of unretrieved deer reported per 100 buck-only hunters in four check station surveys ranged from 15.9 to 21.7 with a weighted mean of 17.9 unretrieved deer per 100 buck hunters. Total unretrieved deer for this period was 32,441 deer per year and mean total annual hunting mortality was 104,324 per year. Mean hunter satisfaction (1987–1990) with zero representing the worst hunt and the 10 the best hunt was 4.4. Hunting party success was 45.8 percent.

Subsequent to 1990, generally hunter harvest and satisfaction have declined. Harvest has declined to less than 40,000 bucks, hunter license sales have been limited, previously open private lands are mostly closed to the public hunter, and special interests have often prevailed over common interests. However, CWMUs have offered limited but high quality public hunting on private lands. The trend of buck-only hunting since 1991 has been toward establishing increased hunter restrictions.

**Too Many Hunters, Too Few Bucks**

Complaints by hunters before the mid 1960s were few because deer numbers were high, deer hunter numbers were relatively low, and deer hunting was very good with hunting success percentages often exceeding 50 percent. Most hunters who hunted diligently bagged a deer, and if a buck could not be harvested, a doe filled the freezer just as well.

However, since the change from either-sex to buck-only hunting in the early 1970s along with the rapid increase in the number of hunters beginning in the late 1960s, and newer restrictions in the 1990s, the number of complaints from Utah deer hunters increased (Krannich and Cundy 1989). Two issues of complaints are always in the forefront: overcrowding of hunters during the rifle hunt and especially on opening weekend, and excessive hunting pressure on bucks. This is simply stated as too many hunters and too few bucks. The third complaint is usually too few big bucks. The fourth complaint, which is increasing in frequency and will likely move to third in importance, is problems associated with private lands. The fifth most common complaint was the hunters’ becoming too old or physically impaired. Sixty-six additional factors were listed by one study (Austin et al. 1992). However, the four major complaints as listed above, over which management regulations have significant input and control, have continued to dominate even though Utah has limited the total license sales to 95,000.
Finding solutions to these two major problems—too many hunters and too few bucks—such that hunter satisfaction is increased and deer populations are maintained at carrying capacity, while revenues for wildlife agencies are maintained, continues to be the key issue facing Utah deer management into the twenty-first century.

**Hunter Preferences**

Hunter preferences for deer management changes are often difficult to define, and the results usually vary by the hunters sampled, the time period of sampling, as well as the manner and exact wording in which the questions are written. Consequently, when results agree between independent surveys, much more confidence can be placed upon the results.

*Note:* When hunters or wildlife biologists gather in discussion groups, I have observed on numerous occasions that the outcome and resolve usually follows the opinion of the most forceful individual. Despite large differences of opinion at the beginning of the meeting, by the end everyone seems to agree. However, I have also observed the same groups of hunters and biologists meeting again, perhaps a year later, beginning again with diverse opinions about the identical topic, and coming to a totally different conclusion from the first meeting!

Deer hunting as a sport is very important to Utah hunters, and almost all hunters anticipate hunting yearly. Surveys consistently agree that the most important aspect to deer hunting is annual participation. Hunting deer on alternate years or most years, as has been suggested on numerous occasions, is not acceptable to a high majority of hunters. Only those hunters with marginal interest seem to agree with the concept. However, in controversy, the majority of hunters believe deer hunting pressure and opportunity should be reduced to increase the quality of the hunts. The question invariably becomes, what hunter opportunities should be sacrificed for increased quality, and which hunters are going to make those sacrifices? Each hunter generally feels entitled to higher quality hunts, but doesn’t want to be the one to change. Such is the manager’s dilemma.

The decline of mule deer numbers is a long-term trend that began at least as early as 1970, and deer herd numbers will continue to decline for
many decades due to habitat changes, human encroachment, competitors, exotic species of forage, and numerous other factors. One experienced biologist apparently suggested that within the next 100 years or by about the year 2100, mule deer may become so scarce as to preclude any hunting. Hunters clearly desire management to make every effort to limit this decline. These efforts will surely include habitat management, but must also include controlling predators, wildlife competitors, and human encroachment and harassment.

Options for improving quality of the hunt have received mixed responses. Changes in the length of the rifle season or splitting the hunt into two or more hunts are not favored by most Utah hunters, with numerous hunters indicating they may quit hunting because of too short a season length. Most hunters preferred to keep the hunts as currently managed. Years ago most hunters were generally satisfied with the 11-day October rifle hunt, and many hunters were displeased when the season was shortened to nine days in 1993.

