

Season 1 Episode 9 Culling Final.mp3

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:22] Welcome to A Talk on the Wild Side, you biweekly tour of all things wild in Texas, I'm your host, Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak. Now, I have a couple of our student technicians in front of the mic today, Andrew Lowery and Tre' Kendall. Welcome, guys.

Tre' Kendall [00:00:38] How's it going!?

Andrew Lowery [00:00:39] Howdy. Howdy.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:40] All right. Yeah, it's going well, I think so far, so good. And today, we're going to be talking to a wildlife manager/deer biologist, who works down here in South Texas on several properties. He has a lot of experience with managing deer to get the best results with with the herd. With deer season coming up, I think a lot of people are going to be interested in what he has to say. But first, we have our What's Wild and New segment. Tre, what do you got for us for what's wild and new?

Tre' Kendall [00:01:13] Well, Wal-Mart has been in the news lately with their latest plan to tackle climate change, as you can imagine, Wal-Mart has a huge climate footprint and their goal is to achieve zero emissions by 2040 without relying on carbon offsets.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:01:29] Really did not know that.

Tre' Kendall [00:01:34] Yeah. This initiative started back in 2005, when Wal-Mart's chief executive at the time, Lee Scott, was emotionally moved by the destruction of Hurricane Katrina that ended up killing more than eighteen hundred people in the Gulf Coast region. He then set out to create a company initiative that would curb their carbon footprint. But earlier attempts at times were clumsy and Wal-Mart began being accused of greenwashing, or in other words, providing misleading information about how environmentally sound their products really are.

Andrew Lowery [00:02:13] So have they made improvements to the plan over the years?

Tre' Kendall [00:02:18] Well, according to its July sustainability report, Wal-Mart is about a third of the way from achieving its goal. The question is whether they will be able to continue providing low cost products while staying on track to meet their goal of zero emissions. There are still many challenges they're facing. For instance, some areas where Wal-Mart, Wal-Mart conducts business do not yet have the renewable infrastructure they require.

Andrew Lowery [00:02:46] Is Wal-Mart doing anything about the products they sell or those products specifically part of the plan?

Tre' Kendall [00:02:53] Yeah, actually Wal-Mart asks their suppliers to disclose information about their impacts on deforestation, which can be powerful when you think about the variety of products they offer that may include inputs like palm oil, timber, cattle, soy and the like. That being said, to address the impact of a product's entire lifecycle, huge conglomerates like Wal-Mart, Amazon and Costco will need to pay much more attention to the procurement and life cycles of these products they sell. While keeping in mind, how their business practices influence the behavior of their customers as well as their competitors. And, you know, in my personal opinion, how ever valuable that may be. Many

of these companies should be required to report a new form of financial statements called a triple bottom line. This new form of accounting framework measures a company's impact on things like: the financial and physical well-being of their stakeholders, making positive impacts on the environment, and finally, how these two practices have been actually proven to create financial value for shareholders, which is becoming increasingly more important due to the dramatic rise of activist investors. And as I'm sure you would agree, Andrew, developing a form of blockchain could be an invaluable tool used to help companies, as well as governments, maintain accountability through their supply chains and their product's life-cycles.

Andrew Lowery [00:04:29] Hashtag blockchain, everything! (Laughter).

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:04:33] Well, that's interesting. Blockchain, and even triple bottom line, are our sort of new concepts to me. So what are other retailers doing? How does Wal-Mart compare to their competitors?

Tre' Kendall [00:04:46] Well, right now, only 8.6 percent of the global economy is considered circular, meaning that materials are reused rather than sent to landfills or incinerated. And up until 2019, Wal-Mart was the largest retailer in the world, when Amazon began surpassing their sales. Of course, Amazon has a supply chain that is incredibly complex and comes with huge carbon footprints. Public awareness is starting to get out there. But big companies like Amazon and Wal-Mart, they are so big that they are they're the ones that actually are driving the efforts of the ones lower down on the food chain. So if the if these guys can lead as an example, others have to follow.

Andrew Lowery [00:05:37] Yeah, well, that's top down...Definitely!

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:05:39] Yeah. And they're not a perfect example. There have been a few hiccups, but but it's a start.

Andrew Lowery [00:05:46] Definitely! You have to start somewhere. Hey guys. Today, Rebecca out with the butterflies. So the breakdown is going to be done by me and Tre'.

Tre' Kendall [00:05:53] Yes, sir!

Andrew Lowery [00:05:54] So, we will catch you guys on the flip side.

Tre' Kendall [00:06:00] How's it going, all you wildlife enthusiasts, this is Kendall here with my good friend, Andrew Lowery. Good to be here with you, Andrew.

Andrew Lowery [00:06:06] Howdy. Howdy. Great to be here with you to Tre'.

Tre' Kendall [00:06:09] Andrew, did you know that today's episode is all about intensive management of whitetail deer?

Andrew Lowery [00:06:14] You know, man, that's what I heard.

Tre' Kendall [00:06:18] Well, I'm glad you got the memo there. Now, some people may not think wildlife needs to be managed, but with this rapidly changing world, it sometimes is necessary for wildlife managers to step in and take over. Even the term manager might be a little confusing in this context. We're not quite describing your typical office manager that says things like, uh...Yeah, I'm going to need you to come in on Sunday...so...yeah...

