

BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB'S

POACH AND PAY PROJECT

JONATHAN GASSETT

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER

KRISTIE R. BLEVINS

EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

HUNTERS' OPINIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ILLEGAL TAKE OF WILDLIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

Modern fish and wildlife conservation is based on the public trust doctrine (PTD), which establishes a trustee relationship whereby the government holds and manages wildlife for the benefit of the public. Fundamentally, it posits that natural resources are universally important, and that the public should have an opportunity to enjoy these resources, including activities such as fishing, hunting, and trapping (Geist et al., 2001; Batcheller et al., 2010). Prior to the adoption of this philosophy, wildlife was often treated as an inexhaustible commodity, with little thought or concern for long term sustainability. As a result, many species suffered under this “limitless supply” philosophy, with some becoming extirpated or even driven to extinction.

The PTD is the foundation of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation (NAMWC) which is viewed as an important construct of law, policy, program framework, and scientific investigation that has led to the conservation and restoration of wildlife populations in the U.S. and Canada (Geist et al., 2001). Managing wildlife through the rule of law is one of the tenets of the

NAMWC. Wildlife crime, including illegal take, can have deleterious impacts on wildlife populations, the hunting experience, and social acceptance by both hunters and non-hunters. While there is a large body of research that examines the impact of international wildlife crimes, only in the last two decades have researchers taken a serious interest in issues related to domestic wildlife crime. Even fewer studies have directly examined the impacts to conservation and the financial consequences resulting from the illegal take of wildlife.

OUR APPROACH

As one of the oldest conservation organizations in North America, the Boone and Crockett Club (B&C) has long recognized the importance of the PTD and the NAMWC. In 2016, B&C commissioned a study to examine and review state restitution systems for illegal take of big game species, with the intent of assisting state agencies. While the results of this study showed that most states (42 of 50) had adequate penalties, fines, and restitutions that accurately reflected both the severity of the crime and the current values of illegally taken animals, it also found that the judicial systems were the primary obstacle to successfully convicting and punishing poachers. Respondents

(primarily commissioned wildlife officers) from this earlier study felt that judges and prosecutors did not view wildlife crimes as a priority, that the penalties were often applied inconsistently, and that wildlife cases were disproportionately dismissed (Edwards, 2017). The findings of this first study caused B&C to start the Poach & Pay Program, a collaborative effort between B&C and the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI). The program is a comprehensive research effort designed to review, assess, and address the level of illegal take of wildlife in the U.S. with the goal of further describing and reducing the barriers to prosecution identified in the first study. This three-year effort has four phases of research, including:

1. Assessing the levels of detection and conservation impacts associated with wildlife crime.
2. Describing the motivational factors and potential deterrents that influence poachers.
3. Determining the judicial and prosecutorial barriers to enforcing wildlife laws.
4. Providing solutions to improving prosecution and conviction rates of poachers, including an objective, defensible, and proportional framework for poaching penalties and restitution.

In 2021, B&C and WMI began Phase 1 of this critical research, the results of which will be a comprehensive estimate of the rates of undetected, unreported, and unresolved wildlife crimes that will allow us to determine their true impacts to conservation and the public trust agencies.

INVESTIGATING THE “DARK FIGURE”

Previous research into the “dark figure” (undetected level of wildlife crime) provides estimates that are minimal, dated, and based on small sample sizes. Adding to this dark figure are the number of wildlife crimes that are detected by someone, but not reported to law enforcement. As with any “victimless” crime, accurately estimating the number of undetected and unreported crimes is an arduous process. However, this information is critical to fully understanding the fiscal and conservation impacts that wildlife crimes have on conservation, hunters, and state trust agencies. Impacts of wildlife crimes are also important to understand, not only for the biological functions, but also from the experiential and social impacts to both hunters and the non-hunting public. By determining hunter perceptions of these impacts, we hope to further determine the true

costs and impacts that these crimes have on wildlife populations, hunter experiences, and non-hunter perceptions.

In Phase 1 of the study, we distributed surveys to 80,000 resident hunters from eight subject states (10,000 per state). Questions focused on determining hunter perceptions of the biological, experiential, and social impacts of poaching, as well as determining the degree to which wildlife violations go undetected and/or unreported. The eight states were selected to maximize variability in location, urban/rural makeup, percent of public vs. private lands, species composition, and accessibility and quality of data. States included in the study were Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, and Pennsylvania. States were also grouped regionally for analysis, with Oregon and Nevada representing the West, Ohio and Michigan representing the Midwest, Pennsylvania and Maine representing the Northeast, and Missouri and North Carolina representing the Southeast.

Hunters from the subject states responded to the survey at a rate of 17% (n = 13,640). Surveys were distributed to hunters that were randomly selected from a pool of candidates based on their relative avidity

to hunting activities—with eligible hunters having purchased a hunting license for each of the five years preceding the survey.

