

# Protecting Our Most Vital Resource

By Patrick Durkin

American author Charles Dudley Warner once wrote, “Everybody complains about the weather but nobody does anything about it.”

Likewise, many good people and organizations have spent the past 20 years worrying about the future of hunting but most struggle to do anything about it. After all, much like the weather, hunting is often affected by huge forces we don’t control or comprehend.

But that doesn’t mean we can’t identify issues and try to address them. If you gathered more than 200 people and asked them to pinpoint hunting’s most pressing challenges, they could quickly form a top 10 list. But if you asked them to eliminate whitetail deer from the discussion, you’d soon be frustrated. More than ever, hunting in North America now revolves around whitetails.

That fact arose continually when the Quality Deer Management Association held the 2014 North American Whitetail Summit near Branson, Missouri earlier this spring. Although the Summit was called to address whitetails and deer issues, those animals’ fate was repeatedly linked to hunting’s future.

“This was a landmark meeting,” Jay McAninch, president/CEO of the Archery Trade Association, said. “Whitetails touch people’s lives in many ways, whether they’re hunters, farmers, foresters, gardeners or motorists. And they’ve been the archery/bowhunting industry’s number one economic asset since the 1970s.”

“We can’t take whitetails for granted,” McAninch continued. “They affect every phase of our lives and go far beyond hunting and the hunting industry. They’re part of our food chain, they impact other species, they’re overrunning some suburbs and they’re

now at the center of significant disease research, some of which have human health implications.”

McAninch said a good way to gauge the whitetail’s importance is to scan the list of Summit attendees. That list included Dan Ashe, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Dan Forster, director of Georgia’s Wildlife Resources Division and president of the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies; top-ranking officials from 18 state wildlife agencies; research scientists from nine major universities; deer hunters from 20 states and one Canadian province and representatives from 19 companies, 17 landowner groups and 13 hunting/conservation organizations.

Brian Murphy, CEO of the QDMA, said it was important to attract key decision-makers and stakeholders from across whitetail country. “You see summits convene regularly to discuss ducks, pheasants and wild turkeys but until now, no one ever met to discuss whitetails,” Murphy said. “We can’t solve 40 years of accumulated issues in one meeting but this was a first step. We wanted to start that process and we exceeded our expectations.”

Among those representing the hunting industry was Will Primos, founder of Primos Game Calls. Primos thinks he knows why it took until 2014 to convene a whitetail summit meeting.

“People haven’t put a real conservation value on whitetails because there are so many of them,” Primos said. “Most conservation efforts the past many decades sprang from necessity. And they succeeded because they helped rescue a game animal from decline, whether it was elk, ducks or wild turkeys. Now we’re seeing areas where all those whitetails have changed their habitat. They’re facing disease issues, they have more mouths to feed than some habitats can support and in

some cases, there aren’t as many deer as people want.”

“But until this meeting, no one got together to sustain whitetails. We must start paying more attention to them. They’re the driving force in 90 percent of our company’s sales, they’re our nation’s number one big-game animal and they add more value to rural properties than almost anything else.”

Summit participants ranked these 10 issues as whitetail/deer hunting’s most pressing challenges: 1) Hunter recruitment and retention 2) Education and outreach for hunters 3) Access to hunting land 4) Political influences on hunting and deer management 5) The captive deer industry 6) Deer diseases 7) Public concerns about deer numbers 8) Habitat loss/landscape changes 9) Connecting hunters to scientific information 10) Impacts of predators, feral hogs and invasive species.

The participants didn’t always agree on where to rank an issue’s importance, although the assemblage ranked recruitment/retention as deer hunting’s top priority.

Fred Pape, president and CEO of Pape’s Inc., gave hunter recruitment/retention top billing but felt all issues were almost equal in weight. Pape said it’s tough to rank one issue over another because many are intertwined.

“We depend heavily on the long-term health of whitetailed deer populations,” Pape said. “It would be hard to recruit and retain hunters without healthy deer herds and it would be hard to ensure the whitetail’s long-term health without strong hunter numbers.”

Murphy said the Summit achieved its purpose of determining priority issues but now the work begins. “We’re evaluating how the different representatives ranked the challenges and we’ll follow up to see which ones we must pursue,” he said.