Andrew Lowery [00:06:44] Yeah, you know, you wouldn't mind putting that over time, two or three checks down the line, would you? It'd be better for us.

Tre' Kendall [00:06:53] I've definitely got a pool on the line here...you know?!? (Laughter).

Andrew Lowery [00:06:56] Well, thankfully, managing wildlife is a little different than that. It actually includes a variety of activities based on the objectives of the landowner or the agency. Many times it means managing the habitat to meet the certain needs of certain wildlife species. But it can also mean maintain the density of animals in a habitat, or at/or below the habitats carrying capacity, which is the point where no damage is done to the animals or to their habitat. Definition time: density, it means the degree of consistency measured by the quantity of mass per unit volume...

Tre' Kendall [00:07:32] Uh...English please, Andrew...

Andrew Lowery [00:07:32] Oh wait, that's physics, isn't it? This is wildlife management. OK, so for us, density means the number of animals per unit area, for example, the number of deer per acre.

Tre' Kendall [00:07:43] Yeah, that sounds more like what I heard in class. So, for game animals, like deer, management often means using techniques to manipulate age structure, genetics, sex structure and other factors that help land managers and owners achieve their goals, like increasing antler size. Traditionally, one technique believed to work is called culling. Definition time, culling just means removing something that is believed to be inferior or not as good as the rest. For deer, antler size and number of points are often part of the coaling space. For example, removing all mature deer with less than seven antler points. And harvesting these management deer, is also a way to thin-out the herd and keep population densities and check. Traditional thinking was that by culling animals with inferior qualities would prevent those genes from being passed on to future generations. Our guest today, Mr. Donnie Draeger, is going to hold up this idea to the light for us to see. That's right! We're about to find out if it freezes in the headlights.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:09:36] We have Donnie Draeger with us today, Donnie is the director of the Friedkin Ranch Properties, and I'm going to let him tell you what that means. Donnie, welcome to our podcast. Thank you so much for being here.

Donnie Draeger [00:09:49] Thank you very much for having me. I appreciate it. It's an honor to be on another podcast with you guys. And early on with A Walk on the Wild Side. Caesar Kleberg, so excited about that! And I think it's a great idea and much needed. So, congratulations to you guys.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:10:05] Thank you. Well, we're having a blast doing it. So far it's been lots of fun!

Rebecca Zerlin [00:10:10] Yeah, learning lots!

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:10:11] Yes, we are. We're all learning a whole lot about everybody else's work, so that's pretty fun. So let's start out with just you. Why don't you tell us about yourself and what you do for the Friedkin properties and, yeah.

Donnie Draeger [00:10:27] OK, I guess I've kind of give the brief background. I did my bachelors at Texas A&M, the big the big A&M, College Station, got a degree in Wildlife Management there. I came to Texas A&M-Kingsville in the early 90s and worked under Dr. Charlie DeYoung and did my graduate work on the Faith ranch and got a master's in Range and Wildlife Management from there. Bounced around the country on jobs here and there, and then landed 20, about 20, 21 years ago and landed at Comanche Ranch and working for the Friedken family. And we added properties as we went on. And I climb the ladder and I'm like you said just a second ago, Director, the Friedken properties in Texas, and that consists of four ranches across the state. And I have managers on each one of those locations, but I live and work daily on the Comanche ranch. And Comanche Ranch has cooperated closely with research with Texas Parks and Wildlife and Caesar Kleberg and with professors, you know, Tim Fulbright, Dave Hewitt, of course, Charlie DeYoung, and all these guys that were my mentors. And I've been very, very fortunate to have a tremendous boss and family that I work for and get to work with such intelligent, great leaders in our industry. So I thank my lucky stars every day.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:11:58] Oh, that's terrific! It's great to have a job that you just love. So you're mainly at the Comanche ranch. And why don't...tell us what your top priorities for that ranch are?

Donnie Draeger [00:12:13] So, the Comanche ranch has a deep history. It was the Freitas ranch, and we're basically in between Carrizo Springs and Eagle Pass and Maverick, and Demmit County, Texas. So we're on the western side of that, that and inside that golden triangle and all that western side of south Texas and close to the Rio Grande, all that stuff. And the Freitas Ranch history goes back for, you know, hundreds and fifty, hundred seventy five years...Changing hands and then Dewey Hazel got that land in the 30s. And then he died here actually on the ranch in 1969. And then it went to it went to a trust of bankers and lawyers for about 20 or 30 years. And then my boss bought it in 2001. And at that moment that's when we shifted. Up until that point from the history, Comanche Ranch was, you know, it went from, you know, goats, to longhorns, to regular cows. And it was always more...you call it more ag. related and meat production or mohair production. And then in September 2001, when my boss bought the property, it was an immediate and abrupt shift to wildlife management.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:13:28] Really?

