

After the Hunt

Suggestions for the Proper Disposal of Deer Carcasses

by Daniel Coggin and Larry Castle

For many of Mississippi's approximately 200,000 white-tailed deer hunters, deer hunting is more than a favorite pastime; it is an obsession. Millions of dollars and hunter hours are spent annually in Mississippi pursuing the Magnolia State's number one game animal. For many hunters, deer hunting is a year-round obsession with countless hours spent scouting, planting food plots, sighting in rifles, etc. The end result of this effort, for approximately 60 percent of these hunters, is the harvest of a white-tailed deer.

But, what happens after the hunt? For most successful hunters, this means a trip to a local deer processor who takes the deer and reduces it to nice, neat packages of venison. However, some hunters prefer to process the deer themselves. What is the proper method to dispose of the byproducts of their processing job? A few of these hunters take the easy way out and simply dump their deer carcass along local, county, or state roads. Worse yet, an increasing number of deer carcasses are appearing in streams or rivers. These dumping practices are unsightly, unhealthy, and illegal.

The chronic problem of improper deer carcass dumping in Mississippi is a cause of grave concern to the future of hunting. Foremost is a complete lack of acceptable hunter ethics on the part of the successful hunter who indiscriminately disposes of his deer carcass in a manner that will impact other people. Hunters must wake up and realize that they are in the minority in today's population. Common hunting practices and traditions of twenty years ago must be conscientiously rethought today. Recent information indicates that less than 20 percent of Mississippians hunt. Do the math – this means that 80 percent or more Mississippians are non-hunters. The opinion of hunters embraced by this group of non-hunters is crucial to the future of sport hunting in Mississippi and every state in the nation. Deer carcass disposal in a fashion that will prevent any future human contact with the remains of a hunter's successful hunt is ethically mandatory in today's society.

As previously mentioned, deer carcass dumping is also illegal. Section 97-15-29 of the Mississippi Code of 1972 prohibits the dumping of dead wildlife, their parts, or waste on Mississippi's roadways or their rights-of-ways or on private property without the landowner's consent. If caught in violation of this act, an offender can be charged with a misdemeanor and fined up to \$250.00. Many counties and cities have littering ordinances in addition to state laws whereby these violators can be charged.

In addition, hunters should think about the health risks associated with this practice. Deer carcasses dumped in streams and rivers can pose a human health risk. The risk comes from the drinking of contaminated water and swimming in waters containing decomposing deer carcasses.

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is a "new" disease that is plaguing wild and captive deer populations across the nation. Fortunately it has not been found in Mississippi. CWD is one of a group of diseases called transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs). CWD infected animals are neurologically impaired, quit eating, and eventually die. The infectious agent of CWD is a prion. Prions reside mostly in the brain, spinal cord and lymph nodes of an infected animal. A prion is a most heinous structure because it is amazingly durable. It is possible that prions from an improperly dumped deer carcass could remain in the environment for years. This disease is devastating to local deer herds. Once a deer herd is diagnosed as positive for the disease, control and eradication measures must be immediate. There is no live animal test for this disease, no vaccination, and no magic science or aspirin panacea that will make it go away. Control and eradication of CWD includes extensive and expensive testing of animals in and around the positive area. Secondly, control includes depopulation of the deer within the positive area to prevent spreading of the disease into uninfected areas. Prevention includes bans on the interstate and intrastate movement of any deer species known to be susceptible to infection. Other intelligent preventative measures include bans on artificial supplemental feeding and baiting. The potential for the spread of CWD to other deer through close contact, particularly saliva, urine, and feces, warrant management practices that disperse deer.

Because of the seriousness of CWD, hunters who harvest deer or elk in states that have tested positive for CWD should take some extra precautions. Number one, always wear latex gloves while field dressing your animal. Avoid handling the brain, spinal cord or lymph nodes and bring only boned-out meat back to Mississippi. If possible, properly dispose of the carcass in the area that you harvested the animal. Should you find yourself in a situation where you must transport the carcass to Mississippi, or to any location other than where it was harvested, be certain that correct disposal methods are followed. Burying the carcass is the safest measure known at this time.

We recommend that in situations where a hunter has harvested a trophy animal in any CWD diagnosed state and intends to mount this animal, that still further precautions be taken. If possible have the deer prepared by a taxidermist in the area where the animal was taken. Avoid bringing an entire head back to Mississippi. A second alternative is to cape-out and remove the antlers from the skull of the trophy in the area that the animal was taken. As a last alternative, transport the animal to Mississippi but take special precautions to properly dispose of the skull and any other remains.

Faced with these ethical, legal, and health issues, what are the thinking hunters, the genuine wildlife conservationists of the 21st Century to do with deer carcasses? Roadsides, streams, and dumpsters are not options. Our objective in this article has been to provide acceptable alternatives to Mississippi's sportsmen for disposing of deer carcasses.

The majority of Mississippi's deer hunters own or lease lands for hunting. A recommended method of disposing of the byproducts of their deer processing is to simply dig a pit in which the deer carcass is placed. This is the most convenient, economical, and simplest method for camp carcass disposal. It is also legal as long as no other trash, such as cans and bottles, is placed in the pit with the deer carcasses.

When locating an area for your disposal pit, consider the following suggestions. First, it is recommended that you locate your pit at least 300 feet from any nearby watercourse or flood-prone area. Second, do not build your pit in very porous soils or on soils with a high groundwater level. Third, common sense should tell you not to put your pit close to your camp where the smell would be offensive. Disposal pits also should not be located adjacent to camp access roads. Members and their families will derive little pleasure from smelling the pit every time they visit the property. We have visited many hunting clubs who have located their pit adjacent to the camp skinning and data collection area. This location is quite convenient. But, it is often the location of considerable activity. Trophy pictures are taken in this area. Other family members frequent this area to view harvested deer. With a small amount of planning, it will take only several minutes of the successful hunter's time to transport a carcass to a pit away from the skinning shed, where no one will be offended by the smell. Finally, take into consideration any nearby camp houses and residences when picking a spot for your pit.

After hunting season, it is best to cover the pit with a least six inches of soil. Following these guidelines will insure that there is no transmission of bacteria or diseases from your pit to any possible drinking water supply or local swimming hole. As the old saying goes "what happens up stream affects everyone down stream."

Another means of disposing of deer carcasses is by constructing a deer composter to naturally break down or decompose the carcass. Composting is used extensively by home gardeners to break down yard waste and kitchen scraps with the end result being fertilizer which is used in gardens and flower beds. The same principles hold true when creating a composter for deer. Composting is primarily used for small animals although it can be used by the hunter who only harvests a couple of deer a year. Mississippi State University Cooperative Extension Service has a leaflet (Information Sheet 1625) describing the construction of a deer composter. This information can be obtained by contacting the Cooperative Extension Service at Mississippi State University at (662) 325-3174.

We wish you the best while hunting this year. Please take a portion of your time and pre-plan for appropriate carcass disposal this summer and fall. Hunting and the environment warrants some pre-planning on our part as hunters. Hunters have a rich tradition of being true conservationists. Conservation is wise use. Wise use includes proper carcass disposal. Hunt safely.

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