

HUNTER'S INITIATION

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EACH YEAR, FALL BLOWS DOWN from the high country driving the game before it. And each year, fewer and fewer hunters return to the field to herald their arrival in the lowlands. Even more startling than the dramatically attenuated ranks of returning hunters though, is the absence of young, first-time hunters. The declining ranks are as noticeable to those who sell the licenses and manage the wildlife as to those who buy the licenses and take to the woods to reenact that age-old atavistic ritual—the hunt.

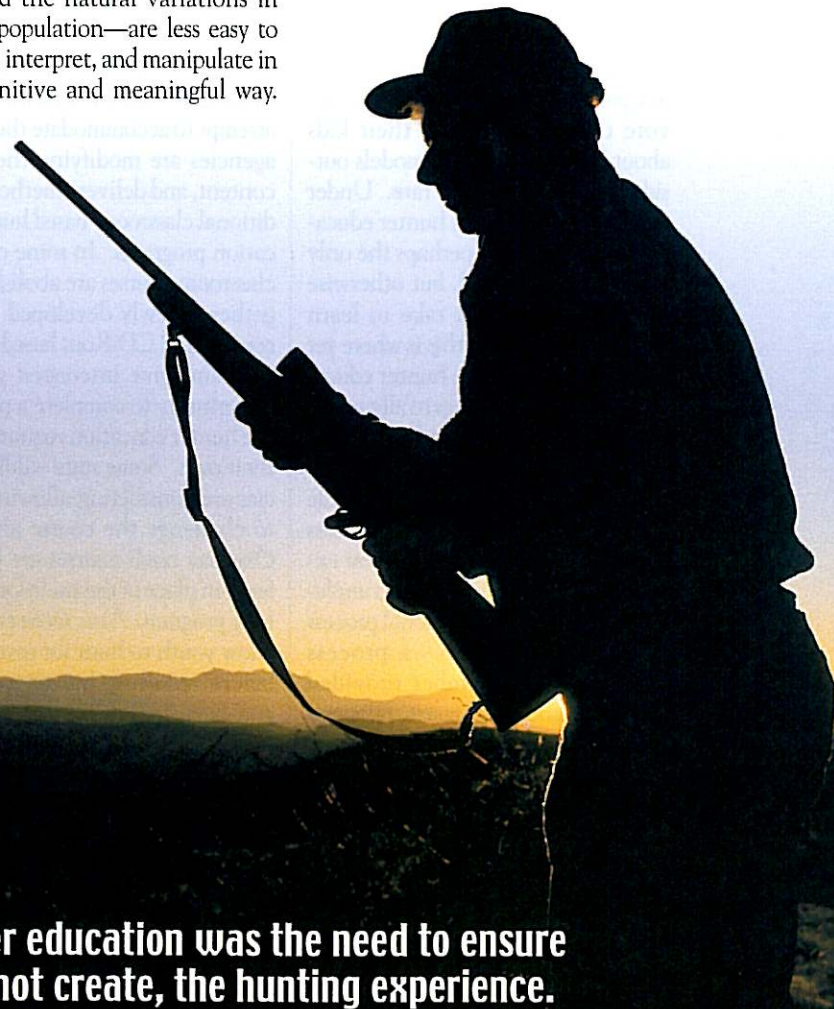
No one denies that hunter participation is declining nationwide; the numbers, like the anecdotal evidence, are irrefutable. Fewer than 15 million American hunters 16 and older (or less than 5 percent of the total U.S. population) purchased a hunting license this fall, one million fewer hunters than just 10 years ago. But perhaps even more significant than the drop in overall hunter numbers is the dramatic decrease in young hunters; the average age of those who identify themselves as hunters is rising steadily. Agreement, however, ends here, and the whys and wherefores of the dwindling ranks are hotly debated in rod and gun clubs, electronic chat rooms, industry boardrooms, magazine reader-response sections, conservation communities, and federal and state wildlife agencies all over the country.

One of the culprits taking the lion's share of the blame is the hunter education program. In some circles, conventional wisdom has it that these courses function as barriers, effectively "scaring off" potential hunters who are unwilling or unable to complete an education program prior to heading afield. While it is generally accepted

that many social and biological factors influence the recruitment of hunters, it may be that hunter education programs are singled out because they are the only variable over which state wildlife agencies have any real control. In other words, those responsible for the program, namely the state wildlife agencies, are in a position to tinker with the educational prerequisites for hunting license purchases as well as the timing, length, and content of actual programs—all of which are thought to have some impact on hunter participation. There is pressure to shorten programs, abolish them altogether, or, at a minimum, to seek alternative training venues and methods. Most of the other factors that undoubtedly affect hunter participation—constraints imposed by the modern work schedule, declining social support due to changes in perceptions and values, demographic shifts, changes in the structure of the family unit, and the natural variations in wildlife population—are less easy to quantify, interpret, and manipulate in any definitive and meaningful way.

Hunter education by its very nature is an easy and obvious target.

