

HUNTING *for* HUNTER

We need to set our sights on recruiting new hunters — to conserve outdoor America and benefit the economy.

BY DAWN MERRITT



Brenda Lee Smith, a member of the League's Ames (Iowa) Chapter, remembers a day when she was 8 or 9 years old, riding in the car with her family. They spotted a small herd of deer in the woods along side the rural Iowa road. Brenda turned to her father and said, "Daddy, I don't think I could ever shoot a deer unless I knew that I was helping manage the deer population." And he replied, "Brenda Lee, that's exactly the right idea." Smith's father was an avid hunter who often harvested wild game for the family to eat. "I grew up thinking that it was perfectly normal to get food from the woods in addition to the grocery store," says Smith. "Dad would have venison processed into ground burger and summer sausage. Meals at home included pheasant, squirrel, and rabbit. My dad saved his first wild turkey for our Thanksgiving meal."

Years later, when Smith's husband suggested that she learn to shoot a bow and go deer hunting with him, she jumped at the chance. "Not only did I want to learn a new skill, I also wanted to spend time with my husband in the outdoors."

Early exposure to hunting opened Smith to the experience — the same as it has for millions of other Americans. Unfortunately, that hunting tradition is on the decline, affecting not only opportunities for outdoor recreation but funding for wildlife management as well.

National Numbers

The "National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation," conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in conjunction with the U.S. Census Bureau to quantify participation in wildlife-based recreation and

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Urban Living: People living in urban areas are far less likely to take up hunting than their country counterparts. With more Americans moving to urban areas, the pool of potential hunters is shrinking. The explosion of urban and suburban development has also taken away lands that can be hunted and puts more distance between urban dwellers and lands they can hunt. This distance means that hunters may be less familiar with nearby hunting landscapes and therefore less like to hunt there.

Access to public lands can also be a problem. A Colorado study by Responsive Management, a natural resources research firm, found that 32 percent of people who hunted on federal public lands had problems accessing those lands. The most common complaint was private land that blocked access to public lands. Even finding information about public places to hunt can be difficult.

Aging Population: Young adults (25 and under) are more likely to hunt than older adults, according to the “National Survey.” However, America is aging. The Census Bureau reports that between 1970 and 2006, the median age of Americans increased from 28 years old to 36.4 years old. This age increase tracks with a decrease in active hunters.

Inactive hunters (those who have not hunted in two or more years) also tend to be older than active hunters. Research by Responsive Management found that only 10 percent of active hunters are 65 years old or older but 23 percent of inactive hunters fell into that age range. When hunters whose participation had declined over 5 years were asked why, 42 percent cited age/health – the top response.

Family Ties: Fewer adults hunting leads to fewer youth introduced to hunting. Responsive Management found that 92 percent of youth who had hunted in the previous year came from a hunting family. There are few other avenues to introduce youth to the sport. Likewise, adults are unlikely to engage in hunting without the help of family or friends.

In addition, hunters who have not been in the field in recent years cite lack of free time

its economic impact, is one of the most comprehensive surveys of hunting in the United States. Federal and state government agencies and private organizations use this information to look for trends among hunters, anglers, and wildlife watchers. What they’ve seen is a downward trend in the number of people who hunt.

According to the 2006 “National Survey,” about 12.5 million U.S. residents age 16 and older hunt. Just 15 years ago, that number was 14.1 million people. Of greater concern is a significant drop in the overall percentage of Americans who hunt. In 1955, 10 percent of the U.S. population age 16 and older hunted; by 2006, that number was just 5 percent.

