

Changes in deer hunting management impacts hunters and local economies

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The value of hunting, especially to communities outside of urban centers, is an economic boon to local businesses who cash in on hunting visitors.

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An exception to that continued economic growth might be California for two reasons:

First, hunter numbers have declined from 850,000 annual licensed hunters in the early 1970s to under 220,000 last year, nearly a 75 percent decline. As the primary funding source for the state wildlife agency, its staff is finally recognizing the golden goose is ailing.

Second, state Department of Fish and Wildlife management changes have reduced hunter opportunity without improving wildlife numbers they are intended to protect and increase. The reduced hunter opportunity has led to far fewer hunters in the field, especially in the Sierra Nevada where deer tag numbers have plummeted since the late 1970s when the DFW first started implementing its zone management plan.

The good news is that the DFW has initiated work with the state's deer herds that might finally turn the decline in tag numbers around and grow the herds as more information is gathered and better management decisions can be made.

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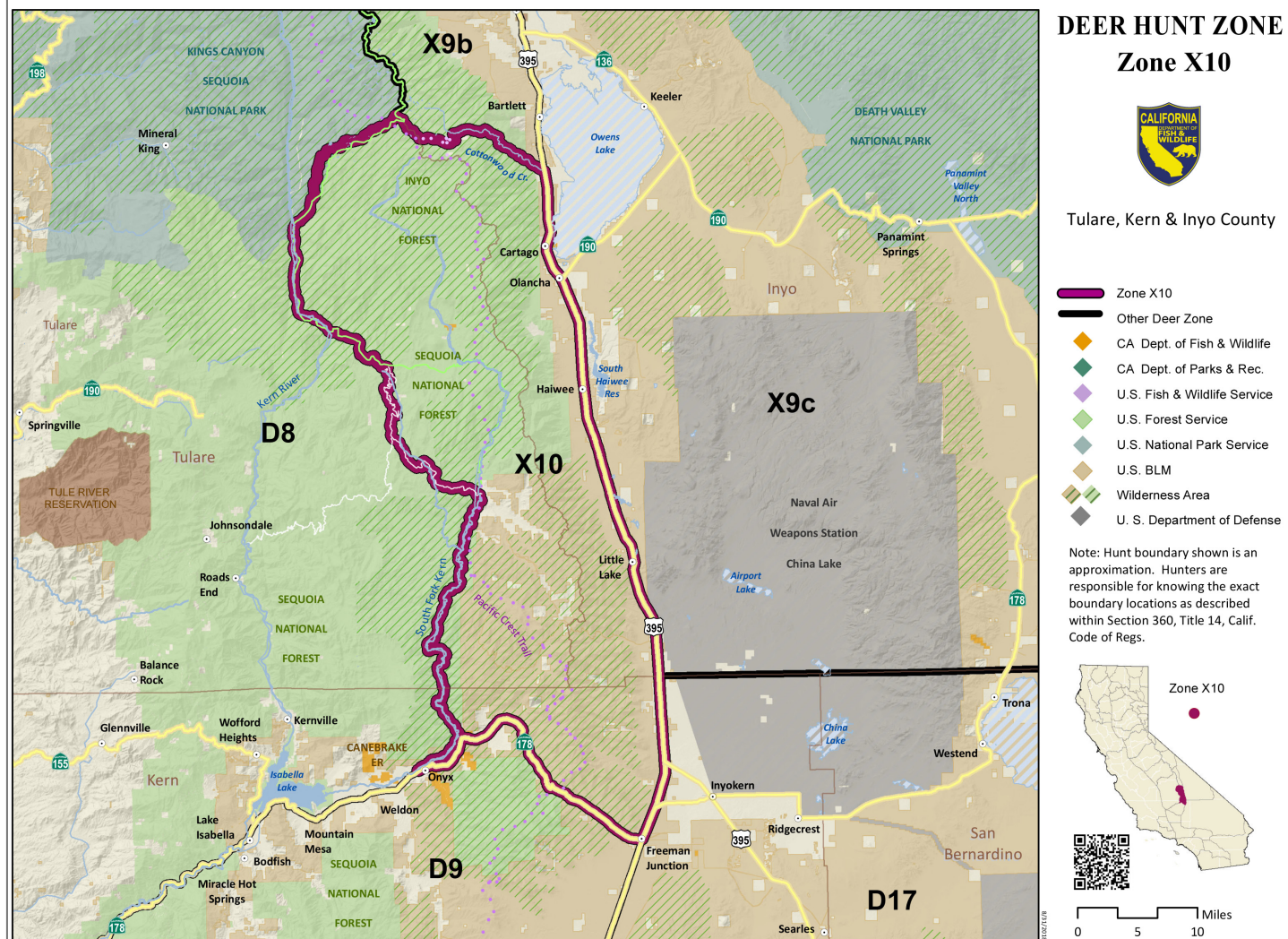
The helicopter banked over the herd of deer on Sage Flat. Sitting in the open door and strapped to the machine was a wildlife biologist with a net gun. The goal was to