Donnie Draeger [00:13:28] And our our first and priority was to remove the cattle. The place had been in a drought. It had been overgrazed for a long time. It technically, you could say, had been overhunted. The age structure wasn't proper on your buck-side of the herd. And and it needed some rest and it needed some TLC. And, you know, and the great thing about this country down here, it's so resilient. If you just let it be for a little while and just stop stop chopping on it and stop chopping down the tree, it will recover. And and it did so quickly. And ever since then, you know, we've just picked up the ball and run with it from a wildlife management standpoint. And that's all aspects of native native species here and including habitat management, of course, that we work closely with South Texas Natives, which is in the y'all's guys pocket as well and all that. So that's kind of the gist of it.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:14:25] OK.

Rebecca Zerlin [00:14:27] From your experience, what seems to be the most common mistake people make when trying to properly manage a deer herd?

Donnie Draeger [00:14:34] Well, a good question. I would say they underestimate the power of a good nutritional program. And I'm not talking just supplemental feed. I'm talking the holistic approach to habitat management. Supplemental feed can certainly be a part of that and certainly and is very commonly in South Texas, and of course, is in ours. But, so they underestimate the power of that aspect and they probably overestimate the power of something proactive management or "trigger management." What I would call and and culling, more specifically. So I know we're going to dive into that deeply. But I'll tease...I'll tease now with that that liner right there. So I think they overestimate the power of culling and underestimate the power of nutrition on their landscape.

Rebecca Zerlin [00:15:24] Gottcha! Leaving the listeners wanting more.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:15:26] Yeah! (Laughter).

Rebecca Zerlin [00:15:31] What's the biggest philosophical land management change you've made during your career?

Donnie Draeger [00:15:37] Yeah, that and that was a pretty big one that came from a 15 year study that we did with the Faith Ranch in combination with the Faith Ranch. So it's called the Community-Faith Study. It involved Tim Fulbright, Dave Hewitt, Charlie DeYoung and a load of graduate students, Phd's, Masters. I mean, just a ton of them. And like I said, it took 15 years and we had these enclosure's on each ranch, and we studied the...we studied the density, varying densities versus protein feed, not protein feed and how that affects the native vegetation. And what we learned from that is, again, I already said part of that is how resilient this country is, one, two how much that protein feed, when put on the landscape at a proper the proper density and ad libitum, it can it can alleviate pressure on native vegetation. And the traditional thinking when we started that was that it would just add pressure to your top tier plants called, you know, and so that would we flipped the script on that, if you will, and where it actually protects those top tier plants and probably pushes deer down on the preference list where they eat more of the lower preferred stuff. And and at one point in time that we may have been counterintuitive, but as you think about it now, they're getting all the high quality protein stuff they need and those nutrients they need. So they kind of shift their diet down to dead leaves and not saying that's all they eat, but, you know, things like that and and just lower tiered on that on that preference list. Now, they certainly still eat the higher stuff and they're certainly still you have to watch your densities and things like that. But that is one aspect of it. And how that mechanism works with protein feed and how it interacts with the native vegetation. That was a huge thing for us as well. As I say, equally important to our management is, is what we do with our doe harvest, and how we had traditionally...you know, everybody felt if you go back 10, 15, certainly 20 years and beyond. People felt like, oh, well, you have to shoot doe's to, you know, control the population. It's going to get out of control. And that's probably very that is very, very true, in ninety eight percent of the whitetail's range across across their range. But we in south, deep western south Texas have this uniqueness of density, independent and where the rest of the and what that means is that if you remove 10 doe's, the remaining 10 doe's there don't necessarily have a better chance of survival. On a density dependent environment or a situation. If you remove ten doe's, the remaining 10 doe's, those have a greater chance of survival because the amount of resources that left will greatly impact them. And what the density independent is being driven here by rainfall or more importantly, the lack thereof. So if you remove those 10 doe's, and it doesn't rain down here, then the remaining ten doe's might still not make it. I mean, it just. But on the other hand, when it does rain down here, it does those if you didn't remove any

of them, those 20 does still have way more than they could possibly eat. So we have these really you know, I like to use the big fancy word to make myself sound smart, stochastic environment. But all that means, you know, as your listeners know, all that means is highly variable. Right. And so we have this highly variable rainfall where it goes up real high some years and then it just like never rains some years, like 2011 is a great example of that bottom of the barrel where, you know, in 2011, I was a terrible biologist. You back me up to 2004 when it rained. I was a pretty darn good biologist here. (Laughter) It's amazing how that works, where my my skill level is very dependent on spring rainfall down here. So, yeah. So those are those those concepts together, the density independent aspect of our deer herd, and how supplemental feed really affects deer selection and and our and habitat recovery if you will. So I'd say those are the two big things that I've learned over the years that we we really hold dear.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:20:34] Hmm! That's really interesting. It's funny that you say that about the rainfall, because that's exactly how prescribed burning is. If you burn and then you get great rainfall after you burn, you look like some kind of God. And they're telling all the neighbors, you need to do this. You know, if you burn and the faucet gets turned off after you burned, everybody's cussing you and you know. Yeah, so (Laughter).

Donnie Draeger [00:20:58] Sort of turn it into a moonscape.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:21:02] Exactly! And so it's you have to keep it. Just wait. Just wait. The rain will come and it'll come back. When the rain comes... (Laughter).

Donnie Draeger [00:21:10] Well, 2011. There's an old joke that goes around 2011, these three ranchers, but one rancher, about four other ranchers said that it would never rain again. And he he collected on three of those bets, three out of the four. That's how bad that's how bad that drought was! (Laughter).

