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## Is the Economic Downturn Helping Hunting and Fishing Participation?

RECENT NEWS REPORTS have stated that, despite the poor economy, participation in hunting and fishing is on the rise. However, a study conducted in 2008 by Responsive Management suggests that participation is increasing *because of* the economic downturn, not in spite of it.

Although many factors can affect license sales, in states that have experienced an increase some officials and sportsmen think that the economic slump is the reason (2, 4, 5). A recent report by the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation (RBFF) and the American Sportfishing Association (ASA) states that fishing participation, as measured by license sales, increased in 2009 when compared to 2008.

As part of a new quarterly fishing license national sales index published monthly by the RBFF and ASA, Southwick Associates, which analyzed the data, found a 7.7% increase in the number of licenses sold year-to-date as of September 1, 2009, compared to the same time period in 2008. RBFF President and CEO Frank Peterson said that the reasons for the increase range from “a slow economy, which may allow people more time to engage in outdoor activities, to recreational fishing being a lower cost alternative to other forms of recreation” (1, 6).

There is statistical support for this view. In 2008, Responsive Management and the Georgia Department

of Natural Resources, under a Hunting Heritage Partnership grant from the National Shooting Sports Foundation, conducted a two-phase study to identify

and explore in detail the factors behind three discrete increases in hunting license sales over the past two decades (8). After reaching a peak in 1982, sales of hunting licenses across the United States declined steadily, according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Federal Aid data. However, since 1990 there have been three notable exceptions to this overall national decline, in 1992, 1999, and 2004.

To attempt to determine the cause of these increases, Responsive Management analyzed potential internal and external factors that might have affected hunting license sales. The analysis was run on each of the 50 states individually, as well as on the nation as a whole. A total

of 43 external variables were examined, including average monthly temperature, consumer prices, Dow Jones Industrial Averages, median income, new housing starts, housing and population densities, and population by age groups.

Of the 43 variables analyzed, there were only two statistically significant factors that were negatively associated with hunting license sales on the national level: the percentage of the population between the ages of 65 and 69, and increases in new housing starts. In other words, (a) the greater the proportion



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of the population between the ages of 65 and 69, the more likely it is that there will be a decline in hunting license sales; and (b) the higher the rate of housing starts, the more likely it is that there will be a decline in hunting license sales.

The age factor is easily explained: as people age, they are less likely to participate in hunting or have a need to purchase a license; the decline in hunting with increasing age has been documented in numerous participation studies. The significance of the housing starts factor is not so clear; the data simply show that hunting license sales have declined in times of rapid growth in housing starts.

One reason might be the number of hunters who work in construction and related trades. In a 2007 nationwide survey of hunters conducted by Responsive Management and the National Shooting Sports Foundation (9), the top occupational category for employed hunters was “construction / carpentry / plumbing / electrical / craftsman,” a category that strongly relates to the work required for new housing construction. Thus, in times of increased housing starts, it may be that a substantial number of hunters will have less free time to go hunting as they devote more time to work.



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hypothesis. None of the other economic indicators in the 2008 Responsive Management study showed a significant correlation to hunting license sales, which could suggest that the increase in license sales is related to time available to hunt rather than to economic reasons such as hunting for meat.

In addition, “work obligations” is one of the most common reasons cited by hunters for not hunting or not hunting more often. In two separate surveys of active and inactive hunters conducted in 1995 by Responsive Management (7) and in 2008 by Responsive Management and the National Shooting Sports Foundation (10), “work obligations” was among the top reasons that took away from hunters’ enjoyment of hunting or caused them not to hunt.

The housing starts finding in the Responsive Management study has been discussed in several newspaper articles and columns over the past year (2, 4, 5, 11) and has been cited by at least one state official regarding recent license sales increases (2). However, one question remains: In hard economic times, in addition to having more time to hunt in general, do hunters increasingly turn to hunting to put food on the table? Some hunters who have been interviewed indicate that this is a motivating factor for them, and others say it is not (3, 11). More research is needed to explore this

## Sources

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## Variables Examined in Relation to Hunting License Sales Increases and Decreases

Only 2 of the 43 variables examined in a study conducted by Responsive Management in 2008 showed a statistically significant negative correlation with hunting license sales.

Just as important as significance in this study is non-significance: Of the nine *economic* variables examined, all but one had *no statistically significant correlation* to hunting license sales. This indicates that something unique to the lone statistically significant economic variable (housing starts) must be behind the correlation, as opposed to more general effects of the economic downturn.

All of the variables examined in the study are listed below. Those that showed a statistically significant negative correlation with hunting license sales are highlighted.

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Consumer prices	Total density of people per square mile	Non-Hispanic population	Population ages 45 to 49
Consumer Price Index	Total precipitation	Square miles	Population ages 50 to 54
Dow Jones	American Indian and Alaskan Natives populations	Population ages 0 to 4	Population ages 55 to 59
Industrial Averages	Asian/Pacific Islander population	Population ages 5 to 9	Population ages 60 to 64
Housing	Average monthly temperature	Population ages 10 to 14	<b>Population ages 65 to 69</b>
Median income	Changes in Black population	Population ages 15 to 19	Population ages 70 to 74
NASDAQ year averages	Changes in White population	Population ages 20 to 24	Population ages 75 to 79
<b>New housing starts</b>	Female population	Population ages 25 to 29	Population ages 80 to 84
Producer prices	General population	Population ages 30 to 34	Population ages 85 and above
Standard & Poor year averages	Hispanic population	Population ages 35 to 39	
The New York Stock Exchange	Male population	Population ages 40 to 44	
Total density of housing per square mile			
Total density of hunters per square mile			