McAninch is confident the QDMA can take ideas from the Summit and turn them into action. "Ultimately, a Summit meeting is all about follow-up, accountability and commitment," McAninch said. "Change won't come overnight and challenges won't stand still. For each challenge you solve, new ones often emerge. But that's why we need to convene summits and develop partnerships. By the time we meet again, whether it's 2015, 2016 or 2017, we'll probably narrow the agenda, identify three or four core issues and set goals for achieving them. One key is to build on the considerable momentum we all felt at the 2014 Summit."

McAninch is also confident the QDMA is well suited to coordinate a comprehensive whitetail management initiative for North America. "The QDMA is grounded in science and understands the importance of working with hunters and landowners," McAninch said. "They're all about quality deer, quality habitat, quality hunting and educated hunters. They touch all the important bases in deer management and the hunting community. Here's to hoping we can all unite behind them to focus our interests and implement our agenda."

### Perspectives from Attendees

**Will Primos, founder, Primos Game Calls:** "The whitetail is number one for our business. There's far more whitetail hunters than any other category of hunter. My personal number one love is waterfowl but I care deeply about whitetails. It all boils down to this: if you love something, you'll protect it. You love your children, so you nurture them, you invest in them, you fight for them, you'd die for them. The same thing goes for wildlife habitat. The more you understand it, the more you appreciate the words of Aldo Leopold and other great conservationists and recognize how valuable it is."

"We have to teach our children basic conservation lessons. Why do we need clean water? Why do we need wetlands? Why do I, a conservative businessman, want to stop bulldozers from filling wetlands to put up a building?

Wetlands serve a purpose in our own health. The number one barometer for me and the health of the human race is the health of our wildlife."

"Someone who's selling land, the first thing they talk about is their deer. They're a huge component of any property, especially mature deer. Yes, I'm a trophy hunter but a trophy in my mind is a mature deer. He doesn't have to be that big but I like herds with a good age structure of young and old deer."

"More than anything, I just wanted to be part of this meeting. It brought together an incredible group of people from across the country: state agencies, hunters, industry people, universities and landowners. Everyone here has a deep interest in whitetails. I'm part of the hunting industry but I'm also a property owner. We have to get everyone focused on what deer add to the landscape and to our enjoyment of the land."

"This is a tremendous resource and we need to decide what whitetail properties should look like 10, 50, 75, 100 years from now. If we don't come together and figure out the real issues and how to communicate them, we'll wake up one day and realize we've lost a valuable resource. Whitetailed deer are a vital species. That's why we came to the Summit."

**Fred Pape, president/CEO, Pape's Inc.:** "Recruiting new hunters is critical to our future. I'm also concerned that the captive cervid situation in this country could become a major issue. Those are the two biggest issues I see because we depend so much on the long-term health of whitetailed deer populations. Whitetails drive about 90 percent of our market."

"The QDMA is focused on whitetails and I'm glad it's taking the lead role in being the country's number one source of information on whitetails. No deer organization has ever taken the leadership position like they're doing. They're dedicated to doing what's right for the resource by providing scientific information on whitetails."

**Terry Rohm, director of marketing, Tink's Hunting Products:** "I came to the Summit to help protect white-tailed deer. With the changes we're seeing across the landscape, we want to help protect a sport and an animal we all cherish. We need to get more hunters into the woods, whether they are kids, women or people who just never got a chance to hunt before. That's a big challenge."

"Hunting is a great family activity and deer provide better meat than you can get in any store. Hunters today are hunting more for meat than just a few years ago. With today's economy, hunters can get two or three deer and feed their family a long time. It's also interesting to see the whitetail's economic impact. If you draw that line the QDMA shows from western Texas to northwestern North Dakota, everything east of there is all about whitetails. They're what funds wildlife agencies and the hunting industry."

"If we lose the whitetail, we're out of business. That's just the way it is. No matter what you sell as a company, it's your job to protect wildlife. Protecting natural resources should be part of your mission statement."

"We discussed a lot of good ideas at the Summit but now the work begins. None of those ideas matter if they don't get implemented."

**Gene Price, marketing director, Trophy Rock/Redmond Minerals Inc.:**

"The Summit showed a high level of commitment by our industry to whitetailed deer management and the hunting community. The whitetail provides about 90 percent of the driving force in our sales. We're looking forward to working with the QDMA to see how they'll use the information they gathered at these meetings."

"It was great to see so many leaders gather for the conference. Whether they were from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or state wildlife agencies, it was good to see their level of concern. They sent key people to work with us. They legitimately want to create a better place for whitetails and deer hunting."