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:21:27] My gosh! Yeah, I was. It was it was terrible! So you mentioned this 15 year study. And in that study, they they used pinned deer's and they just had low, low, medium and high density. Right?

Donnie Draeger [00:21:45] Correct Yeah.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:21:47] What you know, so so, compared to.

Donnie Draeger [00:21:49] But they had those so they had had low, medium, high density and then they to have it with supplemental feed, low, medium, high, and they had low, medium height without supplemental supplemental feed. And each one of these enclosures that the deer were in or about 200 acres of natural vegetation. Now, we had supplemental water in there so that on all of them. So. So we really got to see truly the difference of density effect with protein feed and vegetation and and then the just the density effect on natural vegetation without protein feed. So and you do that over...what was really amazing is it took a very long time and that's why that study ran 15 years to truly kind of tease out the effects on how some of that was coming about and what changes were happening is a better way to put it. OK.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:22:44] Okay, and the when you say to tease out the effects, is is that what you learned down here, that that you just related to us, that the density isn't, you know, we're more about the weather than the density.

Donnie Draeger [00:23:01] Yes. Excuse me. So...to give you a good example. If it rained the high density, no supplemental feed, if they had sufficient rain, they were just as healthy as they as any other category. Right. Not high density supplement, low density stuff. If you got enough rain, they were fine. But that's but, you know, that's a giant, BUT... (Laughter) In South Texas, I mean, that's that's a quotation underline, italics, right?

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:23:38] Yeah, thats a big, if!

Donnie Draeger [00:23:38] Yeah. Because that's so rare. I mean, it's really rare down here. And as I get older and manage more, maybe it's just my grumpiness and my pessimism coming in. But it seems fewer and far between nowadays than it did when I was a kid working down here. So it is. Yeah. So that's kind of it. And then the the and the other thing you know, what's interesting also is that we learn that no matter even if you're at low density, with supplemental feed, it wasn't so...and those guys did well, obviously. But it wasn't as good as if you just got a great, timely, good, consistent and timely rain, meaning that supplemental feed, as good as it is, it is it is truly a...I don't want to... It is not as good as a good timed rain, to produce forbes in this country from a nutritional standpoint, from a deer's view. Put it that way.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:24:41] OK, so the supplemental feed can be really important, but there's just nothing like what nature can do herself when when you get a rainfall?

Donnie Draeger [00:24:51] Yeah, and especially a well timed, you know, and that's, you know, you you guys girls probably know that, you know, those spring rains are really important down here for us, you know, and ending from about January to March 15th or so. And then once you get into late April, May and more on those, you can get a great rain. And it certainly green's everything up, you know, like, oh, this is terrific. And but when you really get down to the species composition level, you start producing more grasses during that time than and less forbes. So and deer don't live off a gass, so much on grass, early shoots. But that's not their bread and butter, if you will. Those forbes are what really drive that drive those larger antlers in a given year, etc.. So, yeah, when when we're all out there rooting on rain, we need to be doing it from January to March 15th.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:25:51] So. So that study, you know, you're you're managing a very large properties. What did you personally take from that study? Do you do you cull? Do is there a time when culling is necessary or helpful?

Donnie Draeger [00:26:10] Well, that study didn't have anything to do with the culling, we did another study culling that lasted that lasted 13 years, and that was a separate study that Charlie DeYoung, and myself and we brought Texas Parks and Wildlife in, there was several guys from there. And and we did a, like I said, a 13 year study where we had three we had three areas. We had a treatment, one which was about 30,000 acres that we would start culling at three years old and up. And all the yearlings one and one and two year olds would be caught, measured, and let go. And we were catching all these deer by helicopter and net-gun. Right. And then treatment, two, was about 3500 acres. And we would cull all the way down into the Yearling Age class. And to give an example of that particular one, that was a very harsh culling criteria. The yearling had to have seven points or more to live and in that category.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:27:16] Wow!