Many factors have contributed to the decline in hunting, including

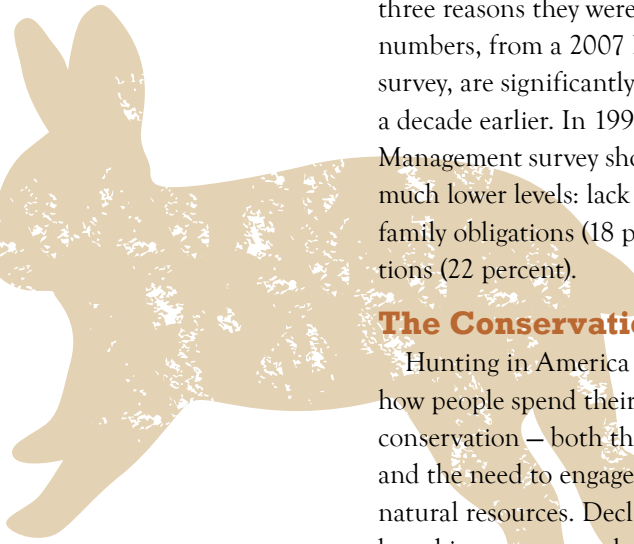
(40 percent), family obligations (35 percent), and work obligations (34 percent) as the top three reasons they were unable to hunt. These numbers, from a 2007 Responsive Management survey, are significantly higher than results from a decade earlier. In 1995, results of a Responsive Management survey showed these obstacles at much lower levels: lack of free time (26 percent), family obligations (18 percent), and work obligations (22 percent).

The Conservation Connection

Hunting in America is not just an issue of how people spend their free time. It's about conservation – both the dollars and cents of it and the need to engage people in protecting our natural resources. Declines in hunting have a broad impact across the country.

Conservation Funding: State fish and wildlife agencies protect fish, wildlife, and plant populations and the habitats on which they depend – which also benefits the people who live in and visit each state. The majority of funding for state fish and wildlife agencies comes directly from hunters, anglers, and shooting sports enthusiasts. Every purchase of a box of ammunition or fishing tackle includes a fee (called an excise tax) that helps fund state fish and wildlife programs – almost \$750 million in 2011.

It was sportsmen who devised this “user pay” system and brought about the creation of the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (also known as the Pittman-Robertson Act), which imposed an excise tax on hunting firearms and ammunition. Amendments later extended this tax to pistols, revolvers, and most archery equipment. Separate legislation, the Dingell-Johnson Act, created similar taxes on fishing equipment. License sales and excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment account for more than 75 percent of the total funding for many state fish and wildlife agencies, even though most of the nation's



wildlife is not hunted or fished. Without these funds, state agencies would effectively cease to operate, which would dramatically affect outdoor recreation opportunities and game and nongame wildlife and fisheries management.

Economics: Hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation have a broad impact on the U.S. economy. According to data collected by Responsive Management, hunters alone contribute more than \$22 billion to our economy each year through their purchases of items ranging from food and lodging to equipment and tour guides. Hunters also support almost 600,000 jobs across the country, generating salaries, wages, and income of more than \$20 billion every year. The money hunters spend also yields about \$4 billion in annual state and local taxes and almost \$5 billion in federal tax revenue.

Wildlife Management: Restoration programs funded by sportsmen have helped numerous wildlife species recover across the country, including wild turkeys, wood ducks, pronghorn antelope, elk, and even white-tailed deer. License fees and excise taxes have been used to conserve millions of acres of land that support vital habitat for game and nongame species alike. These funds also support the work of wildlife biologists.

Sportsmen also help keep wildlife healthy by balancing wildlife populations with available habitat. For example, humans are the only remaining “predators” for white-tailed deer in many parts of the country – an overly-populous species that was endangered just a century ago. Dale Garner, chief of wildlife for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, reports that Iowa's deer herd could grow 20 to 40 percent each year if deer populations remain unchecked. With an abundant supply of agricultural crops, densities could reach 100 or more deer per square mile before natural systems would slow the rate of growth. Deer numbers that high could cause economic hardship, damage crops, and be hazardous to drivers. “Maintaining a deer population in balance with the wants and needs of the people in the state is a difficult task, and hunting is the only viable management option to achieve this goal,” says Garner.



Conservation: People protect the things they love. For hunters, anglers, and other people who enjoy the outdoors, that includes our natural resources. Not only do hunters see first-hand the conservation challenges facing the natural world, they are often the first to see problems as they start to occur and can alert the appropriate authorities to take action.

Sportsmen are more likely than non-sportsmen to support conservation organizations with donations of volunteer time and money. According to research by Responsive Management, the average hunter donates \$53 every year to conservation organizations to support their conservation work, compared with \$32 per year donated by the average U.S. resident.

Hunters also contribute their time and talents to on-the-ground conservation projects organized by groups such as the Izaak Walton League. These volunteers improve wildlife habitat and waterways; raise and stock game birds and fish; and volunteer as education, safety, and skills instructors.