capture and place radio collars on deer so the agency could track their movements, define migration and core areas of habitat, and study their survival.



This Department of Fish and Wildlife has launched a statewide effort get better data on deer herd numbers and locations. The work involves tracking radio-collared deer and other survey efforts.

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH & WILDLIFE



It was the first time in decades the state wildlife agency was starting intensive studies on the deer that live in the southern Sierra Nevada, and the capture just off Highway 395 south of Olancha, was a first step in what is shaping up to become a new wave of comprehensive deer work done statewide

These deer were on their winter range, explained Evan King, a DFW biologist in charge of this work that will shape the agency's deer hunting program and management of the herds. These particular deer might live in four different deer hunting zones at some point in their wanderings over the course of a year or two, but the capture was taking place in the X10 hunting zone.

Most of these deer winter on the east slope of the Sierra Nevada in Inyo County, but throughout late spring, summer, and most of the fall, they live in the high elevation meadows in the headwaters of the Kern River and north into Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks. The deer zones they might wander into and through include D8, D9, D10, and X10.

King said the capture in the Sage Flat area ended

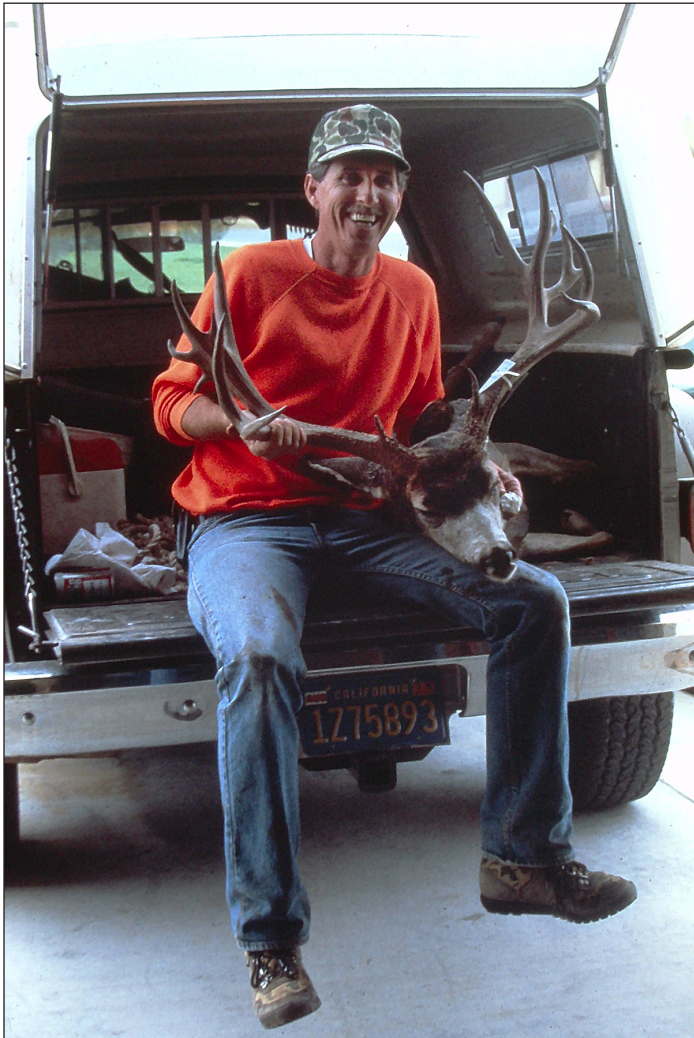
with 48 deer being captured and fitted with radio collars in January. Another 33 deer were captured near Johnsondale on another part of this herd's range.

King is excited about the work because it will give them new baseline data for managing the herd, and perhaps increase deer hunting opportunity in the region. The portion of the herd that lives in very high elevations in wilderness or in the National Parks are mostly unavailable to hunters. King said he hopes the state might be able to have a few limited hunts for these deer when they are more available, and the data he is collecting could lead to this. It wouldn't be anything new.

