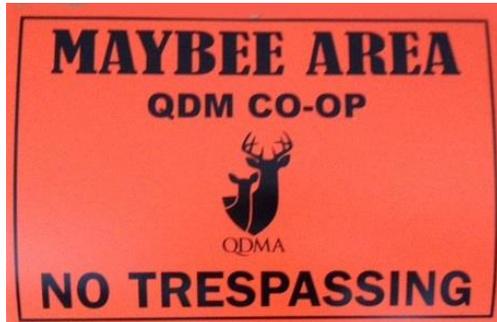


IS THERE A PERFECT DEER COOPERATIVE?

by Anna Mitterling, Wildlife Cooperative Coordinator, MUCC



Starting a wildlife cooperative is a lot of work. As I've talked about before, getting a couple neighbors to assist you in planning, strategizing, networking, and connecting with fellow landowners and hunters will make the job a lot easier, more rewarding and fun! However, regardless of how much help you have, is it possible to have the "perfect" Cooperative? I guess we all have our own definitions of what a perfect cooperative would look

like. So starting with that, I don't believe we can ever have a perfect cooperative, as all of our definitions will be somewhat different. Regardless, any cooperative, no matter how big or small, involved or disconnected, enemy or friend, lots of deer or few, has the ability to improve hunting and habitat in your neighborhood. Maybe with this thought in mind, we can be encouraged that any bit helps!

The general goal of any cooperative I have worked with centers around three concepts: improving habitat, improving hunting, and improving wildlife - for current and future generations. These goals are measured and articulated in many different ways depending on many factors. Row farmers, cattle farmers; new hunters, seasoned hunters; young hunters, old hunters; landowners, non landowners... the comparisons continue. Each individual has at the very least a slightly different subset of expectations and goals than everyone else in the cooperative. This is an important concept to understand. No matter how aligned you think you are, even with your best friend or closest hunting ally, if you dig deep enough, you will find variance in your perceptions, expectations, and goals.

Honestly, these sets of differences, regardless of how big or small, and coupled with the intense passion many of us hunters have, can lead to significant conflicts at worst, and simple misunderstandings at best. I want to break down some of these areas, in hopes that maybe we can be more forgiving and understanding with each other, and come to an understanding and appreciation that seeing things the same way, and always being on the same page - or having a perfect cooperative - will never happen. Understanding these differences, going even deeper and valuing these differences, will improve your cooperative tenfold. The realized improvements (even the small ones) will help increase your satisfaction with your cooperative experience, and help you focus on areas of commonality.



TARGET DEER HARVEST

This is the area of largest contention amongst deer hunters. I believe cooperatives are the best way to increase the age class of bucks in Michigan because it works on at a voluntary level where individuals can work together and create environments where goals of larger bucks can be accomplished. I have seen this work many times, and with high levels of satisfaction. It is important to understand a couple things though. Bucks only get a year older, one year at a time. And hunters change their behavior at least twice as slow. Meaning that if you want to see a behavior change in your cooperative to pass younger deer - you need to be patient, lead by example, and make recommendations for harvest goals slowly. While you may be passing 4.5 year olds (yes I have a cooperative here in Michigan with that goal), consider that many of your members are trying out passing 1.5 year olds. Maybe in a couple years they will be interested or motivated to start passing on 2.5 year olds. Regardless, an incremental change is an improvement and a significant step towards why you started the cooperative to begin with.

We cannot address buck harvest without looking at doe harvest as well - another contentious topic. There are tools available to provide some good direction in deciding an estimation or trend in deer densities. Consider doing a browse impact study (more information at www.mucc.org/cooperatives). However, even if you can prove on paper that there are "too many deer" impacting your woodlots, I guarantee there will be disagreements on if and how many does should be harvested within a certain area. Consider the stakes of the other cooperative members in your cooperative as well. While some hunters may want to see more deer from their stand, others may depend on an income from agriculture, and seeing too many deer is translated as a loss of income. Coming to some common ground and understanding, and both parties being willing to make some compromise will go a long way in making improvements to the deer herd, as well as your neighborly relationships. Again, this is another area where really small steps are the beginnings of really big improvements.

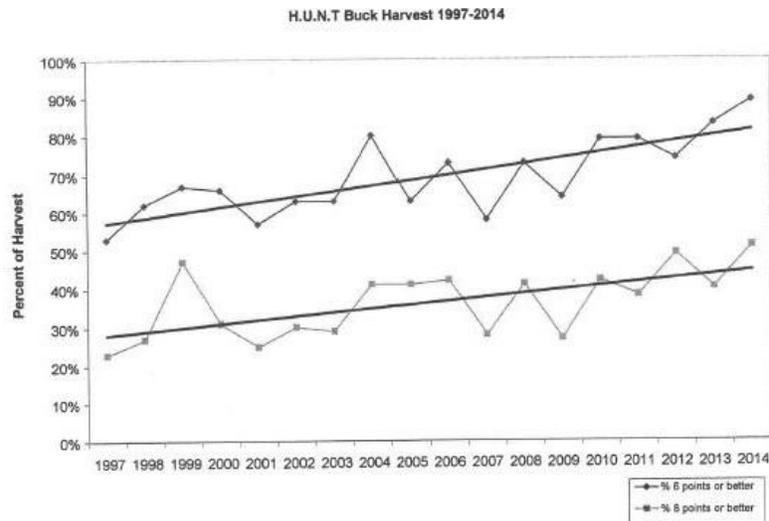
HABITAT IMPROVEMENT/MANAGEMENT

In the ideal world I picture a bunch of landowners getting together, with their connected parcels illustrated with plat maps, topo maps, and aerial maps. They are in a room together talking about the projects they have in mind, and they are getting additional guidance and suggestions from a habitat biologist. They put together a detailed plan, outlining when and where they will conduct what projects. Each project will outline the goals and objectives of the projects, as well as an outline detailing the maintenance needs and timelines. On top of that, they have a list of all the equipment available among the group, and what they may have to pool in to purchase or rent to meet their overall habitat goals. In reality, I know a few guys who have this level of detail worked out for their individual property.