Hunters were surveyed extensively as a part of this research project for several reasons. Importantly, law-abiding hunters are primarily the “paying” customers of the state trust agencies charged with wildlife management, and therefore they are the primary funding source for conservation in the U.S. By their actions, hunters also likely have a vested interest and understanding of the subject matter surrounding wildlife crimes. The activities of hunters also place them in situations (hunting, scouting, etc.) that likely allow them to be familiar with the timing and circumstances (when and where) associated with illegal wildlife activities. Finally, while all the public suffer losses when wildlife crimes are committed, hunters are most often the tip of the spear for that impact, frequently being improperly lumped together with poachers by the non-hunting public that frequently struggles to differentiate lawful hunting from illegal acts of poaching.

HUNTER PERCEPTIONS – GEOGRAPHIC/SCALE IMPACTS

To geographically determine the level of concern hunters have for poaching activities, respondents were asked their opinions on the impacts of wildlife crimes at a spatial scale, specifically focusing on illegal take at the local, state, and national levels. Questions were asked at various scales ranging from the most local to the most comprehensive. Summarized responses to the four spatial scales, including lands hunted in state of residence, overall state-level impacts, lands hunted in other states, and overall national-level impacts

The additional figures (available online) show a pattern similar to Figure 1 (below) in that most respondents from all regions viewed illegal take at the state level to be extremely serious or very serious. However, the West identified the problem as extremely serious at a significantly higher rate than did the other regions. Conversely, the Northeast identified the problem as extremely serious for state-level activities at a significantly lower rate than the other regions.

HUNTER PERCEPTIONS – BIOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS

To evaluate hunter perceptions on the biological, experiential, and social impacts of illegal take, respondents were asked their opinions on several additional factors. Questions were designed to identify concerns with wildlife population levels, hunt quality, hunting opportunity, access to lands, hunter self-perception, and public perception.

Approximately 60-70% of respondents from all regions moderately or strongly agreed that there are significant negative biological, experiential, and social impacts associated with the illegal take of wildlife. The data for this set of questions is available online. The exception is seen in this question: do you feel that the illegal take of wildlife has had a negative impact on your personal perception of hunting? Approximately 30-40% of hunters selected moderately or strongly agree on the issue of perception of self as impacted by illegal take. As seen in the geographic scale analysis, hunters in the West felt that each of these impacts were significantly greater (in

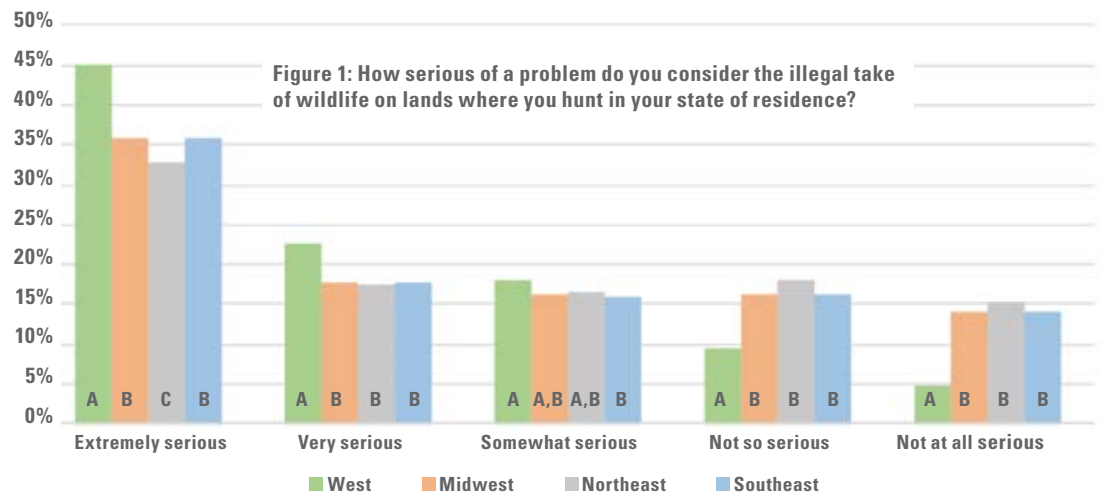


FIGURE 1 shows that, while most respondents in all four regions felt that illegal take of wildlife was a very serious or extremely serious problem on resident lands where they hunt, respondents from the West chose the very or extremely serious categories at a significantly greater ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) level than did respondents from the other regions. Different letter subscripts in all figures indicate a difference within response category (level of seriousness) at the $\alpha \leq 0.05$ level.

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See all the data presented from this survey online.