In the late 1970s, the DFW drafted its first, comprehensive statewide deer management plan. The management plan led to the state being carving up into deer hunting zones. This was done so biologists could manage individual herds and herd groups, rather than simply selling tags that could be used statewide or in vast regions. It resulted in a reduction in tag numbers, but the DFW promised to increase opportunity as herd

size and management goals allowed.

The X10 deer zone is roughly located between Lone Pine and Kennedy Meadows between the Kern River on the west and Highway 395 on the east. It sits astride the crest of the Sierra Nevada, carving out the Kern River drainage from surrounding deer zones in 1981. It is a



John Peterson of Ridgecrest was drawn for an X10 Period 4 rifle tag hunt held in December when the deer were on the east slope of the Sierra and in the rut. This trophy buck was his reward.

good example of how zone system allowed the DFW to try to keep deer herds healthy while allowing hunting opportunity.

That first year, deer tags were available in essentially unlimited numbers for the month-long season that ran from late September through late October and a total of 1,600 tags were issued and those hunters bagged 211 deer. Almost every year since, the DFW has tinkered with season dates and tag numbers.

The following year in 1982, the zone had three different hunts with only a total of 650 tags. There were two late-season hunts that had three-point antler restrictions. Often these were called trophy hunts, where just older age class animals were to be targeted. There were 500

tags for the early hunt, 100 tags for the middle hunt, and just 50 tags for the late season hunt in December.

That last hunt was when the deer were mostly on their winter range, which was the east of the zone in the Sierra canyons on the west side of Highway 395 where deer that summered in inaccessible areas or in parks. On the winter range, the deer were more likely to be seen and hunted. It was the same area where the deer were captured and radio collared last month. But even if some hunters had a special opportunity in X10, there were still 850 hunters who didn't get drawn who had hunted the X10 zone the year before.

The season stayed the same through 1983, but the 1984 season saw more changes, with two December trophy hunts with 50 tags each and just one general season in October. The general October season saw its tag numbers dropped to 600, a further reduction. It stayed that way through 1985.

In 1986, the biologist added a muzzleloader-only season in held in mid-November with 100 tags. This was the period 3 three hunt. They also split the early rifle hunting into two periods, one in September with 400 permits and one October with 300 permits, and the December rifle hunt on the east side was retained as the period four hunt with 50 permits. Total tag numbers were now 850, bumping tag number up 250. The DFW was keeping its promise to hunters to try to increase opportunity without impacting the herd.

This framework stayed the same through 1989, but that was the last year for the period four December hunt and the period three muzzleloader hunt was halted in 1992. No one knew why.

Since 1993, the season has just changed once in 2000 when the two general hunts in September and October (and a total of 700 tags) were again consolidated into a single hunt with just 400 tags running a shorter period of time from late September to mid-October.

Tag numbers dropped from a high of 850 to a low of 400 since it began its zone management system and it went from four distinct rifle hunting opportunities in the zone back to a single season (arguably during the most difficult time of the year to bag a buck).

With the new survey data, tag numbers might just increase again and those late buck hunts on the east slope might return.