Donnie Draeger [00:27:16] So it was you can't it was tough! So that was 35 hundred acres... Because then the third area was obviously controlled, about 5000 acres of control. So we did we captured and culled for seven years in that. And we the kind of the rough statistics over the time period that we you know, we culled about 6000 bucks over that year period. You know, about 3000 individuals recaptured, about 2500 of those. And over the seven years of culling, we culled 1,333 deer. And then at year seven, we also had Bronson Strickland of Mississippi State as our statistician, a good friend of mine. And he he kind of worked the numbers. And we started we decided for various reasons that we needed to stop the culling at year seven. And then we just kept capturing and releasing everything, capturing, measuring, releasing everything for six more years. But and then we would take DNA and antler samples and hair samples and measure antler measurements, body weight, Charlie DeYoung with age, every single one of those deer. And all that data would just like most deer captures do, but all that data and then through the DNA data, we had Masahira Ohnishi, and Randy DeYoung as our kind of our genetic guys, Masa's moved back to Japan. He was a Ph.D. student, really did well for us. And they assigned offspring with nine hundred and sixty three science. So we really got this inner working of of genetics on what happened there. So that's the that's kind of the big overview of and and I guess the short version of the results is that after all that work and over a thousand deer, you know, culled and various types of culling and all that, we found no differences and or no improvements in the two treatment herds versus the versus the control. So what we did do in the treatment two, where it was harshly culled all the way down to or it was culled all the way down into the yearling age class, we almost ran out of bucks. We were culling that yearling age class at a rate of ninety eight percent because ninety eight or ninety six percent get to go back and look. But it was unsustainable because basically you were wiping out recruitment. So that's one reason we stopped in year seven to let we did improve the standing crop. The remaining deer that got through that, that made it through the culling criteria and we let go were outstanding much, much better than the ones that we culled. So we had improved standing crop by about 20-25 inches on on average of versus, let's say, the control. But it didn't come back to us in, and there's depends on how deep you want to dove into this. And there's reasons we know why it. But it didn't come back to us by improving the next generation antler sizes. So the whole point of it, which obviously would be the whole point of culling, for genetic improvement at least, there's multiple reasons to cull this particular study was to determine if we could make genetic improvement via culling and by genetic improvement, I mean, the larger antler sizes. Right, right. So it didn't work on either treatment one or treatment two. And after, you know, we're currently I think Charlie is currently writing the journal Wildlife Management Monograph for that study. And we're bouncing around the edits on that. And then when that's all done and we get that peer reviewed, I plan on. And writing a popular book on that study. So that's a little ways away, probably a year, a couple of years, but we'll get there and all things in due time, right?

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:31:19] Yeah, yeah. OK, I understand it a little bit better now. So the culling that in the culling study, it was selective culling. You weren't just culled to reduce density.

Donnie Draeger [00:31:29] No. And that's a great point because, you know, I get I've done this talk. I've done speeches and talks on this subject a lot and and and and or it's been talked about my buddies send me quotes on forums or talk rooms and that and and, you know, a lot of people like well that, you know, they miss the point that we were we were specifically culling to improve antler size. It wasn't. And we're not we're not denigrating culling to change your population density or change to change the...Or change the buck/doe ratio or any of these other reasons that you might need to cull. And and, you

know, so that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about let's go out and selectively shoot the lower end of the of the antler sizes and whatever age classes we choose and therefore try to make the next generation a little bigger and and so forth and so on as the generations go on.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:32:31] Gotcha. That makes sense.

Rebecca Zerlin [00:32:33] Gotcha. So going back to just more general management and Texas landowners often spend a lot of money on high fences, breeder bucks and so on and so forth. Do you find these things to be necessary for achieving a herd of mature high Boone and Crockett scoring deer?

Donnie Draeger [00:32:55] Well, you know, that's that's a broad brush to paint over that question, I'll kind of break it up a little bit. I'll tell ya in cases, there are some cases where you might need a high fence to to get to have older age class bucks. If you're on a small property and you have neighbors that aren't going to buy into your program, which, by the way, should be the first step is go reach out and do co-ops. And I've got a cousin in the Hill country who's done really well with this, and he's by Hamilton, Texas. He's shooting 180s and 200s. People won't believe that statement. And frankly, I still find it hard to believe, but the guy's doing great and he's really small properties, but he's got a few neighbors that bought into the program. So that that's achievable there and a lot of places. And of course, he's doing all the other management right, too, of course. But so fences may be necessary. You can't get your neighbors to buy into it. Breeder Bucks, that's a that's a whole nother can of worms that currently...I don't think in good conscience I would tell anybody that first off, I lean the other way. I admit I have a bias towards the wildness of deer, more in the affinity towards that. And I know those are all degrees on a spectrum. Right. So let's be honest about that. And but my everybody has their line in the sand and that they like to draw in my line in the sand personally is a little on the whatever side of that where I kind of prefer more wildness in deer instead of deer that have been in and at some point in their life. Right. So so knowing that by bias and I'll say that up front, I don't. And also, more importantly, I think nowadays we have the this resurgence of CWD in the state of Texas that is in good conscience. I'm not sure I could tell people, yeah, go get breeder bucks, go do this whole thing. Certainly the end goal would be you would have bigger deer. I mean, the breeder industry has done a very good job of being able to breed monstrous deer and do it at younger ages. And yeah, you could get that. But you're doing it at a greater risk of exposing your property to CWD and and which is, you know, CWD is Pandora's box. If you get it and it's opened up, you never get rid of it. It's not like and so it is a and land values go down. You know, there's there is a domino effect that happens in that. So today's environment, I don't think I could I don't think I could feel good about that particular recommendation.

Rebecca Zerlin [00:35:55] Yeah, we, uh, we actually just we're just spoke to Mitch Lockwood with Texas Fish or Texas Parks and Wildlife about CWD. So we we just became very familiar with the problems in Texas for that. Are y'all doing anything in particular to prevent CWD or have you changed any of your management methods because of that?

