunting Experience:

_____ Extensive _____ Average _____ Novice

6. Have you ever hunted elk before? _____ No _____ Yes

Have you ever hunted at Vermejo Park? _____ No _____ Yes

7. Guide Preference: _____

(NOTE: We cannot guarantee you will receive the guide you request,
but we will make every effort to see that you do.)

8. Will you need a ranch 4-WD vehicle? _____ No _____ Yes

If so, how many vehicles for your hunting party? _____

9. If you need transportation from the Raton airstrip, please indicate:

Date: _____ Time: _____

10. Comments: _____

Appendix B. Vermejo Park Hunting Rules.

In the interest of maintaining a high quality hunt and insuring the safety of our guests, the following rules have been established:

I. MINIMUM CALIBER REQUIREMENT

Each elk season many bulls are wounded but not recovered. We feel our wounding loss may be as high as 30% of the actual harvest. An analysis of this problem indicated that most of the wounding loss occurred in elk shot with rifles smaller than .30-caliber. In an effort to reduce this needless waste, we have established the following policy:

1. The following calibers are approved for elk hunting at Vermejo Park: .300 mag, .338 mag, 8 mm mag, .375 mag, any caliber over .375.
2. Hunters will not be prohibited from using a caliber we do not recommend. However, if a hunter uses an unapproved caliber and wounds an elk, then he may be requested to spend the remainder of the hunt searching for the wounded animal.
3. If a hunter using an approved caliber wounds an elk, makes a reasonable effort to track and recover the wounded animal, but is unable to find it, then he will be permitted to hunt for another bull.

II. HUNTER SAFETY

1. Do not carry a loaded rifle while in a vehicle. Wait until you are out of the vehicle and in a safe position before injecting a cartridge into the firing chamber. Check to make sure the chamber is empty before getting back into the vehicle.
2. Do not shoot from your vehicle. Get out of the vehicle and into a safe position before firing. This is a state law.
3. Remove all cartridges from your rifle before taking it into a lodge.
4. Please do not mix drinking and hunting. Guides are instructed not to take intoxicated hunters into the field.

III. HUNTING AREAS

Each hunting party is assigned to a specific hunting area each day. Areas are rotated daily. Therefore, you will have an opportunity to hunt in a variety of different terrains. Please be considerate of other hunters by hunting only in your assigned area.

IV. FIVE BY FIVE (5 x 5) RULE

Vermejo's policy is to shoot only bulls with at least 5 antler points on each main beam. Hunters are not permitted to shoot bulls smaller than 5 x 5. The purpose of this regulation is to protect the younger bulls. The long-term effect will be an increase in the number of mature bulls, and an improvement in the quality of hunting on the ranch. Your cooperation in abiding by this policy is appreciated.

V. HUNTER CONDUCT

All hunters are expected to conduct themselves in a gentlemanly and sportsman-like manner. We have a responsibility to provide all of our guests with a safe and enjoyable hunt. Obnoxious behavior or abusive language will not be tolerated. Anyone refusing to abide by ranch rules or state laws will be asked to leave the ranch.

VI. NEW MEXICO GAME LAWS

All of Vermejo's hunting guests and guides are expected to comply with all New Mexico State game laws, especially for your protection, but also to assure that Vermejo can continue to offer elk hunting. Because regulations differ from state to state, and even from year to year within the same state, we have prepared a list of New Mexico's most important game laws. Please read and become familiar with these regulations before hunting.

The staff at Vermejo Park wish you a safe and successful hunt. Observance of safety rules and state game laws will make the hunt more enjoyable for everyone concerned.

Thank you.

VERMEJO PARK