

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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FOSTERING ACCEPTANCE AND SUPPORT FROM THE NON-SPORTING MASSES IS KEY TO THE FUTURE OF HUNTING AND FISHING

When it comes to hunting and fishing, new approaches that generate resilient public support for these consumptive uses are needed. While strategies to enhance recruitment, retention, and reactivation of hunters—known as R3—have been (and will continue to be) important, they are not designed to engage the general, non-hunting public, nor foster a cultural Zeitgeist that supports hunting and fishing as legitimate and productive conservation strategies.

When it comes to active participation, the evidence is clear: hunting and fishing are well on their way to becoming eddies off the mainstream of our evolving culture. The explanations proffered are familiar—daily life is increasingly busy, opportunities to participate are scarce, and on and on.

Yet none of these explanations explain much of anything; they're really just descriptions encapsulating the realities of life in the twenty-first century. The more fundamental issue is that American culture is evolving away from consumptive uses like hunting and fishing. Just as cohort effects generated positive views of hunting and fishing among the baby boomer generation, so too, they're now driving other (and frequently unflattering) conceptions of hunting and fishing today.

A cursory review of the statistics is sobering. For instance, here are some numbers from a recent study in Michigan:

- 25 percent of Michiganders don't know if hunters generally follow the regulations; another 8 percent

don't believe that they do.

- 39 percent either don't know or don't think hunters are responsible people.
- 61 percent either don't know or do not believe that wildlife requires management to thrive.
- 45 percent believe that legal regulated hunting can lead to the extinction of species.

Borrowing from 12-step ideologies, recovery depends on a clear admission of the problem. Because the most probable trajectory for hunter and angler numbers is negative, new approaches are needed to sustain hunting and fishing traditions. New perspectives, approaches, and realities need consideration.

The good news is that despite naivete and general misunderstandings, public support for hunting and fishing remains strong. Nationally, approval ratings are consistently in the 70 to 80 percent range. Perhaps it's time to augment R3 and implement strategies that take advantage of general public support and strengthen it.

Organizations like the Nimrod Society and the NRA's Hunter's Leadership Forum are looking to expand generic support for consumptive use among the non-hunting public.

The Nimrod Society aims to encourage state and federal wildlife management agencies to "adopt self-sustaining revenue models to fund ongoing and comprehensive media-based education campaigns targeted at the general public and to further public understanding of the contributions made by hunters

and anglers to the protection and enhancement of fish and wildlife and their habitats." The Society was an outgrowth of Colorado's successful "Hug A Hunter" marketing campaign that significantly increased public support for hunting (and against anti-hunting ballot initiatives). In Michigan, they encouraged the establishment of the Wildlife Council. This citizen-based effort partnered with the Department of Natural Resources to deploy a targeted advertising campaign that has positively affected public attitudes. Using a one dollar surcharge included in the 2014 hunting license increase, their carefully crafted messaging shifted attitudes toward wildlife health, habitat management, wildlife conflict mitigation, and responsible hunting.

More recently, the NRA Hunter's Leadership Forum collaborated with polling firm Responsive Management to produce a book, *How to Talk About Hunting*, based on more than 30 years of survey research, focus groups, and other data that reflect American attitudes toward hunting, the use of animals, and other related topics. The text is available at no charge from the NRA. The authors

convincingly argue that the future of hunting depends on social acceptance by the non-hunting, non-shooting public and the text shows how language can be used to appeal to non-hunters.

Support within the conservation institution is not assured either. A recent study being conducted at Michigan State University indicates newcomers into the wildlife profession are mixed in their support for hunting. Fortunately, a program called Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow (CLfT), is making inroads into fostering positive attitudes toward hunting among wildlife professionals. A companion program, Hunting for Conservation, is an on-line curriculum using CLfT instructors to educate university students about the history, legacy, and benefits of hunting.

In the end, an enduring value of hunters is our explicit desire to assure that opportunities and traditions remain available for future generations. To assure that the legacy is sustained, our community would be well-advised to recognize that general public sentiment toward wildlife and hunting is at least as important as efforts to stimulate direct participation. ■

HUNTING AND FISHING ARE WELL ON THEIR WAY TO BECOMING EDDIES OFF THE MAINSTREAM OF OUR EVOLVING CULTURE.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

How to Talk About Hunting: www.nrahl.org

Nimrod Society: www.nimrodsociety.org

Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow: www.clft.org

[Read the complete study here.](#)

