

**The future of public hunting** in North America will be decided by non-hunters. This determination will depend upon the perception of hunting by non-hunters as being socially acceptable and ethically responsible. Recent national polls suggest that more than 70 percent of the American people approve of hunting. However, there remains considerable disagreement over what constitutes appropriate hunter behavior. Criticism centers on what the non-hunting public perceives to be an individual's failure to choose a course of action that demonstrates reverence for life and a responsibility for one's own actions. The non-hunting public is troubled by the lack of respect some hunters show for animals, other hunters, and the concerns of non-hunters. Thus, present and future conflict stems from the disparity between the conduct of hunters and the public's ideal of the modern hunter.

Mounting evidence suggests that voluntary pledges of codes of conduct and tighter regulations are insufficient to improve hunter behavior. Similarly, most hunter education programs are limited because curricula are designed primarily to recruit new hunters. The main educational focus of these programs is on safety, knowledge, and hunting skills. As such, there is little emphasis on addressing attitudes and motivations underlying overt hunter behavior. Addressing these factors requires a different approach, one that cultivates a particular set of attitudes, values, and ethics in individuals. Two approaches might help engender such a framework including mentorship programs and advanced hunter education. Both aim at influencing the development of certain behaviors through relevant learning and experience.

### **Mentorship Program**

Traditionally, most beginning hunters had a mentor, often

a family member, who guided their development. The breakdown of the support system for hunting due to urbanization and the disintegration of the family has left many young hunters without a role model. As such, the hunting community is losing its teachers. Yet, educational and behavioral research suggest that young people benefit from mentor guidance in their character and moral development. We, the hunting community, need mentorship programs that facilitate opportunities for young and less experienced hunters to internalize virtues of ethical hunting. Hunters, guides, and outfitters who have demonstrated skills, in-depth knowledge, and a high level of ethical behavior are encouraged to become mentors.

### **Advanced Hunter Education**

To date, only Oregon and Washington offer advanced education programs that incorporate behavior education. These programs are designed to train and select a cadre of knowledgeable and responsible hunters interested in participating in politically sensitive limited entry hunts. As such, the program promotes certain attitudes and behaviors compatible with the circumstances of a particular hunt. In the course, students are confronted with meaningful questions regarding conduct in a practical and relevant manner. Programs include lectures, field components, as well as a proficiency test focusing on actual behaviors. Following completion of a course, an individual is empowered to better differentiate between what is legally- and what is ethically-correct and to anticipate the consequences of certain actions. Collectively, this awareness can lead to the development of a personal code of conduct.

Envisioning that upon completing an advanced education program, hunters could earn the status of *Apprentice*

*Master Hunter*, and following years of hunting and a record of outstanding service to the hunt and the community at large, the title of a *Master Hunter*, and eventually that of an *Elder Hunter* with recognized mentor responsibilities. Throughout their lifelong development as hunters, individuals would serve as visible role models for others.

Aside from having achieved a qualification and a recognition to be proud of, individuals would develop a strong sense of identity which, in turn, would reinforce and shape their own ethical behavior over time. This type of certification and recognition is similar to that practiced in some European countries including Germany.

The privilege of public hunting in North America is at risk unless fundamental change occurs in the behavior of hunters. Hunting can be secured as a publicly acceptable activity by fostering within the modern hunter the recognition that hunting is a privilege, with moral duties and ethical responsibilities. Improving hunter behavior through experience and education should be the highest priority for the hunting community today. We must not forget that the actions of a few may very well determine the fate of hunting for all of us. ▲▲▲

## **FIELD NOTES**

### **FROM THE TRM RANCH**

**Improving Hunter Behavior Through Experience and Education**

By Thomas Baumeister - B&C Fellow

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