A recent nationwide survey of 13 to 20 year-olds revealed an almost even split between those who are interested in hunting and those who are not. Of those interested in hunting, about half had hunted and completed a hunter education course; the other half, though interested, had neither hunted nor taken a course. It is these youths who are the focus of the current debate over hunter education. According to recent studies, the chances that an interested but otherwise unable (for lack of resources, access, opportunity, encouragement, guidance, etc.) youth will become a hunter is slim if he or she has not hunted or completed a hunter education before reaching adulthood. The next question is, does the hunter education course requirement present too great an obstacle for these youths to overcome?



Photography by
Tom Tietz

The original impetus for hunter education was the need to ensure public safety . . . to improve, not create, the hunting experience.

The same survey also revealed that a hunter education requirement doesn't prevent a youth from hunting; not having someone to hunt with does. Seventy percent of survey participants interested in hunting stated that a mandatory course would not prevent them from hunting and they would take the course even if it was not required. By and large, these youths are from families with a hunting tradition where initiation occurs under the tutelage of a father or a close family member who hunts. In that context, a mandatory hunter education course is viewed as one of the steps in the initiation process. Ironically, for those youths without a family member to hunt with and learn from, a hunter education requirement may be the only opportunity that a youth has to learn about hunting.

In fact, a panel of experts in the field of hunter recruitment identified the lack of social support as the single biggest obstacle to hunter recruitment. Today, young people simply have fewer opportunities to learn about hunting in a conducive and meaningful way; hunting is no longer a prevalent part of the culture or a mainstay of the family economy. Too few parents are willing or able to devote the time to teach their kids about hunting, and role models outside the family unit are rare. Under these circumstances, a hunter education requirement is perhaps the only avenue an interested, but otherwise unable, youth might take to learn about hunting. And this is where yet another difficulty lies: hunter education cannot be all things to all people. So what should it be, and for whom?

Today's hunter education program no longer plays the same role in the initiation of young hunters that it has for most of its 50-year existence. Hunter education complemented nicely the traditional process of hunter initiation—a process whereby a kin member provided guidance, encouragement, opportunity, and support to a young person interested in hunting. Hunter education was designed to harmonize with that process by providing training in some of the more technical aspects of hunting such as handling of firearms and familiarization with

hunting laws. Young hunters were trained in the safe and responsible use of firearms so that the "real" learning of becoming a hunter, the how and where and why, could take place under the guidance of a family member in a safe and legal hunting environment. Hunter education and family mentors worked hand-in-hand to equip young hunters with the knowledge and skill to be safe, legal, and responsible. In effect, hunter education facilitated and to some degree institutionalized the ritual of passing on hunter knowledge and wisdom from one generation to the next. For rural America where hunting is still a family tradition and identity, the age-old initiation process is still working and the hunter education course is but one facet of a rich hunting culture.

But much of America is no longer rural, and the students in any one hunter education class are more diverse in their level of interest, preparation, and experience. The change and diversity are especially pronounced in those regions of the United States that are undergoing a rapid rural-urban transformation, a transformation complicated by concurrent changes in family life, leisure time, and outdoor activities. In an attempt to accommodate these shifts, agencies are modifying the length, content, and delivery methods of traditional classroom-based hunter education programs. In some cases, the classroom courses are abolished altogether. Newly developed Internet courses and CD-Rom based learning programs give interested youth an opportunity to complete a portion of the hunter education requirement on their own. Some state wildlife agencies are considering allowing people to challenge the course altogether. One-day crash courses are being offered in place of the traditional week-long program. Also, some states now allow youth to hunt for several years before requiring hunter education and licensing, as long as a licensed hunter accompanies the youth. But most significantly, and perhaps most troublesome, hunter education is being asked to play a much larger role: that of a surrogate family member by offering mentored youth hunts.

It is important that hunter edu-

cation adapt and evolve to meet the ever changing needs and desires of those it's designed to reach and teach. Otherwise it can easily become that much feared barrier to participation. However, easing the requirements of hunter education or abolishing the program altogether will serve the interests of neither the hunting nor non-hunting public. Proposed modifications need to be carefully assessed to ensure that hunter education programs continue to meet the needs of the student as well as the demands of citizens, hunters, and wildlife managers. The question remains: what is the proper scope of hunter education and what is its most effective role?

Some things we can say for certain about what hunter education is not. Hunter education is not a publicity stunt designed to convert the apathetic and indifferent non-hunter into an interested hunter. It is not intended—and is ill-equipped—to fill the role of mentor. It cannot take the place of an involved and supportive family, nor can it *create* a culture that is sympathetic to hunting. It isn't designed to take the kid interested in football or video games and turn him into a hunter. It is not an outreach campaign. Nor is it an advocacy program. It isn't designed to "sell" one something that one doesn't already want. It is also not intended to act as a filter for screening out "unsuitable" or "substandard" participants.

The original impetus for hunter education was the need to ensure public safety. The whole point of the program was to *improve* the hunting experience (not create it), to *facilitate* a strong and active family-oriented initiation process (not replace it), and to respond to and hopefully ameliorate negative public perceptions of hunters and hunting (not turn them all into hunters and hunting advocates). It is designed to help those who are already interested in hunting to have a safe time doing it and to facilitate the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and wisdom. Understood in this way, a traditional hunter education program is not a barrier to participation, it is a rite of passage. It is not a panacea for all that ails hunting any more than it is the root of all that ails it. ▲ ▲ ▲