

JUMP INTO THE MENTORING ARENA

NEW HUNTERS NEED INSTRUCTORS, AND BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB MEMBERS CAN FILL THAT VITAL ROLE

For those of us who were raised in a family that hunts, our journey to become a hunter was molded by the experiences of our elders, usually across multiple generations. We were immersed in the culture and learned at their sides even when we weren't out in the field. Over the years, we absorbed their lessons and built our own innate understanding of wildlife, hunting, conservation, and ethics. Most of us continue to pass those lessons down to our own children and grandchildren.

But what happens if you aren't raised in a hunting family? The truth is the vast majority of Americans are not raised in a hunting family. According to the *National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation*—a comprehensive report conducted every five years by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Census Bureau—there were 11.5 million adult hunters in the U.S. in 2016 (the last time the survey results were published), a decline of about 2.5 million hunters over the last two decades. The biggest red flag is the recognition that baby boomers and Generation Xers make up well more than half the current hunting population. As they age, it is predicted that hunting license sales could drop an additional 11 percent by 2025.

These factors led the outdoor community to rally around efforts to recruit, retain, and reactivate hunters. What has become known as the R3 movement has galvanized state fish and wildlife agencies and conservation organizations to work together to reevaluate traditional hunter recruitment efforts. An organizing entity known as the Council to Advance Hunting and Shooting Sports, now led by Boone and Crockett Club member Dr. Steven Leath, supports these efforts by conducting research and connecting R3 providers. In 2016, the partners released an updated and more detailed *National Hunting and Shooting Sports Action Plan* with strategies and a more disciplined approach.

One specific tactic to provide an immediate uptick in the number of hunters is to target 20- to 40-year-olds who have discretionary funds and time, as well as the independence to make their own decisions about how to spend both of those things. Many millennials have an interest in knowing where their food comes from and are willing and interested in being part of the process of providing their own protein. They are also often concerned about conservation and the environment and are interested in reconnecting to the natural world.

THE PANDEMIC EFFECT

As partners were ramping up their R3 efforts, in particular the outreach to millennials, along came 2020. The crush of the pandemic left supermarket shelves empty and outdoor recreation became a safe alternative when there was little else to do. To many, hunting became much more interesting.

Digital mapping application onX Hunt saw a 300 percent increase in active users, so the company commissioned research through Southwick Associates. They found that there was a 5 percent increase in the total number of hunting licenses sold in 2020, fueled in large part by a 25 percent increase in new hunters. According to the report,

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the new participants cited, above anything else, that “COVID afforded them more free time to spend in the field. This may have been the push they needed—the extra free time and encouragement to be outside rather than inside—to dedicate themselves to the new endeavor.”

Notably, they also found that about half of the new hunters primarily hunted to harvest meat and nearly 20 percent of 2020 hunters took up the pastime to be closer to nature. With those motivations, perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that 62 percent of the new participants were millennials.

If the COVID pandemic kickstarted the new generation of hunters, research

suggests that there are still plenty of potential new participants. Southwick Associates and DJ Case and Associates conducted national surveys and online focus groups for the Wildlife Management Institute in 2020 to gauge overall interest in learning to hunt. They found that nearly 10 percent of respondents had at least a moderate level of interest in learning to hunt which could equate to about 25 million new hunters. However, 37 percent of those who

Mentoring as defined by the R3 Community: “One-on-one interaction, either in-person or otherwise, that occurs more than once between the same parties. This would include one-on-one long-term teaching relationships, youth clubs with an education element, summer camps with multiple hands-on opportunities, in-field programs that bring the same students back more than once, electronic mentoring, etc. It would not include one-time fishing derbies, one-day seminars, instructional videos, and marketing campaigns, etc.”

For many of the people interested in learning, it often only takes an offer to spend the day in the field with someone willing to teach them.

Enjoying the moment and learning the regulations upon harvest



expressed interest had previously tried hunting, but they simply didn't have someone in their social group who could instruct them as they moved forward on the path toward independence.

At the same time, the onX report found that two-thirds of "adult-onset" hunters who began hunting over the last three years tapped into the experience of a spouse/partner or through their network of friends. Regardless of where they found it, 47 percent of new hunters in 2020 said mentorship had the biggest influence on their success and their experience.

THE INSTRUCTION CONNECTION

Clearly, tapping into the skills of experienced hunters who can share their knowledge through a more

formal coaching process—whether directly with someone they know or connecting with interested students who have no previous connection with hunting—will help transition the necessary field skills, as well as the conservation and fair chase ethic that will bring forward the next generation of hunters.

The R3 focus on creating a network of instructors and students will be a clear pathway forward and resources are being developed to help potential instructors become more engaged. One organization that is helping to bridge the gap is the First Hunt Foundation (FHF). Established in 2015 by retired U.S. Forest Service manager, Rick Brazell, the organization has rapidly grown to have a presence in 35 states with a network of 750 mentors.