The proportion of mature bucks, defined as bucks three-and-a-half years and older, is a major concern by hunters. Almost 10 percent of hunters indicated that they may quit hunting in Utah specifically because of too few big bucks in the harvest, especially on public lands. Surprisingly, a majority of Utah hunters would even prefer to harvest a mature buck less frequently as opposed to harvesting a smaller buck more frequently (Austin et al. 1992).

The decline in the proportion of mature bucks in the harvest is an accurate perception by hunters. Before 1950 the proportion of mature bucks in the harvest was about 50 percent. During the years of either-sex hunting, 1951 to 1973, mature bucks comprised about 25 percent of the buck harvest. Beginning with the buck-only hunting era, 1974 to 2000, the proportions of mature bucks was only about 10 percent. Since 2000 with increased hunter sales restrictions, the establishment of Cooperative Wildlife Management Units, the goal of 15 bucks to 100 does post-season with five of them being mature bucks, that proportion has increased considerably. For example, from the Blacksmith Fork checking station on the Cache unit, 59 percent of the bucks were mature in 1946; that percentage dropped to 25 percent between 1962 and 1966, and greatly decreased to six percent in 1986–1988, but has risen to about 33 percent since 1996.

Hunters generally supported high-country hunts, and continue to support limited-entry hunts. However, most hunters rejected
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three-point-and-better-hunts. Although they were attempted on several management units, they were only successful in limited areas. The Wellsville Mountains on the Cache unit and the LaSal Mountains were marginally successful as observed by myself and the area conservation officers, and some private lands, such as the East Canyon Resort with 10,000 acres, were also marginally successful. These hunts mostly failed because too many bucks having two points or less were harvested or killed by hunters. One unpublished field survey estimated that for every legal buck harvested on these units at least one illegal buck was harvested and usually left in the field.

One effective way to reduce hunter crowding was to require hunters to choose and hunt only one season. This rule was adopted in Utah in 1994 and has been reasonably successful. However, shortly after its passage, dissatisfied hunters petitioned the state to allow a special interest group of hunters, willing to dedicate time or money to the state, to hunt all three hunts. The Board approved the application for the Dedicated Hunter Program. This program has been enthusiastically supported.

Hunter access to at least some private lands has shrunk since 1993. Access to some public lands surrounded or partially blocked by private lands has similarly become unavailable. However, with the advent of the CWMU program, some private ranches, formerly unavailable to public hunting, now maintain limited-by-permit public access. Although access to private lands is difficult to obtain at any level of private or governmental effort, hunters have repeatedly stated that access to all public lands for hunting is a high priority.

In summary, hunters prefer management options that would reduce hunter crowding, increase buck harvest success, improve the proportion of available mature bucks, open private lands, and insure access to all public lands to hunting. Practical options hunters clearly prefer include limiting license sales, choosing only one season to hunt, and perhaps choosing to harvest only one animal yearly. Hunters generally agree on current license fees, but may be willing to pay additional costs for improved quality.

**Future Hunter Management**

As hunting and hunters evolve, management philosophy must also change. All management scenarios evaluate existing data as the major
sources of information for planning strategies. Because hunter numbers greatly exceed the total harvest by a ratio of at least three to one, hunter numbers are always more than adequate to accomplish the need to maintain populations within carrying capacity, via buck and antlerless harvest, and to meet management objectives. Surprisingly, annually about five percent of hunters who buy licenses do not hunt during that year. Heavy hunter selectivity of larger bucks within age classes after several years can lead to smaller bucks in carcass weight and decreased number of antler points (Austin et al. 1989). Similar to most other biological systems where selectivity occurs, future management must not only work to insure adequate numbers of deer, but also must maintain genetically healthy deer herds.

Unquestionably, the most difficult decisions in deer management involve how to manage hunters. The future management of Utah’s deer hunters will be determined at several levels of influence. The first determining factors are the political issues as established by the state legislature, especially with respect to license fee revenues, flexibility in available management options for the Division of Wildlife Resources, and private land issues. The second level deals with cooperation between the Division of Wildlife Resources and private landowners, Utah trust land managers, and federal land managers in sharing and utilizing the benefits of our natural resources among several interests, including wildlife, livestock, recreation, and watershed uses. The third level deals with legal conflicts with private organizations, the one side working for increased hunting opportunities and on the opposite side proponents for almost total wildlife protection and anti-hunting. Because few biological arguments to perpetuate a species can be made for hunter harvest of game animals other than deer and elk, anti-hunting factions may have increasing influence into the future. Finally the preferences of responsible hunters will have influence, but this seems to be gradually decreasing due to the shrinking proportion of hunters in Utah’s population, and especially since the argument for ‘feeding a family’ currently bears almost no weight.