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Experienced Hunters' Attitudes Toward Mentoring in Arizona

THE ARIZONA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT (AZGFD) and Responsive Management recently collaborated on a qualitative research study that examined experienced hunters' attitudes toward mentoring and their interest in a mentored hunt program offered through the Department. The Department partnered with Responsive Management to conduct the research under a grant from the National Shooting Sports Foundation's Hunting Heritage Partnership. The study entailed a series of five focus groups with experienced hunters at least 50 years old. The groups were held in Mesa, Phoenix, Pinetop, and Tucson.

Focus groups are an established and accepted research technique for qualitative explorations of attitudes, opinions, perceptions, motivations, constraints, participation, and behaviors. Focus groups are in-depth interviews in which a small group of participants (8 to 12) are interviewed at length about select subjects. Focus groups provide researchers with insights, new hypotheses, and understanding through the process of interaction. They allow for extensive probing, follow-up questions, group discussion, and observation of emotional reaction not possible in a quantitative study such as a telephone or mail survey. Focus groups allow analyses of thoughts, attitudes, behaviors, and opinions that have a high level of content validity; however, because these results are on small numbers of individuals, the conclusions rest on face validity and rely on the depth of analysis rather than breadth of analysis. Focus group research, as does all qualitative research, sacrifices reliability, or the ability to replicate results, for the sake of increased validity.

The Arizona focus groups revealed strong support for the proposed mentored hunt program among group participants, most of whom were avid hunters with several decades of hunting experience. While group

participants were uniformly enthusiastic about the prospect of mentoring youths, a number of them also pointed out the potential for longtime hunters to use the program to take other adults hunting, especially non-hunters or lapsed hunters.

For many individuals in the focus groups, mentoring was not an unfamiliar concept. A number of participants spoke positively about passing on the hunting tradition to children, spouses, friends, and co-workers. One hunter recounted teaching a neighbor's son to hunt: "I came home from work one day and there was a note on the door from a nine-year-old boy with a single mom down the street, and it had an elk drawn on it and said, 'Will you please take me hunting someday? I really want to go.' And that Saturday we went hunting. And now he's sixteen and I think he hunts more than I do." Additionally, several group participants had volunteered as hunter safety instructors or had participated in a youth camp or family event weekend sponsored by the AZGFD (e.g., Wapiti Weekend).





In discussing the logistics of the mentored hunt program structure, hunters in the focus groups identified safety and costs associated with hunting as two of the biggest potential hurdles to participation in a mentoring program.

Summarizing these points, one hunter commented, “Number one, you’ve got to have safety. Number two, you’ve got to have the resources to take them out. A shooting range will welcome a group. But if you don’t have these basic resources—safety and opportunities—you can’t mentor.” The importance of safety was also discussed in the context of liability concerns, and on this point, most hunters recommended that the Department or hunt coordinators address liability issues proactively at the outset of programs.

It was also suggested that small game hunting opportunities, such as dove, squirrel, or rabbit hunts, may work best for initiating new hunters since they represent relatively easy hunting opportunities providing the greatest chances of initial hunt success. Additionally, most hunters in the groups opposed the concept of incentives for mentor volunteers, with one hunter stating, “I’d rather people become mentors because they’re passionate, not for the incentives.”

Addressing the broad issue of hunting initiation, several people in the group discussions suggested introducing newcomers to hunting through a variety of different topics and instructional opportunities emphasizing wildlife, the outdoors, and related activities (shooting, fishing, camping, conservation and biology, etc.). According to some hunters, the most important step toward initiating newcomers into hunting is to get the person outside. One hunter elaborated: “The whole outdoors experience is such a place of wonder for someone who’s never been there. There’s something really fascinating about being out there. Hunting doesn’t necessarily have to be about the animals—it’s about kids exploring new horizons.”

Maintaining volunteer awareness of mentoring opportunities was considered to be an essential component of a mentoring program. In fact, several

focus group participants said they would be happy to volunteer as mentors but were unaware that such opportunities existed—in this regard, effective information dissemination and publicity are critical. Said one hunter, “I would love to spend my free time teaching kids to hunt. But I don’t know anything about it because I don’t hear anything about it. So I’m sitting home doing nothing when I could be helping someone.” Several people commented that hunter safety courses and nonprofit sportsmen’s organizations might be good opportunities for recruiting mentor volunteers. Overall, the groups suggested that hunters learn about hunting opportunities from a variety of information sources, so a diversified publicity approach may be the best way to reach individuals interested in participating in a mentoring program.

As a whole, the focus group research suggests that a Department-sponsored mentored hunt program will enjoy strong support from longtime hunters interested in imparting to others the hunting heritage. Both youths and adults interested in learning to hunt are fortunate to have a pool of dedicated, supportive hunters in Arizona ready to communicate skills and ethics—the



only remaining challenge is ensuring that newcomers and teachers know how to find each other. In any case, the most effective mentoring program will be a well-publicized effort that keeps safety and liability concerns at the forefront of the program, includes opportunities for both youths and adults, presents a wide range of hunting experiences (including small game), maintains volunteer participation from veteran hunters, and presents hunting as one part of the overall outdoors experience.

The full focus group report is available at http://www.responsivemanagement.com/download/reports/AZ_Mentored_Hunt_Focus_Group_Report.pdf (220KB PDF).

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