Donnie Draeger [00:36:18] Well, personally, I'm on two different boards that that are among the Texas Wildlife Association, big game committee and co-chair on that, and we spend a lot of time talking about CWD. And and those are those are people in the industry that are concerned about all things related, wildlife and private land ownership. And so we spend a lot of time talking about that and strategizing and how can we help Parks and

Wildlife and what can we do to support that? And then I'm also on the whitetail deer advisory board for Texas Parks and Wildlife, and Mitch is one of the it's kind of one of the Parks and Wildlife leaders on that board and run him and Alan Kaner on that. And they give us the subjects and we discuss that. So we spent a lot of time on CWD personally discussing it with other concerned citizens across the state. And then from the ranch perspective, yeah, we test and we we started testing in 2015 when the first that Medina County seedbeds step popped up and we and the state started asking for voluntary testing whether we wanted to be part of the solution and that so we started giving samples and having our heads in our Parks and Wildlife biologist come out. And then the other side of that is I don't move any I do have an exotic pasture with like thirty five hundred acres. And we have some I'd say the two species that are the one species that is in there that susceptible is elk. And I don't bring elk in anymore. We got a self-propagating herd now and and we test them and we don't bring elk in because for two reasons. One, we have all that we need and two have a level of concern that we would accidentally bring that in because, you know, that is a species that can carry it.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:38:13] Yeah. It is changing the landscape, I'm sure, of of management for you guys giving you extra levels to worry about.

Donnie Draeger [00:38:22] Yeah. Like we didn't have enough anyway, so I threw one more. Right.

Rebecca Zerlin [00:38:26] Keeps things interesting, right. Yeah.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:38:28] Yeah. Job security I guess or something. I don't know...Well as you know, I'm a professor in the Range Wildlife Department here at A&M-Kingsville, and we have a lot of students who want to be wildlife ranch managers as they come through our program or that specifically why they come to that program. What advice would you give to them about how to prepare for this career and how to be competitive in the job search?

Donnie Draeger [00:39:00] So that's a good question and. I would say, number one, you know, everybody is going to say we know the things that that...There's already a level of things students do really well, you know, if you're a good student, you're probably making good grades and you're, you know, doing all the school stuff right. My my thing is well, I also know that there's, you know, several thousand other kids across the nation doing exactly what you're doing, and you're going to be lost in that sea of resumes when when there's so you have to distinguish yourself out of that. And really the best way to do that is networking. And so you've got to get over shyness or intimidation or whatever your hurdle may be to go in and while you're at school, get to know your professors and make sure they know you personally and that they have some sense of who you are, your work ethic, your your your dedication. You're willing to sacrifice all those things and then and another way to do that, it's not just about the immediate professors in your immediate environment. I tell every one of those kids, take summer jobs, get internships, take a semester off if you need to, and go get a job that lasts longer. And I know that's unpopular, certainly with parents, because parents are like, oh, God, this cost me so much money, hurry and get it over with. (Laughter) And I get that. But it does you no good to hurry and get over with it and then come out with zero experience on your resume and you may have a 4.0 and Dean's list and all those great accolades. That's terrific. But as a person who hires a lot of these kids coming out, I the first thing I kind of skip over that part of the resume and I just go down and list. I go down the list and look at their experience and second and see if they've worked for anybody I know. There's also as hard as this business is to break into

and get the job that you want. The other aspect of the other side of that coin is, is like I talked about that peer group of mine and these guys that all have very similar jobs to me, they have no idea how much we're rooting for them and how much we want that next level. I...you know, Aldo Leopold kind of put this all into our heads as a biologist and land managers is that we're just here a short time. We put a little bit of we put a little bit of our effort into the land, but it's not ours. We're renting it. We don't own it. And and I think my peer group and I certainly feel that way when it comes to these next generation of wildlife biologists that are coming behind us. We want them to succeed. We want to give them knowledge. We want to pass down what we can. We want them to have the work ethic and all the moral ethics code that we grew up with so that when we're gone, we know that the land is lasting longer than us. And we're going to we move on. We have this and there's a little bit of out. There's altruism in that and there's selfishness in there. In the selfish part of it is, is that, well, I love this land that I'm managing so much and I really want to know it's taken care of when I step down from this position. And the only way to do that is to groom people that appreciate what you're trying to do here. And it so it is this job as hard as this industry is to build, to break into. You also have great advocates in every position from your professors to to all these ranch managers, to state biologists. All of them want you to succeed. Every single one there's so and and if you know that it also takes away the intimidation factor of approaching someone and creating that network. So if we bring it full circle that that's what, you know, go into that conversation with a little bit of nerves, but know that, you know what, this guy probably at the end of the day just is more than happy to talk to me, more than happy to to get to know me. So if I hopefully finish with that.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:43:20] that's a great point.

Rebecca Zerlin [00:43:21] I think it's like Karate Kid, you know, doing all the odd and weird things...like how how does this relate? And then afterwards...

Donnie Draeger [00:43:29] oh, my God. Wax wax on, wax off.

Rebecca Zerlin [00:43:33] You can tell about your Techs. when they're pulling weeds now.

Donnie Draeger [00:43:40] I'm going to give them chopsticks until they catch a fly. And I think that was part of that movie. Yeah! (Laughter).

Rebecca Zerlin [00:43:48] Yeah, so catch a tick! (Laughter).

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:43:50] OK, let's talk about the the favorite. The not so favorite. What's what's the favorite part. What's your favorite part of your job and your least favorite part of your job.