But let us come back to a situation where a cooperative can make improvements. One property who comes on board and decides to do a timber harvest, or the new guy who learns about food plots, and tries out his own plot for the first time with the help of one of the other members. What if a forester came to a cooperative meeting to teach the members in attendance about good forestry practices. Again, these are small things that have the potential to lead toward really big impacts.

DATA COLLECTION

The fastest way I have seen eyes get glazed over at a cooperative meeting is when we start talking about data collection, statistics, or reports. I think we can all agree that data is very important and a great tool to make us better wildlife managers. However, it is boring (to most) and time consuming. Just think of all the things you could collect data on. Observations during seasons, observations outside of season, counting fawn drops, counting roadkill, counting unaccounted for deaths (the dead deer you find in February in a field), deer browse studies, counting deer from the road, trail camera surveys, and then there is harvest data. You can collect the total number of deer, number of bucks, number of does, ages of deer, lactation rates of does, size of antlers, number of points, weight of deer, location, etc. The list can go on.



The point is though, that if we want to manage our deer, we need to know what is going on outside of our individual perceptions. The sole factor of having a group of hunters

coming together and talking about their observations is a HUGE step and a vast improvement compared to not communicating at all. However, taking a couple simple steps and picking a couple other types of data to collect can go a long way in verifying population size and makeup and providing a baseline to compare over time. This will help provide the information needed to make calculated harvest decisions and goals in the future, and you do not have to collect all the data to provide confidence to your cooperative membership.

HUNTER COMMITMENT

In my experience working with dozens of cooperatives around the state of Michigan, I have concluded that deer cooperative leaders are more committed to their hunting and habitat management than most. This does not mean that deer hunting is more important to them, but they are the ones who are willing to put forth the time and effort trying to bring everyone together and commit to following through with keeping up communication and interactions of the members. But my definition of commitment is oriented around my perception of the time and effort they put into expanding their cooperative, the goals of the cooperative, and general communication.

Cooperative members are going to vary in how “committed” they are to the cooperative, and what level of interaction they are willing or interested in committing. There are the guys you can depend on to be at every cooperative meeting. There is a different set of individuals who will reply to emails that get sent out. There may be another set whom the only communication you ever get from them is a text when they shoot a deer opening day, and they want help tracking it. It is important to realize that each point of contact has value and plays its role.

How hunters plan for their hunting seasons varies from pulling out the camo tote and sighting in the rifle on November 14. Other hunters think about deer season all year round, planting food plots, hinging trees, attending educational events to teach them more about deer. Again, each hunter plays their role in the management of our deer. We all fit somewhere on that scale of comparison, and regardless if our spot on that scale ever changes, small steps toward overall cooperative improvement are made by making contact with individuals and inviting them to be part of something bigger than themselves and their own hunting experience. Small steps, big differences; little changes at a time.

A note to encourage the cooperative leaders who struggle to get attendance at cooperative meetings: Some cooperatives have great turnouts, while others have a handful or fewer at meetings. I encourage you to continue holding these meetings, and contacting members in your cooperative throughout the year. The small touches and point of contact you make create a reminder that there are other hunters who care about the wildlife in their area, you would like them to be part of that group. Maybe they will come to a meeting, maybe not. But take the opportunities you chat with them to learn more about their hunting experiences and goals.



LAND COHESION

Cooperatives come in all shapes and sizes, with their own unique gaps and holes. I know of one cooperative that is fully filled in, and they are the size of a square section. The rest of the cooperative have their share of gaps and holes, yet despite not having complete involvement from their neighbors, are making strides to improve their habitat and hunting.

I've been asked if there is a percentage of cover that cooperatives should seek to cover. Honestly, two neighbors are better than one, ten are better than five, 50 are better than 30... and so on. There is no magic number that I know of, but the cooperative maps that are illustrated here, are all solid cooperatives who have made good progress in seeing larger bucks and balancing out the herd.

The other topic of conversation that comes up orients around "that neighbor" who shoots all the deer, or kills all the button bucks, or is anti hunting and a nasty person. We all have someone (usually multiple someones) in our cooperative who have no interest in joining the cooperative, and could cause some potential damage to the

cause. Regardless, while they may be negative, and they may act in a way counter to the goals of the cooperative, as long as they are acting within the means of the laws and regulations, they have the right to do so. Also, they make up the minority. While they may have an impact on the goals you are trying to accomplish, they can not destroy the strides that are being made. Keeping as good of a relationship or interaction with individuals who are not buying into the cooperative concept is important as we never know what will happen down the road. And as reiterated many times in this blog, small conversations, and small steps can lead to massive changes.

CELEBRATING THE SMALL STEPS

The beauty of cooperatives is that they really do inspire a change on the landscape. It may take a few years to see the impact, but it is there. Even with small membership. There are a couple things you can do to help find those positive changes. The first one is choose to see the good. There will always be negative things going on - bad neighborly relationships, another button buck or yearling down, or only two people showing up at the cooperative meeting. What is going well? What about the great conversation you had with your co leader, the buck with serious potential who popped up on your trail camera, your food plots that are looking great, or your grandkid's first deer.

Another thing you can do is be on the lookout for small improvements or change. It may be as small as one of the cooperative members acknowledging that maybe the corn is being hit really hard by deer this year, and possibly shooting a couple does could be a good thing. Action may not come out of that statement, but it is an indication of a mental shift occurring. It is a small thing, but has major possible ramifications down the road.