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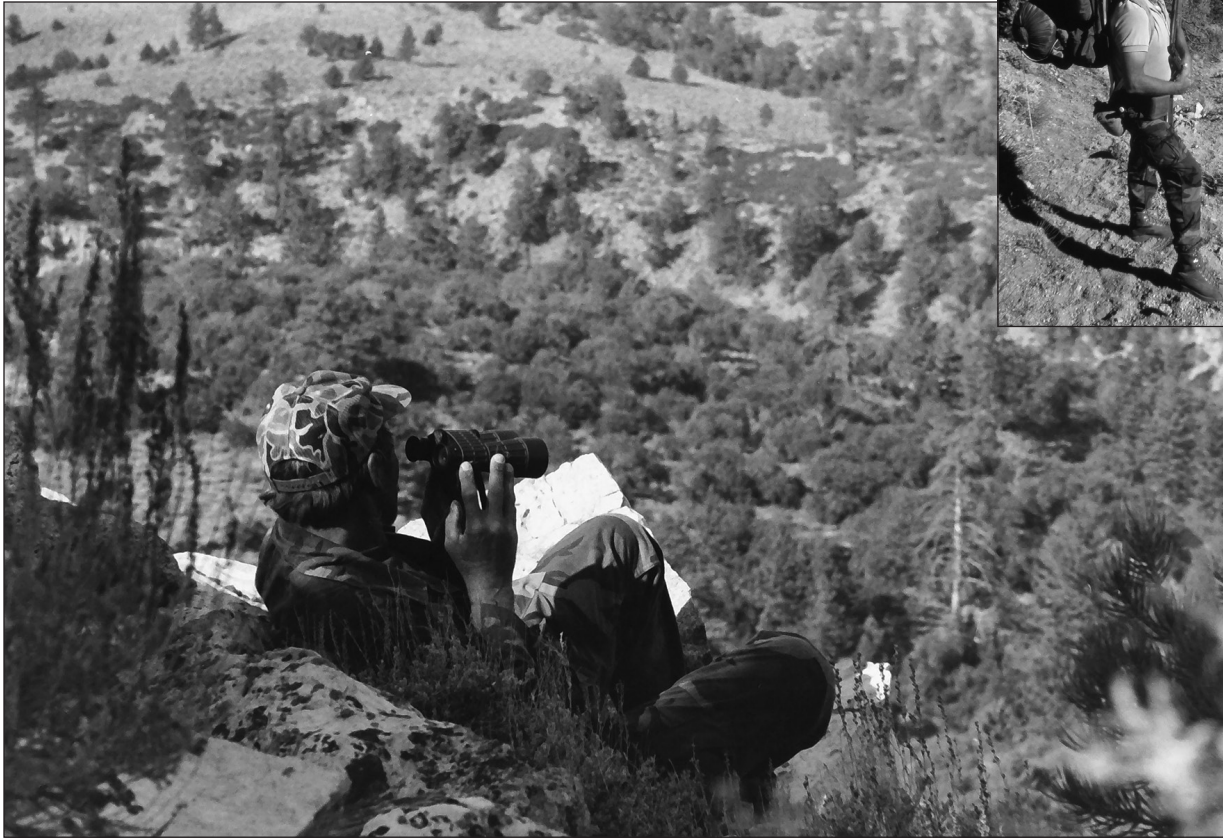
There is a deer tag from 1987 on my desk. It was for the X10 Period-3 muzzleloader hunt. It went unfilled, but not because there were not opportunities. It was because my hunting buddy Jim Akin and I spent much of the nine-day season in mid-November looking for trophy deer, climbing and glassing the hillsides of all the canyons north and south of Olancho. We even

backpacked to the top of Haiwee Pass to hunt the high ridges and passes coming over from the Kern River drainage.

And we saw them — just never in range of our modern replica muzzleloading rifles.

The deer were just starting into the rut, or breeding season, and the bucks' necks were swollen and they were sniffing the air to see if a nearby doe was in heat. The deer were already pouring over the Sierra crest into

That same year, my wife had been drawn for the even later Period-4 hunt in December, and we found her a nice three-point buck and she



In 1987, I hunted with Jim Akin (shown in the two photos above) during the X10 Period 3 muzzleloader hunt. Backpacking into high vantage points we glassed for days looking for big bucks. Becky Matthews, who had a Period 4 rifle tag, took the buck at right.

their winter range, and our routine was to glass groups of does early and late each day to see if there were any new, big bucks sniffing around. The bucks were roaming from doe group to doe group and we'd see different bucks every day, sometimes just glimpses of big bucks as they crested distant ridges or slipped into a patch of junipers.

One evening I made a stalk on a heavy-horned three-point buck, but an errant gust of wind pushed my scent to him and he climbed up the steep hillside to glare at me out of range. I glassed my buddy Akin who was across the canyon, and he gave me a thumbs-down sign. We decided to come back the next morning and hope the buck would be back with the does. He wasn't. We saw the same little forked-horn and small, three-point, but no sign of the big buck. He had moved on during the night. Our tags stayed in our pockets that year.

dropped him with one shot. The new Matthews' family would have venison that winter.

On both hunts, we had some of our meals in now-closed restaurants in Olancho and

spent at least a couple of nights in now-closed motels. The other hunters in all the different hunts in X10 did the same things in small towns all round the zone — from Ridgecrest to Kernville to Olancho and Lone Pine. Did hunters' spending during the era of late-season hunts and greater tag numbers in X10 keep those businesses open? Probably not by themselves, but they certainly didn't hurt the bottom line.

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