Recruiting Success

The drop in hunting participation mirrors a national drop in outdoor recreation activities. Recruiting new hunters or bringing an inactive hunter back to the sport can not only help conservation and wildlife management but also get people active and healthy.

The Council to Advance Hunting and the Shooting Sports was formed last year to support research, management, and program activities that will help build participation in shooting and hunting sports traditions. Members of the council's Board of Directors include leaders of nonprofit organizations, state and federal fish and wildlife agencies, and hunting and shooting sports companies. League executive director David Hoskins is on the council's Board and is leading efforts to develop short-term goals for the group, which include analyzing the many state agency and nonprofit-led hunter recruitment programs to find out exactly what works and develop recommendations on to how to translate what's working to the national level.

Individual hunters can also make a big difference in increasing hunting participation.

Share the Experience: Having friends and family who hunt or support hunting is an important component of recruiting new hunters. "The development of an identity as a hunter is necessary for long-term commitment to the sport," says Mark Damian Duda, executive director of Responsive Management. That identity comes from time spent with like-minded family and friends who encourage hunting. Among active hunters, 86 percent said they had been invited to go hunting by a friend, and 28 percent subsequently increased their hunting participation.



NATIONAL HUNTING AND FISHING DAY

National Hunting and Fishing Day, held annually on the fourth Saturday in September, provides opportunities for people across the country to learn more about outdoor skills and conservation, frequently through hands-on hunting, shooting, fishing, and archery activities. This grassroots campaign promotes the traditions of hunting and angling and the many conservation benefits they provide for all Americans.

The Izaak Walton League co-chaired the first National Hunting and Fishing Day steering committee in 1972. Since the beginning, the message of these annual events has been that hunting and fishing are vital conservation tools, important economic engines, and enjoyable outdoor recreation activities.

This event offers the perfect opportunity to engage people in your community in hunting and fishing and encourage them to support the Izaak Walton League's conservation mission. Your chapter can provide that "community" of hunters needed to recruit and retain hunters.

You can find the "National Hunting and Fishing Day Activity Plan" from the IWLA *Chapter Manual* and additional planning resources on our Web site at www.iwla.org/NHFD.

The Izaak Walton League of America is a proud sponsor of National Hunting and Fishing Day.®



Sharing the experience helps keep fellow hunters active and is critical to recruiting new ones.

New hunters may initially be focused on results, but as a hunter gains more experience, the pursuit often becomes more important than the kill. The majority of people say they hunt as a recreational experience, to enjoy nature, or to spend time with family and friends, according to a recent Responsive Management survey, although nearly all hunters also eat the game they harvest.

Mentor Youth: People who are introduced to hunting as children (under the age of 16) have much greater enthusiasm for hunting as adults than someone introduced to the sport as

an adult, according to Responsive Management survey results. More than half of active hunters surveyed said they had hunted at least once by age 12, and these hunters typically hunted more days per year than hunters who started later in life.

When youth were surveyed directly, 70 percent of those with mentors said they “like hunting a lot” compared with only 35 percent of youth who did not have mentors. In addition, 60 percent of mentored youth were “very interested in going hunting” (compared with 39 percent of non-mentored) and 73 percent had gone hunting in the past year (compared with 46 percent of non-mentored).



USFS, ISTOCK PHOTO

There is a trend among states to lower minimum age requirements and add special opportunities for young hunters to encourage participation, such as special licenses for mentored young hunters and youth-only hunt days.

Start Simple: Hunters who start with small game (such as rabbit, squirrel, or pheasant) or commonly hunted game (like white-tailed deer) are more likely to stick with hunting. Small game is particularly important when introducing youth to hunting, but the same holds true for adults — more challenging game can frustrate new hunters and cause them to lose interest.

Make It a Family Affair: Another factor in building a life-long love of hunting is family

involvement. Although hunting with friends encourages hunters to stay engaged, research shows that hunting with a family member early on leads to better retention rates for new hunters. For example, a national study of youth ages 8 through 18 found that 92 percent of active youth hunters came from a hunting family.

Hunters who were mentored specifically by their fathers are much more enthusiastic about hunting than hunters mentored by a different adult in their lives. In addition, recruiting rates for young hunters are higher in households in which both parents hunt. So get the whole family involved!