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the strongly agree response) than hunters in other regions, with the one exception being access to lands for hunting, where the western region responses were not different from the northeast and southeast regions (Figure 8). For all categories except for access to lands for hunting, the Northeast indicated that they strongly agree with the negative impacts at a significantly lower level than hunters from the other regions.

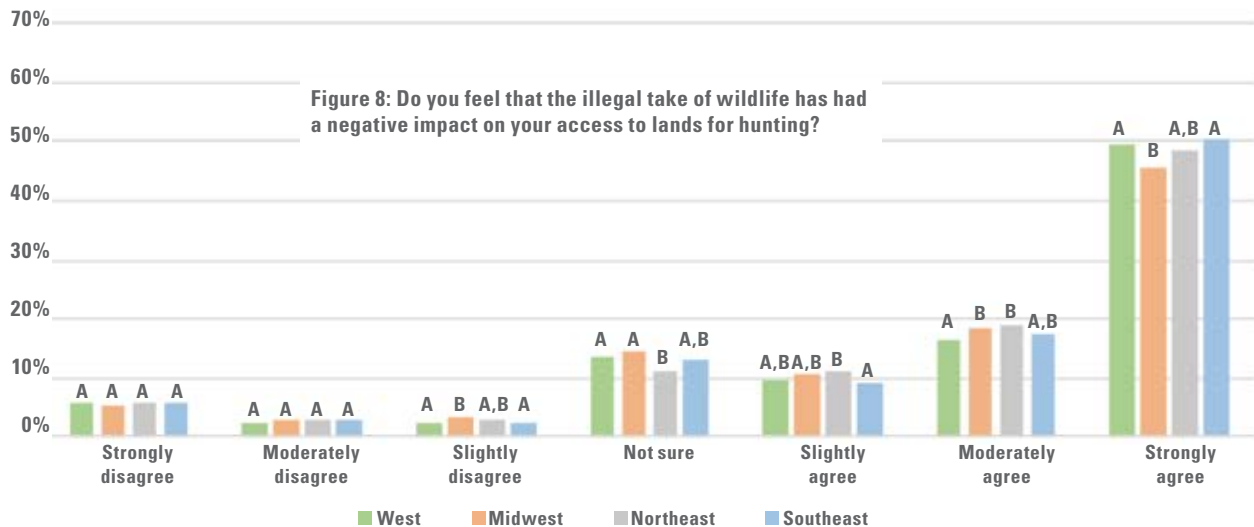
A PATH FORWARD

The initial review of the hunter survey data for the eight subject states indicated that hunters generally feel that illegal take of wildlife has negative impacts at the local, state, regional, and national levels. For states in the West,

this concern was significantly higher than for other regions. While there are several possibilities from which this difference might arise, we suspect that it is due to the perceived or real scarcity of opportunities in most western states. For example, most western states have a quota system for big game species, which may result in hunters having to wait one or more years in between hunting opportunities. Conversely, many states in the other regions offer at least some big game opportunities to be purchased over the counter (without a draw), so hunters can participate each year. This inability to consistently participate on an annual basis may cause law-abiding hunters to be more aware of the impacts that illegal take may have on their personal experience. In addition, persons that become frustrated with their drawing success rates may resort to taking wildlife illegally rather

than wait their turn. To many, poaching of wildlife may seem to be inconsequential to the many abundant wildlife populations spread across North America. However, both the removal of animals beyond what is biologically justifiable, as well as the removal of high quality “breeder” animals by illegal means may have significant biological impacts. The hunters surveyed indicated that they strongly agree that poaching has a detrimental biological impact. Likewise, the quality of the hunting experience, in the form of quality of game, abundance of game, availability of hunting lands are all concerns voiced by the hunters in this survey, with the majority either moderately or strongly agreeing that poaching has a detrimental impact on these factors. Finally, the social impacts that result from poaching activities cannot be overstated. While hunters have some concerns about self-perception, they are much more

concerned about how the non-hunting public views these illegal actions. Law-abiding hunters are frequently targeted by anti-hunting organizations, but a greater concern is the inability of the non-hunting public to differentiate between lawful, regulated hunting and poaching. In conclusion, the expectations of the Boone and Crockett Club, the Wildlife Management Institute, and our partner agencies are high, and a comprehensive study on wildlife poaching is long overdue. Success will be determined by our ability to provide the trust agencies with accurate information with which to better perform their jobs. But ultimately, success will be measured by the ability of those agencies to use this information to reduce the levels of wildlife poaching through targeted actions, increase awareness of the true costs of wildlife crimes, and lower the level of social acceptance of these crimes. It is our hope that this study will help agencies to do just that. ■



Different letter subscripts in all figures indicate a difference within response category (level of seriousness) at the $\alpha \leq 0.05$ level.

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