

Game Refuges: A 'Tragic Waste'?

by Eric Loft and Sonke Mastrup

Nearly 90 years have passed since the state Legislature established the first of what eventually would be more than 20 State Game Refuges. In an era of diminishing hunting opportunity, it might be time to revisit the refuge system concept.

Established as conceptual game animal breeding centers where no-hunting, no-firearm laws would insure a steady flow of wildlife—including deer—to adjacent lands, the refuges now number 16 and comprise about 1,100 square miles (don't confuse these with state wildlife areas,

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ecological reserves, or national wildlife refuges). With state and national park and other federal lands in the no-hunt category, about 10,700 square miles of mostly state and public land out of California's 90,000 square miles of deer habitat are off limits to sportsmen.

The whole game refuge concept was based on the idea that these refuges would replenish surrounding game populations. This required that conditions within the refuges be enhanced such that excess animals would be produced. This was to have included intensive law enforcement, improved habitat and aggressive predator control.

Unfortunately, none of the refuges has proven effective. Nature's design for animal behavior has never coincided with man's implementation of a refuge function. Deer, among other animals, just don't do a very good job of following legislative mandates.

Aldo Leopold, the "father" of wildlife management in America, on the subject of game refuges in his classic book *Game Management*, stated that the successful use of refuges "depends on knowing when not to try. A tragic waste of enthusiasm and funds has often followed blind reliance on refuges."

Deer populations increased from the early 1900s through the 1960s, but have since declined. Deer declines throughout the west have stimulated much research and scientific debate as to cause. But game refuges are so widely recognized as ineffective that they are often considered obstacles to game management.

In 1943, F.P. Cronemiller, a U.S. Forest Service employee instrumental in creating many of the refuges, concluded: "...refuges have demonstrated ... little positive evidence of their effectiveness and have shown much that is negative..." Cronemiller cited examples of refuges opened to hunting that yielded harvests similar to adjacent areas. Similarly, kill rates adjacent to refuge boundaries have not necessarily been better than areas far away from the refuge, indicating that the initial "spreading out into neighboring territory" concept failed to consider deer behavior.

In 1952, another critical review of game refuges was published by Bill Longhurst, a pioneering deer and range ecologist with the University of California. He stated: "An embarrassing carryover from the days of deer 'restoration' is the system of state refuges..." partly because "natural refuges (steep canyons, brush thickets, remote areas) are also abundant in most deer range."

The DFG evaluated the utility of the remaining refuges in 1993, and concluded that the majority were no longer relevant to deer management for at least a couple of reasons. The DFG has no management authority over these lands, and many allow activities such as logging, grazing and development. Additionally, they create patrol work for wardens that serves little purpose other than enforcing a functionless boundary. Lastly, our conservative hunting regulations make the need for the refuges a moot issue.

Although removing the refuges from the "books" would require action by the Legislature, the Fish and Game Commission could allow hunting through special action. Some refuges, however, include developed areas or could not be hunted because of other legal ordinances even if the designation were removed. Still, encouraging the Legislature to eliminate the game refuge system would be a cost-effective way of potentially providing additional hunting opportunity.

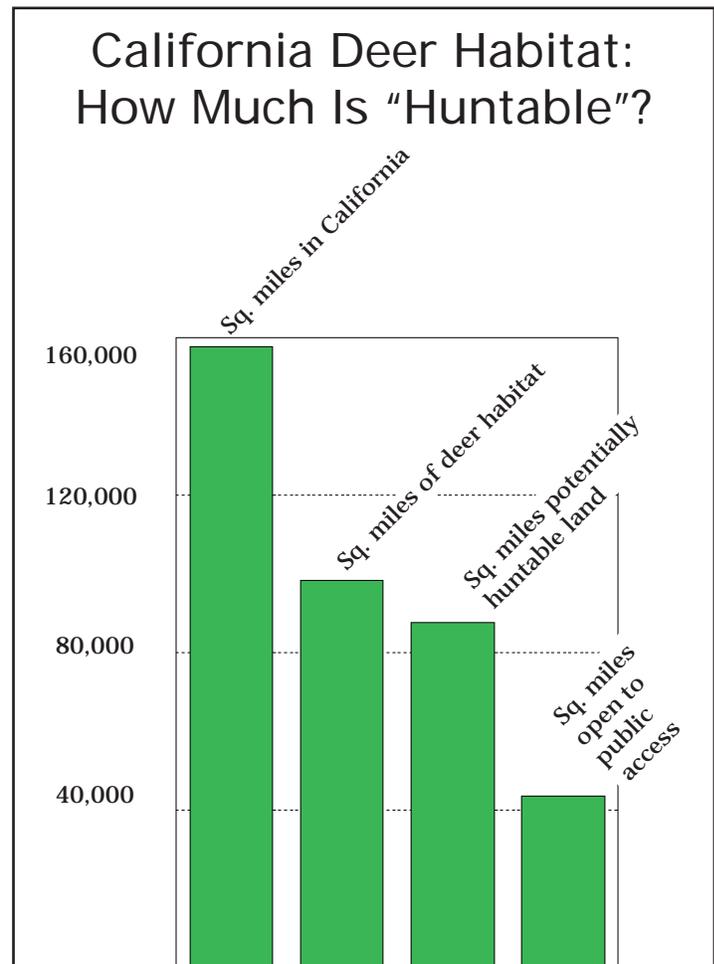


Photo by Daniel Broussard; Graphic by Eric Loft.