

Hunting in America *continued* Steps Toward a Brighter Future

We introduced the North American Wildlife Policy Conference in the last issue of *Fair Chase*. Since that time, more than 150 wildlife professionals met in Denver for a two-day technical conference. Participants discussed the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation; federal, state, and tribal coordination; conservation funding; private and public land habitat conservation; and perpetuating hunter traditions. During the conference, subgroups identified goals, challenges, and opportunities for each of the five topic areas. This information will be transmitted to federal, state, tribal, and conservation group policy-makers. In this issue, we introduce the topics of hunting access and recruitment and retention. Each of the included articles draws heavily from the draft white papers prepared for the technical conference. The policy recommendations associated with each of the five topic areas will provide a focus for discussions at the upcoming North American Wildlife Policy Conference to be held in Washington, D.C. ■

Hunting and Shooting Access

In almost all surveys conducted about hunting participation in the United States, the lack of access to hunting and shooting areas for firearms and bows is one of the top constraints to participation. The access to public lands or areas in which to shoot is critical because our country consists predominantly of urbanites and suburbanites. Closures of ranges and hunting areas due to human development lend an increased significance to the access issue. Without access for hunting and recreational shooting the very underpinnings of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation are at risk—hunters.

There are numerous challenges surrounding access to public lands. In many areas, even though public lands are open for hunting, hunters are unaware of boundaries due to the lack of signs and maps. More than 38 million acres of Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, and National Wildlife Refuge lands have no or inadequate access. Some of these holdings are landlocked by private lands. The lack of a unified, federal coordination of lands open to hunting or shooting has led to public confusion and closure of recreational shooting areas. There is no unified description of user safety, user conflict, or management guidelines for these areas, therefore local land managers have made decisions on area closures that appear to be arbitrary. This lack of federal response and the loss of public and private lands due to human encroachment, land ownership fragmentation, and private leasing have all decreased the land available for traditional recreational shooting and hunting opportunities.

In preparation for the North American Wildlife Policy Conference, the following goals were identified to address hunting and shooting access.

First, state and federal agencies and conservation organizations must work alone and together to improve the awareness of hunting and shooting opportunities on private and public lands and facilities.

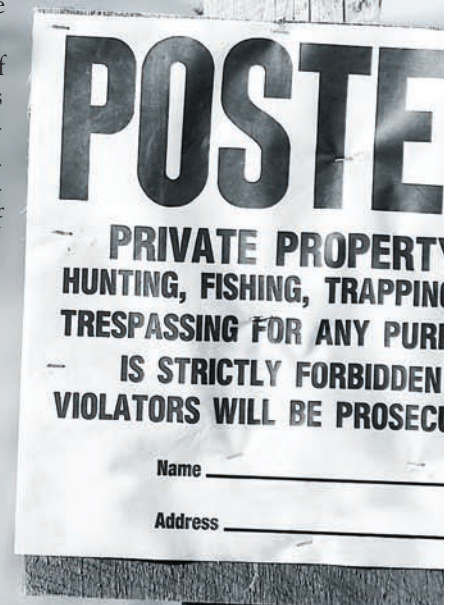
Second, state and federal agencies must improve and expand upon current access programs both on public and private lands.

Third, landlocked and inaccessible federal lands should be identified and prioritized to provide access based on the recreational opportunities available on these lands.

Finally, a comprehensive analysis of the nation's recreational shooting needs should be developed.

A number of challenges and opportunities have been identified to achieve these goals. All of the goals require coordination and collaboration among state and federal agencies and conservation organizations at regional, state, and local levels. Successful goal achievement would improve hunting and shooting participation rates, make hunters and shooters better aware of opportunities to enjoy their avocations, improve the financial situation of state agencies, which rely on license dollars for much of their conservation work, and assist in promoting the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

Identification of access issues and goals are key to improving hunting access. Removing access barriers will address one of the top constraints to hunting and shooting that have been identified by current and potential hunters. It is an essential component of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.



Hunter Recruitment and Retention

Hunter numbers have been on a slow and steady decline for the past thirty years. Numerous factors have contributed to this trend. Our nation has shifted from a rural to an urban culture. Competing interests such as work, structured activities, television, computers, and electronic games have replaced the unstructured outdoor activities of the past. As a result, passing on hunting traditions and skills has become more difficult and apparently less important in today's world. However, the challenges facing hunting and wildlife conservation have never been more daunting. Because of the decline in hunting, the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is at risk.

The challenges that face hunter recruitment and retention are numerous and substantial. The approaches used to enhance recruitment and retention should account for myriad of cultures and lifestyles in contemporary society. Hunting opportunities and social structures vary across the United States, so no one program or approach to recruitment and retention will suffice. Hunting has traditionally been passed from one generation to the next within a family social system. Mentors must be identified who accept the importance of hunting and are willing to devote time and energy to advise, educate, and participate in hunting with youth.

Competition for time affects mentors as well as potential hunters. The complexity of agency regulations, licensing structures, and other mandates presents real or perceived barriers for current and potential hunters. Agency leadership support for hunting may erode over time due to competing issues, political interference, or lack of personal interest or background in hunting. New professionals entering the ranks of wildlife agencies have very different motiva-

tions and experiences than those of us brought up in a different generation and agency culture. Agencies have been reluctant or disinterested in using new methodologies, available data, and analytical tools to evaluate recruitment and retention programs. In addition, we have done little to measure or enhance the public's support for hunting traditions.

To address these challenges and measure success, realistic goals must be established. The following five goals to enhance recruitment and retention were identified at the Technical Conference and will be discussed at the upcoming North American Wildlife Policy Conference.

First, recruitment and retention should focus programs and initiatives on skills development and competence.

Second, a pool of skilled and respected mentors who pass on hunting skills and ethics to recruit youth into hunting traditions must be developed.

Third, hunting and hunters' support for conservation must be incorporated into conservation agency culture and conservation leadership. Conservation leaders must support and expect that current and future agency staff understand the role of hunting in conservation.

Fourth, access, opportunities, and information about hunting must be developed in order to remove barriers to participation.

Fifth, recruitment and retention programs must be based on reliable information about what potential hunters desire in the experience. Programs must be evaluated and adapted to reflect changing social landscapes.

Although the challenges may seem insurmountable, the goals are realistic and attainable if the hunting community and wildlife agencies commit to a comprehensive and coordinated approach to enhance recruitment and retention. We must be successful to sustain the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. On a more personal note, all of us who have learned to hunt have been given a gift. We can hold that gift to ourselves and watch a tradition die in our or our children's lifetime, or we can share that gift with another friend or child. If we choose to share the gift of hunting, we can pass on a human experience rooted in thousands

of years of practice and tradition, an experience that has shaped our nation and ourselves. ■

Although the challenges may seem insurmountable, the goals are realistic and attainable if the hunting community and wildlife agencies commit to a comprehensive and coordinated approach to enhance recruitment and retention. We must be successful to sustain the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