HUNTING FOR NEW HUNTERS

As a retired wildlife biologist, Wes Sheets understands the connection between hunting and conservation. He also knows that introducing young people to the outdoors and recruiting new hunters are important to future natural resource conservation. So Sheets volunteers as a youth mentor.

In Nebraska, bow hunters ages 12-29 must complete a hunter education course before they can hunt deer, antelope, elk, or mountain sheep in that state. Youth who complete the course receive a brochure on the Department of Game and Parks' youth mentoring program, through which hunter education instructors take youth hunting. Sheets volunteers as an instructor and a hunting mentor.

"Some of the students who attend the hunter education classes come there with friends but don't have an opportunity to hunt because their parents don't have an interest in it," says Sheets, who did not grow up in a hunting family. "My parents weren't hunters, but I remember my dad going on a pheasant hunt once. I thought, 'Wow, when will I be old enough to do that?'" Sheets started trapping with friends in his teens — spending time together outdoors — and started hunting at 17. So he can relate to potential young hunters.

Most of the budding archers are 12 to 15 years old when Sheets starts working with them. "At age 12, they can understand hunting ethics and we can certify them through hunter education classes as safe, young hunters," explains Sheets. He often mentors youth until they graduate from high school.

Deer hunting gives Sheets the opportunity to work with young people for an extended time. "Other mentored hunts are just for one day or a weekend — I am not sure kids will understand the need to hunt from that brief introduction," Sheets says. He starts working with the youth about a month before deer season to check their shooting skills. "We make sure they have been practicing to ensure they have good, ethical results."

Sheets says the challenge is to optimize success in the field. He takes youth to places that are not typically hunted by the public, such as municipal lands and an abandoned landfill near town, where the deer herds are healthy and other wildlife populations are abundant. "We're hoping to get these kids tuned into the role hunting has in management of wildlife populations," says Sheets. "We don't promote trophy hunting. Antlerless deer are the target." So is establishing a connection with the outdoors.

Last year, Sheets mentored eight youth and estimates that he hunted with them about 40 times — one or two kids at a time. Over the course of the season, Sheets' young hunters harvested 13 deer. "I had a 12-year-old girl who took three deer. A few kids didn't harvest anything, but all had an opportunity to take a shot. That's part of the experience, and it helps them understand that they need to practice and put some work into it."

When hunting season closes, Sheets and several other adult mentors offer a special class for their young hunters: sausage making. They host the one-day event at a local co-op run by one of the mentors and bring in several deer from nearby farms. "We demonstrate that it's fun, productive, and anyone can do it," Sheets explains. "The youth skin and butcher the deer, grind the meat, and make the sausages. We show them how and direct them. They love it! We had 25 kids this past winter with 4 mentors. Afterwards, we divide and package up the meat and everyone goes home with a tub-full, ready for the freezer." The youth return home ready and waiting for next year's hunting season — along with a better understanding of the role of hunting as a wildlife management tool.

Sign Up Seniors: “Baby boomers” are more physically active than seniors in previous generations, so they may be more interested in starting or renewing hunting activities. In addition, adults who stopped hunting due to advanced age or health concerns can still help mentor new



hunters — and may regain their own passion for hunting in the process. Encourage youth (and people new to the sport) to ask the adults in their lives to take them hunting. Research shows that the top reason a mentor took somebody hunting was that the person asked.

Look for Locavores: The organic and locavore (people who strive to eat foods grown or produced locally) movements present an opportunity to engage new hunters. People across the country are increasingly concerned about where their food comes from and how it is processed. New Jersey resident Chris Sieverts and his family are part of that group. “I’ve been into nutrition for the past 10 years,” Sieverts says. “But I had an ‘aha’ moment reading *The Scavenger’s Guide*

to *Haute Cuisine*. Until the industrial food movement, people hunted for and ate foods that are no longer accessible to us through our regular food supply. Most people don’t think about all the animal parts we no longer eat — amazing food that used to be served to kings and queens, and now we would never even think about eating it.” But Sieverts started thinking about those foods after his daughter expressed an interest in hunting.