While Brazell initially started with a youth focus, he quickly saw an opportunity to also add mentors who could work with every age group. The all-volunteer network has expanded to include programs like Connecting Heroes and Hunters (recall the story in the last *Fair Chase* written by a veteran who was mentored on a hunt on the Club's Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch) and recently brought on Anne Beihoffer as the volunteer National Women's Program Director. The group also has an online Mentor Map that connects prospective new hunters with mentors.

"While other groups include mentoring, we are the only group focused solely on mentoring," Brazell says. "Our goal is to create thousands of new hunters and to do that we are working to add chapters across the country with hundreds of mentors who can be there to help guide these new hunters on their journey."

Fred Williams is the Wyoming State Director for FHF and has volunteered for years in introducing new hunters to the outdoors. Williams plays a key role in the Wyoming Women's Antelope Hunt and continues that instruction during a follow up Sisters of the Sage hunt near his home in Meeteetse as well as a Beyond BOW (Becoming an Outdoors Woman) workshop and other activities. Each of these events helps provide additional levels of instruction to new hunters as they move toward becoming independent in the field.

"The goal is for the mentor to build a long-term relationship with the hunter with the objective to build the hunter's self-confidence," Williams notes. "A mentor is not a guide. They are more like a coach providing instruction and assistance so that the new hunters can ultimately be self-sufficient and enjoy the outdoors on their own. Ideally this is achieved by providing the hunter multiple

A mentor's reward, the hunter's first harvest and making a connection!



Chasing pronghorn is a great way to introduce new hunters to hunting. The Wyoming Women's Antelope Hunt is a guaranteed good time.



opportunities and being available as a coach and ‘cheer leader’.”

Beihooffer agrees. “Mentoring is finding a balance between coaching and helping out, while also letting the new hunters follow their own journey and make their own decisions. The key is being there for the long haul and supporting them for the reasons they decided to become a hunter,” he says.

Havely Holt is the first woman to serve as a chapter president for FHF, and her journey as a hunter is very recent, having been mentored on her first hunt in 2017 during the Wyoming Women’s Antelope Hunt. She hunted with Marilyn Kite, one of the founders of the event, and her guide, Kellen.

“Kellen was not there for the harvest. He was there for me and to help me feel comfortable by walking me through how the hunt would go and making sure everything fell into place while Marilyn provided the emotional support,” Holt remembers. “The whole atmosphere took the weight off my shoulders and gave me a wonderful, empowering experience.”

After participating in the Sisters of the Sage hunt the next year, Holt decided to help pass on that mentoring

experience to other people. “My first hunt experience was life changing for me at a tough time in my life and allowed me to connect with other women who were in the same boat—I wanted to pay that forward to others. My own journey as a hunter is still going on and I don’t pretend to be an expert. But I wanted my kids to see me growing and I wanted to share that with them, and I know others in our community who want to help pass along these experiences.”

While more confident teaching fishing (she launched PEAK Fish Camp, a program through FHF that teaches mothers and children how to fly fish), Holt now leads her local FHF chapter and helps coordinate outings with the Sisterhood of the Outdoors. “I started by taking my own kids out on their first hunts, but my role as chapter president has helped provide necessary structure and allowed us to grow our group of mentors.”

BECOMING A MENTOR

Boone and Crockett Club members offer tremendous potential for providing the mentoring experiences that are so important to teaching new hunters. Remember that big group of new hunters identified in the onX research? Sixty percent of them acknowledged that they felt like they were outsiders when

they were learning in 2020. Club members serving as instructors can help introduce them into our hunting traditions in a positive way.

Williams notes that the fair chase and conservation ethic that is ingrained in us is critical to pass on to new hunters who are getting into the field because of their interest in a greater connection with the natural world. “A mentor is an ambassador for hunting and their role includes coaching new hunters on how to talk about hunting in today’s society through various venues including social media, photograph etiquette, and so much more. This should include teaching the entire experience of hunting—from field to table—and explaining hunting’s role in conservation and as a means of enjoying the outdoors and providing food.”

For many of the people interested in learning, it often only takes an offer to spend the day in the field with you. According to Holt, “When people ask, ‘How did you get involved in that?’ that’s often a clue that someone is interested, which opens the door to a conversation that often leads to an invitation.”

So, make the invitation—jump into the arena, as Club founder Theodore Roosevelt would say.

“You have no idea how far your reach will be when you mentor,” Beihooffer concludes. “It starts as a ripple, but you don’t know how far that one person will take it when you kindle the flames to their passion for hunting and the outdoors.” ■



Being a mentor means showing young hunters not just how to hunt, but how to enjoy it after the season is over as well.



LEARN MORE If you are interested in becoming a mentor through the First Hunt Foundation, go to www.firsthuntfoundation.org for more information.



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