

Wyoming Tribune Eagle, March 17, 2016: “Ecology is a fragile thing” Casper Star Tribune of March 13: “CWD Alliance reminds us that ecology is fragile”

Hikers, hunters, and anglers love Wyoming for its public places. Whether preferring easy-to-access paths or opting for remote mountains or streams, we may choose where to practice our favorite outdoor sports.

Things are different in Texas, where 97 percent of the land is privately held. And these private-property tracts are huge. “There’s an awful lot of nothing there,” someone once told me who had made his fortune in oil, then retired to the coastal mountains of California. Since his time, however, the cities of eastern and central Texas have greatly increased in humanity and traffic.

A Texas physician, patching up a finger I had managed to injure, told me the following story. His dad was friends with a man who owned a 3000-acre ranch. One day an oil exec called up the rancher.

“Would you be willing to lease your place for a year? We’ll pay \$75,000 if you’ll allow six men to hunt there.”

This was in the southern mountains, the doctor explained, where prized deer abound.

A week or so later, the rancher got a call from another oil man. “We’d like to lease your place for hunting.”

“Thanks, but I already have an offer.”

“Have you signed a contract?”

“No, sir, not yet.”

“We’ll pay you \$150,000 annually for three years in a row if you agree to eight hunters per year.”

The physician added that his dad, too, had an invitation to hunt on the friend’s land, wanting him to come with him.

“I was in med school. I said, ‘Dad, I’m in exams. I can’t just pick up and leave here’.”

Inasmuch as the physician was silver-haired, I took it, these events were thirty or forty years into the past.

Today another kind of deer hunting is promoted in Texas: trophy-deer hunting. Ranchers parcel off a portion of land and surround it with high fencing. They water and feed the deer at specific locations. They breed them for big antlers via artificial insemination. Then they invite hunters to go after the deer—for princely sums.

“Can you call it hunting when you shoot an animal that’s fenced in and conditioned to appear at certain locations?” I said to my son.

“I’m staying out of this,” he answered. “The deer are state property, and Texas sells the hunting licenses. But it allows the ranchers their way.”

He did comment that the burden of huge antlers greatly strains the animals’ joints and tendons. And recently, several Texas deer-breeding ranches have been hit with Chronic Wasting Disease.

Until deer in Wyoming and Colorado began to come down with it, CWD was unknown in the U.S. My son was then a wildlife veterinarian working toward a doctorate in epidemiology at University

of Wyoming. His focus was brucellosis in Wyoming elk.

Walter had come to Wyoming on completion of his DVM at University of California at Davis to work with wildlife. He did not cherish the idea of another round of studies, though a requirement of working with elk. He softened when Professor Elizabeth Storm Williams agreed to be his advisor. Professor Beth was the leading expert in CWD. She also worked on several other key diseases that affect wildlife.

CWD is a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy. The infectious agents are prions, which are proteins that exist without associated nucleic acids. In the brain, prions create tiny holes that, under the microscope, make the affected areas appear sponge-like. A rare human form of the disease, Creutzfeldt-Jacob's, is thought to be caused by the consumption of meat contaminated with prions.

CWD-affected deer and elk show loss of body condition and changes in behavior. They quickly become emaciated. Head and ears lowered, they walk repetitive courses, drooling excessively. No treatment is available for these unfortunate creatures. CWD is invariably fatal.

Soon after Walter took up teaching in Texas, by default he became the state's expert on CWD, for no one else knew much about the disease. Thus, in addition to his duties at A & M's College of Veterinary Science, he gives presentations to wildlife managers, veterinarians—and, yes, deer breeders. He conducts seminars on how to take tonsil biopsies to determine whether an animal is affected. Previously, any Texas deer suspected of CWD had to be killed to find out whether it was in fact carrying the disease.

Today the Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance alerts hunters to areas where herds may exist that include infected animals. Wyoming counties from Albany to Weston are on the Alliance's watch list. It serves as a reminder that ecology is a fragile thing. Wild spaces need our concern and care. Wyoming should count itself fortunate to have groups that seek to promote wildlife health and wellbeing, from WildEarth Guardians to the Sierra Club. On Professor Beth and her devotion to wildlife, more in a later column.