

**Demographic trends** in the United States suggest that the public is becoming increasingly more isolated from traditional uses of wildlife—including hunting. Due to changes in the degree of urbanization, family structure, and demography, fewer and fewer people have the opportunity to experience nature in a participatory way. One of the consequences is that fewer people are recruited and retained in the activity of hunting. This is an alarming trend, not only for the hunting community, but also for society as a whole, as our lives are becoming increasingly more removed from nature. To reverse this trend, we need more participatory outdoor activities, like hunting, that give people the opportunity to see, feel, and appreciate natural processes. This then can lead to positive changes in behavior that go beyond simple awareness. In realizing the value of hunting as a participatory activity, we have the opportunity to promote it as a means of getting people more in touch with their natural environment. One means to this end is to improve hunter recruitment, which is at an all time low.

The single most important factor responsible for low hunter recruitment—more so than any other factor, such as access, game abundance, costs, or hunting regulations—has been identified as the breakdown of the social support system within the American family. Historically, hunting in North America was a rural activity closely tied to family life. Most hunters were recruited as teenagers within the context of family and the philosophy that “it takes a hunter to make a hunter.” This initiation was often fueled by an utilitarian need to put meat on the table. With changes in demographics, hunting has evolved more into a leisure activity of the upper social class, living

mainly in urbanized environments. As a consequence, fewer young people have the opportunity to learn about hunting from family members. Unfortunately, other opportunities for learning about hunting are limited. Mandatory hunter education courses, offered by most state wildlife agencies, focus primarily on handling and safety of firearms. Alone, this training is insufficient to recruit and produce new generations of responsible hunters. Instead, we need more apprentice experiences for young recruits closely modeled after that of a family-initiated, apprentice/mentor relationship.

Hunters must take upon themselves the challenge of recruiting new hunters by offering apprentice experiences. Hunters who have demonstrated skills, in-depth knowledge, and are

characterized by a high level of ethical behavior will be the key role models in such a relationship. These individuals need to be encouraged to support the tradition and culture of the hunt by sharing ideas, experiences, values, and behaviors with a new generation of young hunters. To maintain the highest quality in these mentors, years of hunting experience would be required as well as excellent marksmanship and a test of competence that includes proficiency in ethical behavior. Places like the TRM Ranch could serve as a setting for apprentice/mentor interactions to take place. The TRM Ranch, with its spectacular scenery and abundance and diversity of wildlife, provides an excellent setting to replicate the family-initiated, experience-rich recruitment of hunters and to emphasize the total hunting experience.

Today, we expect young and new hunters to be mindful and compassionate to the needs of other members in the community, yet we lack leadership in introducing new programs to establish apprentice experiences and a conducive environment for these experiences to take place. Without this strong support system, efforts to recruit new hunters, especially individuals who do not come from traditional hunting families, may not be successful. The dynamics of wild places such as TRM Ranch provide a natural context for apprentices to deeply feed mind, spirit, and body and to develop an appreciation and awareness of one's place in nature. I believe these experiences will lead to mindfulness and compassion for others, for the hunted, and for the hunt itself.

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