

Recruit or Die

How Texas is Leading the Charge to Save Hunting's Heritage

Somewhere out there are potential sportsmen in their preteen years who would really like to hunt. These are the kids who spend their time outside collecting grasshoppers and catching June bugs. Indoors, they glance through magazines inundated with wildlife photographs, dreaming of the time they will pursue these animals in faraway places.

Unfortunately, these are the same children who are often reprimanded for getting too dirty or playing too close to a woodlot because their parents are concerned of potential harm. The fact is, most youngsters have a genuine interest in hunting. The only thing they lack is opportunity.

Why are youngsters important to our sport? According to Dr. James Applegate at Rutgers University, 68 percent of hunters who start before age 14 still hunt five years later, compared to 38 percent of those who started after age 14.

One of the principal reasons individuals hunt is the quality time they enjoy with family and friends. Caught up in all the excitement surrounding such events, hunters sometimes forget about those less fortunate who might never enjoy the same experiences.

Hunting is constantly challenged by the anti-hunting public, and recruitment is not compensating the loss of older hunters. Hunting is not the acclaimed activity it once was. From caveman to American Indian, successful hunters were revered and often made tribal leaders. Our forefathers depended on frontiersmen for clothing, and more importantly, protein. I doubt there were vegetarians among the Pilgrims celebrating Thanksgiving.

People were altruistic back then, working together in a synergistic relationship. As time and generations passed, people forgot how important hunting was in molding our society.

I doubt our youth even know what the Great Depression was and how important wild game was back then, if you could afford shells to hunt, that is.

Changing Times

Today, America's characteristic strong work ethic is eroding. Technological advances afford people many benefits, one of them being surplus time to dwell on petty differences that often become agendas, like the anti-hunting movement. This is particularly sad when I see our youth place their lives on the line for our freedom on a daily basis in faraway places like Iraq and Afghanistan. I could not live in a society that prohibited hunting. The fact is, hunting is not a sport, it is a way of life.

I have enjoyed the outdoors, particularly hunting, throughout my life. More importantly, I have been blessed to share my unique lifestyle with my wife and daughters. My ladies are avid outdoorswomen, particularly my daughters, who hopefully will pass this tradition on to their children some day.

Over the last two decades, I have shared my love of hunting with a large number of disadvantaged children on the Texas ranches I managed. My objective was to introduce our youth to the outdoors and pass on my passion for hunting.

Without such activities, the future of our hunting tradition would be jeopardized. Organizations such as the Texas Wildlife Association and many others work with landowners to introduce our youth to hunting.

Is there Any Hope?

Without young hunters, where will future hunters come from? Hunters produce hunters. In fact, recruitment rates are high in states with substantial hunter numbers.

Some important statistics were revealed recently at the fourth summit of the American Wildlife Conservation Partners in Minnesota. One was the number of hunters across the United States. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, there are 13 million hunters 16 years or older.

However, when this data is protracted over time, some interesting facts arise. For example, 21.5 million people have hunted at some point during the last five years. More importantly, 42.2 million people have hunted sometime in their lives. In other words, there are more people who hunt than were formerly acknowledged because some do not hunt every year. They are referred to as “casual hunters”.

Although hunting remains popular, as baby boomers pass on, Texas alone will realize a loss of 10,000 to 20,000 hunters annually. Texas hunters are aging. According to the 2003 report, *Preserving Texas Hunting Heritage*, “The average age of a hunter is 41, while the average age of all Texans is 33. The number of hunters is expected to drop by 200,000 over the next decade because young people are not taking up hunting.”

The study also said Texas sold 1 million hunting licenses in 2003—the same number it sold in 1970. However, the population of Texas has doubled since 1970, so the percentage of Texans who hunt has declined to less than 6 percent.

The percentage of Texas license holders who actually go hunting declined 10 percent between 1985 and 1998. Only 7 percent of Texas hunters are female, although 51 percent of the population is female. The study also reported that 61 percent of Texas youths will spend at least part of their lives in a single-parent house, and the person least

likely to hunt, fish or visit a state park is a single female parent. It also revealed that about 32 percent of Texans are Hispanic, yet only 3 percent of them hunt.

What do these statistics mean for the future of hunting? Hardest hit will be the small, rural communities that accommodate hunters. Texas will lose \$3.6 billion and approximately 32,000 hunting-related jobs.

The Trickle-Down Effect

Make no mistake about it: Hunting is big business. Nationally, sportsmen provide more jobs (1.6 million) than Wal-Mart, the largest Fortune 500 employer in the United States (1 million employees). However, without hunter recruitment, hunting and its economical and social benefits will fade like an early morning fog in the forest.

Not only will small towns feel the economic depression, but so will wildlife populations and the habitat they exist upon. All have benefited from Pittman-Robertson excise taxes on sporting goods and money paid for hunting licenses. The fact remains that hunters are America's ultimate conservationists. It is with sportsmen's dollars--\$2 billion annually—that wildlife populations flourish. It will be a sad day for all wildlife when the altruistic hunter/prey relationship ceases.

Theodore Roosevelt summed up our relationship with all wildlife by stating, "The genuine sportsman is, by all odds, the most important factor in keeping the large and more valuable wild creatures from total extinction."

So what do hunters say? According to the Texas study:

- ✓ The most common reasons people hunt are for sport/recreation and to be with friends and family.
- ✓ Older hunters want to help "pass the tradition" to the next generation.

- ✓ Hunters say they do not hunt as often as they would like because of time constrains, lack of quality access and cost.

Of hunters who feel limited by time, most say work obligations are the reason.

Of hunters who feel limited by cost, most say leases are too expensive.

- ✓ Twenty-three percent of Texas hunters do not hunt every year; 19 percent of hunting license purchasers do not get around to hunting at all; and 9 percent of all Texans say they do not hunt but would like to.
- ✓ Occasional hunters ages 17 to 22 say that dating, sports, other recreation and high school or college classes don't leave them enough time to hunt.

Possible Solutions

A private-land state, the future of the hunting heritage in Texas will depend on the relationship of the private landowner and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

The bottom line? It's irrelevant how many individuals would like to hunt if they have nowhere to go. Therefore, the game department must form partnerships with private landowners to establish a gates-open policy. Not only must hunting land be accessible, but more importantly, affordable. Also, landowners must understand that deer hunting is not the only hunting held in high esteem by hunters. There are squirrels, rabbits, turkeys, doves and quail, all of which are abundant and affordable to the sportsman, particularly the youngsters entertaining the hunting arena.

It will also be of paramount importance that sportsmen demonstrate a strong hunt ethic. Without responsible hunters, landowners will be less receptive when it comes to allowing hunters on their land.

“Hunt ethics are also keenly watched by the public, and even though 77 percent of Americans approve of legal hunting, a majority of Americans feel that many hunters violate game laws or practice unsafe behavior while hunting” according to Duda and associates in the 1995 publication, *Factors Related to Hunting and Fishing Participation in the United States*.

To rectify the situation, agencies, associations and landowners must introduce youngsters to hunting annually free of charge. These lucky youngsters should be taught safe and ethical hunting methods by mentors who have hunted for years and are more than willing to give something back to the sport. Texas is one state that is doing just that. Thanks to these concerned and dedicated individuals, the future of our hunting heritage will remain bright. As for the kids, some will no longer have to look at magazines and imagine what it is like to hunt—they will be able to look at their own memorable photographs!

\\