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Deer Farming

Deer farming is one of North America's new and promising rural industries. Although the continental herd is still small by international standards, the prospects are recognized and deer farming is no longer considered an eccentric pastime. This chapter asks why we should farm deer and places the industry in historical and international context.

WHY FARM DEER?

By the year 2000, more than 90% of North Americans will live in urban environments, maintaining a largely recreational relationship with nature. This results from a continuing flow of people from rural areas in search of better economic opportunities. Agriculture will retain its economic significance, but it will accelerate its transformation from a family livelihood to a corporate venture.

In general, consolidation of farm units has meant intensification of crop production. Where topography and soils permit, rural landscapes have been cultivated from horizon to horizon. Soils have become little more than hydroponic media, and millions of hectares have been exposed to wind and water erosion. Ground water supplies have been exhausted or contaminated with fertilizers and pesticides. The destruction of habitat has impoverished wildlife populations. Experts increasingly are asking whether western agriculture, for all its accomplishments, is truly sustainable.

Of course, a great deal can be done to reverse these trends: minimal tillage, more judicious use of fertilizers and pesticides, biotechnology, and manipulation of soil microbiota. This approach generically is called *ecological agriculture* or, in its purest incarnation, *organic farming*. Although significant gains are to be expected from such an integrated approach to crop husbandry, the more sensitive parts of the agricultural land base would simply be better kept in forages, or better yet,

permanent pasture. The geographical zone to which this applies seems to be increasing with global warming and the generally drier conditions and more open winters in midwest North America.

On a regional scale, the balance of cropland and pasture is influenced by the relative profitability of crops and livestock. Crop diversification with oilseeds and pulse crops and more recently with native plants such as saskatoons and wild rice has buffered falling international grain prices and maintained the balance in favor of cropland. It seems reasonable that more valuable livestock can favorably tip the balance the other way. Although llamas, alpacas, ostrich, wild boar, and other exotic animals could play a role, indigenous animals such as bison and wapiti have special appeal to those interested in landscape conservation.

For the farmer, game farming offers economic viability on a smaller land base than that needed for most other agricultural enterprises. For the rural economy in general, it opens a new market niche when demand for conventional meats is declining. As supply and demand come into balance, the high prices for breeding stock and products that have prevailed for the past 2 decades will approach the price of domestic livestock. But cash costs of production are typically low, and rural economies will be left with a more robust, broader-based animal agriculture.

Despite official recognition of the prospects for ranching bison, deer, reindeer, musk-oxen, and exotic ungulates early in this century,¹⁹ game farming and ranching in North America gained momentum only in the 1970s. This was part of a global wave of interest led by Zimbabwe, South Africa, New Zealand, Scotland, China, and the Soviet Union.¹⁶ The industry has developed on many fronts, but the agricultural management of deer has been particularly attractive. But the story really began in other places and in another time.