Donnie Draeger [00:44:03] Okay... I'd say, I have a lot of things I truly love and favorites of my job, so to narrow that down it first-off is difficult, but. You know, the relationships with the employees are certainly one and you become one of these ranches, you become a family. It is not your tradition. That's the difference between private ranch management and, let's say public or state, because you go home and you and you have your own house and you all go our separate ways at the end of the day. But on a ranch like we manage, you know, everybody lives together, these little small communities. And you become family and you raise kids together and you, you know, have parties and all this stuff together. So that that's a big part of it and getting the right chemistry in that. And and when it does happen, then you you just you get this extended family. So that's a big deal.

The other thing I like is, is finding those really young, exceptionally antlered deer that, you know, gaw... This two or three year old is crazy big. And then we just watch him, and we track him, and and there's there's a reward there. There's stress in it like, oh, God would hope the mountain lions or the coyotes don't find him or, you know, lightning strikes or whatever. Right. You know, so you have this four or five or six years of of just watching and praying and but you get this anticipation every year as you get closer to as antler development gets further along. So that's a good one. And then I'll geek out of the last one. I'm a numbers guy. I like crunching numbers at the end of my survey. You just...

Rebecca Zerlin [00:45:47] (Laughter) You just lost Rebecca! Rebecca's gone! (Laughter).

Donnie Draeger [00:45:47] Poor, Rebecca! I'm sorry, Rebecca! (Laughter).

Rebecca Zerlin [00:45:47] I just like Rebecca's gone. Yeah. You know, those (inaudible)... They're sponsored by statistics. (Laughter).

Donnie Draeger [00:45:56] I love statistics. I'm not that great at it. You know, I got my buddy Bronson to lean on when when things get really ugly for me. But I love plugging numbers and creating graphs and and watching that data flow through the years and trying to interpret what's happening out there. It is a I get a little happy zone and I will to the point that I will neglect jobs that are more important at the time when there are numbers to be crunched. I like to lock myself in my office and just type away and I get all hopped up on coffee and excited about it. And it's pretty geeky, I admit that, but I like it. So it is what it is, man. I don't deny it.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:46:41] It's got to be exciting when you see patterns that that are showing you the fruits of your labor.

Donnie Draeger [00:46:48] Yeah. You hope that they are (Laughter). Sometimes they do, sometimes I don't, and then the other side of that is oh God what do I do?!? What I do?!? These things are looking good here!

Rebecca Zerlin [00:47:02] I'll I'll support that.

Donnie Draeger [00:47:04] Yeah. OK, thank you.

Rebecca Zerlin [00:47:05] OK, so I guess one last fun question. We're asking all of our guests this. So working outdoors as we do things don't always go as planned. So we're asking you we're asking all of our guests to share an entertaining biology blunder with our listeners. Do you have any funny blunders you'd be willing to share?

Donnie Draeger [00:47:29] Yeah, I mean, there's a list as long as my arm, of course...

Rebecca Zerlin [00:47:33] Yeah, that's the general consensus for most of us... (Laughter).

Donnie Draeger [00:47:35] Yeah, yeah. You know, one good thing one thing I'm good at is doing blunders, so I have one when that comes to mind. I don't remember what year this was, but it was during our deer capture study, the culling study. And we were we were out on a spot. So what we have is two or three helicopters out there catching a deer or two to catch helicopters, one transport helicopter. And we all had the central location of this base. And they'd bring the dear to us. We'd work them and let them go or cull them or whatever needed to be done. And Charlie DeYoung was there. And, you know, and I've got my

other managers there and this whole ground crew there, probably 20 something people there when it's all said and done right. And we're there and Charlie and I are sitting on the tailgate. We're kind of in between deer, and Charlie and I are sitting on the tailgate of my truck and we all park our trucks, kind of nose right at the edge of the woods. And we're at this pond and ponds got a clearing big enough for helicopters to come and land and refuel and for us to work deer, etc.. And and this guy came out of the woods and I guess he just finished doing his morning business and he goes, hey, man, be careful, there's some bees buzzing around back here. I'm like, oh, OK. Yeah, thanks. And he walked away in like thirty seconds later I get tagged by a bee. I said, "Ouch!" You know, Charlie and then Charlie gets attacked and then the guys next attacked and it's all and then so next thing we know, we're getting swarmed by bees and they're aggressive. I mean, these are these are not there had to be some Africanized strain in there. They're aggressive. So right then, a helicopter comes in with a deer hanging from underneath it on the rope. And we all kind of naturally gravitate that way. Anyway, the bees have hit everybody yet, but they've hit three or four of us and we're kind of, oh, we're making a much faster approach to the helicopter than everybody else. We get there and they drop the helicopter, drops the deer and carries on. And then another helicopter comes in, one of the catch helicopter, catch helicopters come in and they've got one of my employees in it. And he they land and they're calling me over. We're trying to swat bees. They're trying to work the deer. And it just keeps getting worse. The bees are getting worse and worse and more aggressive. I run over there and I've got an employee with a dislocated elbow because he fell into a hole fighting the deer that was partially captured in the net. And so I've got a dislocated elbow employee. I've got bees attacking twenty people. I've got in live deer on the ground that's tied up. And everybody's looking to me, what do we do? What do we do? And I literally did the OK, give me one, give me ten seconds. (Laughter) You'll give me this through. And I just said alright, everybody be quiet. You know, I finally said, OK, Larry was a helicopter pilot, said, Larry, you hover over us, and we got to go over to that deer and untie it and get out, you guys and the other all the other helicopters to hover over those guys and lead them to their vehicles. And and when you got directly under the rotor wash of the helicopter, the bee's couldn't come in. Right. So I was your one save spot. That was so so they would hover with literally we would like the guys were like touching the skids of the helicopter with their right about head level. And we would what they would walk them, they would fly them and, you know, they would walk underneath the helicopter and get them into their vehicles. And then I had another crew get and untie that one deer and just let him go. And we and then I got a helicopter to follow me to my truck and I got my employee in the in the truck. And then we kind of all right, everybody got in. We just disbanded the whole area. And and I took my guy to the emergency room. Everybody just kind of got away from that area and got the equipment in. And we went somewhere else. And I had to go back the next morning and find the bees and and take care of them. But it was that was a bit of a chaos moment for sure.

