White-tailed Deer Hunting Leases: Hunter Costs and Rancher Revenues

Larry D. Butler

In 1967, I paid my first fee, $15 per day, for access to private lands for hunting white-tailed deer. This doesn't seem like much today, but it was a huge sum for a high school student to pay at the time. Today, many hunters are concerned with the rising costs of access to private lands for hunting. The fee hunting issue has received considerable attention in the last few years, especially in states where fee hunting is relatively new.

Are costs rising for access to private lands for hunting? Where access was free, but now is not, there is obviously an increased cost. But what happens once fees have been accepted? There are concerns that fee hunting may lead to a sport excluding all but the rich (Benson 1988, Geist 1986). The general consensus is that prices and returns are in an accelerating trend (Shelton 1988, Hawkes and Henson 1989). To determine whether this is true, I studied hunter access fee changes from 1978 to 1988 in Val Verde County, Texas.

Val Verde Study

Val Verde County, Texas, is located about 150 miles west of San Antonio. In the western portion of the Edwards Plateau land resource area, Val Verde's 2,069,000 acres are 99% rangeland with cattle, sheep, and goat ranching as the major land use. White-tailed deer occupy the entire county. (See cover photo.)

Questionnaires were mailed to all Val Verde County ranchers, 109 and 139, in the fall of 1978 and 1988, respectively. Ranchers not responding received a second questionnaire four weeks later. Responses were received from 62 ranchers in 1978 and 79 in 1988, giving identical 56.6% response rates. Nonrespondents were not surveyed.

In 1978, 65% of the respondents had all or part of their ranches leased for white-tailed deer hunting compared with 54% in 1988. This decrease was most likely due to the depressed Texas economy since the mid-1980's drop in oil prices. Many individuals in the oil and gas industry have leased hunting rights in the past and a decrease in their revenues have caused a decrease in their recreational and entertainment expenditures.

Ranch Revenues

There are several methods of pricing the right of access to hunt. The most common in Val Verde County are on: (1) a per acre basis; and (2) a per hunter basis. Most ranchers' gross hunting revenues are received in direct proportion to the number of acres leased or the number of hunters per season. This study examined hunting access fees in both nominal dollars (which includes inflation) and in real dollars (which excludes inflation).

The mean ranch gross revenue per acre was $1.03 in 1978, and $1.78 in 1988. This is a 73% increase, but this is in nominal prices which include inflation. The real per acre revenue can be obtained by converting the 1988 dollars back to 1978 dollars with the use of the appropriate Consumer Price Index for each year. See Table 1.

Table 1. Mean gross ranch revenues and hunter access costs for white-tailed deer hunting leases in Val Verde County, Texas, 1978 and 1988.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gross ranch revenues</th>
<th>Hunter access costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Per acre</td>
<td>Per hunter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nominal dollars</td>
<td>Real dollars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>630</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Gross revenue per acre, in real 1978 dollars, was $1.03 in 1978 and $0.98 in 1988. On a per hunter basis the average nominal ranch gross income was $342 and $630 in 1978 and 1988, respectively. However, the 1988 average ranch gross income per hunter in real 1978 dollars was $347. Thus, on either a per acre or per hunter basis, the real income to the rancher was about the same in 1988 as ten years earlier.

In the 1978, 14.3% of the ranchers reported that they planned to raise the hunting lease fee in the following
year and 51.4% planned to raise the fee within the next three years. In contrast to 1978, and reflective of the Texas economy, in 1988 only 2.5% of the ranchers planned to increase fees in 1989 and only 30% planned to raise their fee within three years. Sixty percent reported they had no plans to increase fees within the next three years.

In 1978 almost three-fourths of the ranchers believed their current hunters were willing to pay more for the right to hunt; in contrast, in 1988 only 35% believed hunters were willing to pay more. Based upon the ranchers' perceptions of the hunters' willingness to pay and the ranchers' reported pricing plans, the average fee for hunting access in Val Verde County for white-tailed deer will probably not increase significantly in the near future.

**Prices Paid Per Hunter**

Income received by the ranch operator is not the issue of interest for hunters; they are concerned with their cost of access. The figures in the previous paragraph represent ranch income per hunter and not the average price paid by the hunters. This is because the ranch income per hunter is not weighted by the number of hunters. For example, ranch A might charge $500 per hunter and have 6 hunters while ranch B might charge $1,000 per hunter and have 20 hunters. In this two-ranch example, the average ranch income per hunter is $750 but the average price paid per hunter is $885.

In 1978, 23 ranchers reported that 674 hunters paid an average of $377 each. In 1988, 30 ranchers reported that 647 hunters paid an average of $643 each, which is $354 in real 1978 dollars. These two means, in real 1978 dollars, indicate a slight decrease in real fees per hunter. If the hunter's total income kept pace with inflation, then his lease fee was a smaller proportion of his income in 1988 than it was in 1978.

**Conclusions**

In 1967 seven of us paid that $15.00 fee. The ranch had very marginal deer habitat and it was definitely not one of the better places to hunt. We saw very few deer and I was lucky enough to bring home the only deer, a barely legal small buck. Still, it was a memorable experience and the $15.00 was well spent. Today a similar day lease is hard to find, as most ranchers in the area prefer to lease their land for the entire season. If a similar lease could be found today, it would cost about $50, which is still about $15 in 1967 dollars.
One hunting experience, and even results from one research project, do not give the absolute answers. The subject of fee access for hunting will remain controversial over much of the country. Advocates of free access will continue to complain about their rising costs of access and the perception of high profits made by the private landowner.

This fee information has been collected over a 10-year timespan from the same population of ranch operators. The results of this study indicate that real (inflation free) prices paid by the hunter have not increased, and may have decreased slightly in Val Verde County. Nor has the ranchers' real gross income per acre or per hunter increased between 1978 and 1988. Once fee access hunting is accepted and established, real market prices for the right to hunt appear to become established over time.

**Short Duration Grazing—Southern Style**

Jack R. Cutshall

Wintering cattle in the deep South should be a piece of cake. Instead, it is a major cost and management concern for livestock producers.

Most of the forages used for tame pasture, and many native pastures, are low growing, sod forming grasses with poor winter roughage quality. Common bermuda-grass and carpetgrass pastures are prime examples. They are "naturalized" components of many native ecosystems, as well as, agronomically managed for tame pasture. Planning a grazing program around the fast growing sod farmers requires producers to evaluate many alternative management systems.

**Literature Cited**


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