

R3 - RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND RE-ACTIVATION

There's no doubt that the readers of *Fair Chase* are well aware that most all wildlife in America, not just our big game species, faced a daunting and bleak future around the turn of the 20th century. We are also familiar with the story of how the Boone and Crockett Club spearheaded a range of early conservation efforts that ultimately helped to spawn the science of wildlife management which, in the decades ahead, played a key role in restoring many native species to healthy and abundant numbers.

I'm sure, as well, that we all know that the lion's share of conservation funding has come from the hunting community, primarily through license fees and excise taxes paid through the Pittman-Robertson Act. In recent years, however, a gradual but persistent decline in hunter numbers has impacted state wildlife agency budgets and constrained a number of their programs and projects. This fact is gaining public attention. A February 3, 2020 story in *The Washington Post* by Francis Sellers was headlined, "*Hunting is 'slowly dying off,' and that has created a crisis for the nation's many endangered species.*"

As the historical funding model for wildlife conservation in America is challenged, it may well be argued that the next species most in need of saving is us. Is the shoe now on the other foot?

A number of social and demographic trends have for some years undermined the "natural growth" of our hunting population. In my view, however, that does not mean that the decline is inexorable.

Not 20 years ago, there was hardly a state that made any effort to promote or market the sale of hunting licenses. That's changed in a big way. Today, most all states have a dedicated hunter recruitment specialist and/or department that is increasingly active in R3 (recruitment, retention and re-activation) efforts. The modernized Pittman-Robertson Act will now give states greater discretion in their use of federal dollars for recruitment.

I've hunted or fished in six states over the past several years and now receive from each of those wildlife agencies a regularly published email newsletter that provides up-to-date information on hunting/angling opportunities in the state. I suspect most every state agency now has its own online outreach. This morning I received an email from

Mississippi's agency full of information about turkey hunting and places to hunt turkey in the Magnolia State. What a great way to incentivize current customers and cultivate new ones.

New efforts are also springing up from the private, nonprofit sector as described in this issue's story on the Montana Master Hunter Program. While the effort describes itself as, "primarily an education program," it is spinning off a number of hunting-related benefits, not only by opening new areas to hunt and building positive relations with private landowners, but also in creating a network of Master Hunters who can serve as ambassadors and mentors to newcomers. The Boone and Crockett Club is a proud partner of this innovative program.

The few examples I've touched on in this column are just the tip of the iceberg. Whether at the federal, state or local level—and among non-government organizations both large and small—there is a growing movement



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throughout the country to bring newcomers into our ranks, to expand activity among current hunters and to get "dropouts" to drop back in.

Admittedly, this is no easy task. Most in our younger generations have far more likely grown up with a basketball court in their neighborhood park than with a "back forty" on a family farm. Yet from the accounts I've read, most all novice hunters come home with a smile on their face.

The best news is that the R3 locomotive seems to be building a good head of steam. In the years ahead, we'll have to continue to pour it on. No one else is going to shovel the coal for us.

Hope to see you—and lots of you—down the trail. ■

Three generations of hunters. B&C Professional Member Jim Heffelfinger (far right), with his father and two sons enjoying the tradition of hunting together. Levi Heffelfinger (second from right) is a Boone and Crockett Fellow in ungulate research at Texas A&M University-Kingsville.



Read about the Montana Master Hunter Program on page 24.