Rebecca Zerlin [00:51:40] Yeah, that sounds like a really entertaining story.

Donnie Draeger [00:51:46] Well, it is in post in the present time. I was anything but entertained (Laughter).

Rebecca Zerlin [00:51:53] I think we call that "type two fun," where the moment not so fun, but afterwards. Okay. (Laughter).

Donnie Draeger [00:51:59] Yeah! Right, right. (Laughter).

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:52:01] Well how did how did the elbow turn out, did that turned out all right?

Donnie Draeger [00:52:05] Good. You know I've got to still got the picture on my phone and it's so ouchie looking... I mean you're just like oh that had to hurt. And I watched them. I went into the emergency room with him and I watched them pop it back in and. Oh, yeah, I mean, did you get the the cold chills up your spine? You're like, oh, God, he's a tough kid. I mean, he's worked for me for... actually that guys work for me for 20 years and and he's become a great friend and yeah, so but he's tough, tougher than me, I'm sure I probably cried. (Laughter).

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:52:41] That's good. That is that is that is I can just picture everything in my mind going on. So that's a great story. Is there anything else you want to share with us today?

Donnie Draeger [00:52:56] Not that I can think of, I appreciate you guys having me on, and I think it's a great concept and there's so much good work that Texas A&M-Kingsville and Caesar Kleberg does that you guys can have this thing going for a long, long time.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:53:11] Oh, I hope so.

Donnie Draeger [00:53:13] I've already subscribed to it. So I plan on that. I plan on. Yeah, I will. And I plan on listening to all those episodes I've already had. Scott Henke was was one of my professors when I was there. And so I listened to his and and. Yeah. So I'm really looking forward to hearing those that y'all keep doing.

Rebecca Zerlin [00:53:38] And that was only the stuff we were allowed to share. (Laughter). We had a lot...

Donnie Draeger [00:53:44] (Laughter). Well there is a whole bunch of stories that came to mind that and I landed on the bee incident because of the same, the same thing is true after 30 years down and out or more now...Somewhere in there, it's about 1985 down in South Texas. Trust me, there's a few censored ones that, that we can't we do. (Laughter).

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:54:06] That's funny. Well, thank you so much for being here with us today. I really enjoyed hearing from you and learning about culling and densities and all kinds of good stuff.

Donnie Draeger [00:54:16] You bet. Thank you all for having me. I appreciate it very much.

Rebecca Zerlin [00:54:25] That was it was really cool to hear from a biologist who's able to give give advice to people starting out, because I feel like I do that a lot to my technicians and they don't listen to me because I'm just a glorified tech. Right. Just a little over them. But it's cool to hear that a biologist is like, hey, you know, do whatever you can. And I know being a young person in the field, it's easier said than done. A lot of ways it's it is a very competitive field. And I don't want people to take it the wrong way, especially with the entitled comment. But the what they're saying is, you know, take whatever job you can. You it's not a well-paying field. If I'm being perfectly honest and I understand that it's not easy for everybody, but there are ways that any job you take, you can use to your benefit. So even if you are doing a job pulling weeds, it like he said, it does pay off in the long run. So. Exactly. It's just keep working at it. Yeah.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:55:31] I mean, hopefully none of us went into this field for the money. Like you said, we did it because we're passionate about this, and that learning by osmosis, a phrase that he has. I just love because you just it's important to get a degree. You have to have that background. But the degree is just, you know, the the foundation. And you have to learn so much more about how everything works and how it all fits together to do the job. And you learn that by, you know, starting at the bottom and watching people and learning as you go, learning by osmosis.

Rebecca Zerlin [00:56:14] From the bottom. No, I'm here. Andrew's laughing at me (Laughter). Yeah. So that was that was really informative. And just, you know, take this opportunity if you're your young person starting out in and not just wildlife or rangeland, but any kind of environmental science, use it, use this information and try to make as many connections and just gain as much experience as you can.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:56:39] Yes. Yes. Great advice!

Rebecca Zerlin [00:56:40] And my other advice is don't feed the wildlife... Bye, guys!

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:56:47] A Talk on the Wild Side is a production of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute of Texas A&M University-Kingsville. Funding for this project is provided by the Harvey Weil Sportsmen Conservationist Award, by the Rotary Club of Corpus Christi editing was completed by the talented Gabby Olivas, Andrew Lowery and Tre' Kendall. We thank the Team Distance Learning Lab for all their help and cooperation.