“My 13-year-old daughter took a week-long archery course last year that led to a passion for the sport,” says Sieverts. “Now we both have bows and she’s shooting in a league. Recently, she told me that she wants to go hunting. We’re taking a hunter safety course and getting our licenses to go deer hunting, but it’s been hard to find someone to go out in the field with us. We live in an urban area where hunting is not part of the local culture. There’s an absence of outdoor programs here and a loss in our culture of thinking that there are things in the woods we can eat.” Sieverts hopes that through networking at their local archery store they will find a potential mentor to help them with the aspects of hunting that they’ve only read about in books, like field dressing a deer. Although Sieverts daughter is currently a vegetarian, “she thinks it would be cool to have a restaurant where we could serve the food that we hunt.”

Becoming a Hunter

Brenda Smith was recruited as a hunter by her husband after a childhood that created a positive impression of hunting for her. Soon after she learned to bowhunt, Smith attended a Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) workshop — an event that introduces women to hunting, shooting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation — to expand her outdoor skills. Smith was introduced to muzzleloading rifles, and her enthusiasm was apparent from the start.

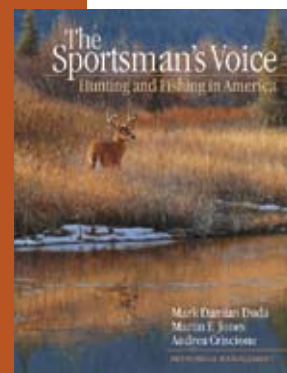
“My husband, Travis, was very supportive,” Smith says. “He bought me my first muzzleloader a few months after the BOW workshop. I was thrilled!” It was with that muzzleloader that she harvested her first deer — and created the memory of a lifetime. “It was mid-October. We stalked through the middle of a corn field to a fence line and, with fading light, determined we didn’t



FOR MORE INFORMATION

“National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation,” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, http://wsfrprograms.fws.gov/Subpages/NationalSurvey/National_Survey.htm

“The Sportsman’s Voice: Hunting and Fishing in America,” Responsive Management, www.venturepublish.com/product.php?id=168



have time for another pass through the corn. We worked the fence line for a short distance before I decided to sit on the ground. I’m not sure how much time passed before a deer emerged from the end rows of corn. I slowly started to raise my muzzleloader. The buck took a hard look my way. I stopped moving and looked down at the ground. After a moment, the deer looked away and I was able to shoulder my muzzleloader and click off the safety. The deer took another step out of the corn, revealing its vitals. I lined up my sight and squeezed the trigger. Smoke obscured my vision. As the smoke cleared, my heart sank. The deer was gone,” Smith recalls.

“We walked to where the deer had been, about 25 yards away. No blood. Just to be sure, we tracked the deer through the end rows. After a few steps, Travis found some blood. Several steps later, there was more. Then we heard a crashing sound and I caught a glimpse of a deer running to the fence line. Unsure if it was the deer I shot, we continued to follow the blood trail. We found an area where the deer had stood for a while – there was at least one corn stalk that was painted dark red. I said to Travis ‘That’s liver blood. I shot him in the liver. That’s lethal.’ He grinned at me and responded, ‘Good job, honey. Now let’s go find him.’”

“We followed the blood trail out of the corn to the fence line. We did not have permission to hunt on the other side of the fence line, so we drove to the adjoining property to ask for

permission to track my deer. As soon as we pulled into the driveway, we realized that the tracking was going to be easy – the truck headlights bounced off a beautiful white rack to the left edge of the owner’s driveway. I let out a big hoot and holler. I think the only thing that kept me inside the truck was my seat belt! The owner was home. Travis began explaining the reason for us ringing his doorbell after dark, but I was so excited that I blurted out, ‘Can we please retrieve my deer from your front yard?’ The landowner looked at me and chuckled. He gave us permission and offered to help load the deer into our truck. That deer head is mounted on our living room wall – the first one we hung there.” Today, Smith continues to hunt deer with her husband and prepares meals that reflect the way her family ate when she was growing up.

Brenda Smith fits many of the key criteria for hunter recruits. She grew up in a family that hunted – particularly one in which the father hunts – and has a spouse who hunts. But she also provides some exceptions to the rules: Her father did not take her into the field to hunt. Indeed, her first hunting foray was as an adult. And she’s a woman – a minority in the hunting community. But as Smith’s story demonstrates, by sharing the experience and enthusiasm with others, every sportsman can recruit new hunters and help sustain this important American tradition.

— Dawn Merritt is the Director of Communications for the Izaak Walton League of America.