

INCREASED R3 EFFORTS

I believe we can all agree that the future of hunting in America is, in large measure, dependent on three key factors.

The first factor is the need for continued public support of scientific wildlife management and, in turn, the broad-based acceptance of hunting within that regulated framework. In 1896, Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) declared that “public opinion is God.” A prophetic statement then, a bedrock truth today.

The second factor is the need for continued development and implementation of “best practices-based” programs designed to stimulate hunting participation, especially among non-traditional audiences. For years, passing along our hunting tradition from one generation to the next served to renew and build our ranks. While such organic growth is still the primary avenue for introducing new hunters, it is no longer enough. The last time I looked, our hunter replacement rate was nothing to write home about. For every 100 hunters we lose today, only 69 hunters are taking their place.

The good news is that R3 programs (recruitment, retention and reactivation) have become increasingly robust and active throughout the country through programs initiated by state wildlife agencies and a host of non-profit organizations, especially as “models of success” gain traction in new areas.

The third leg, if you will, of this stool is to continue to set aside land that is open and accessible to hunting license holders across the nation. At the beginning of this column, I opined about the “future of hunting in America.” I should have been more specific and noted the “future of hunting as a public resource in America.” That is, after all, the unique iteration of the hunting tradition in our country.

In the early 1960s, an exceptionally talented and charismatic young golfer, Arnold Palmer, captured the public’s attention at a time when the networks were first televising professional golf. Soon, thousands joined “Arnie’s Army” on the course and millions followed him on their televisions. While Palmer, and long-hitting Jack

Nicklaus, deservedly grabbed the golf headlines of that era, there is an important “rest of the story” to be told.

According to the National Golf Foundation (NGF) study, “Golf Participation in America, 2010-2020,” golfing participation in the 1960s grew by seven million new golfers, while the U.S. added 3,803 new courses as well. The study makes the point that courses built in the 1960s were mainly affordable public courses—including municipal links, 9-holers, and par 3 layouts.

The 1990s saw another spurt of golf course development. The NGF study notes, however, “Conversely the courses of the 1990s were either built in private gated communities, or they were high-end daily fee courses. The effect of this difference on the growth rate of golfers was dramatic—it was about five to six times higher in the 1960s.”

The open-to-the-public courses built in the 1960s formed the backbone of recreational golf in America and continue to do so. The NGF study reveals that 80 percent of golf played today is still on



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public courses.

Granted, you can’t make a one-to-one comparison between golf and hunting, but it strikes me that there is a universal truth about participation in both: broad-based and wide-ranging opportunity and access are the keys to getting more folks out in the field or on a course.

These thoughts were prompted by the recent announcement from the Interior Department of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s opening of 2.1 million acres of new or expanded hunting and fishing opportunities, including eighty-eight National Wildlife Refuges. This development has been described as, “The largest recent opening of public lands for hunting and fishing opportunities.” What great news!

In recent decades more and more hunters have been “locked out” of our sport. Access and expensive hunting leases are among the main culprits. For the average Joe and Jane, opening the door to hunting opportunity—a place to go—may well be the most effective way to keep current “Joes and Janes” in the field and to attract newcomers of all stripes. From everything we’ve seen so far, if we build it, they will come.

Hope to see you down the trail. ■

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- 1. The need for continued public support of scientific wildlife management and, in turn, the broad-based acceptance of hunting within that regulated framework.**
- 2. The need for continued development and implementation of “best practices-based” programs designed to stimulate hunting participation, especially among non-traditional audiences.**
- 3. To continue to set aside land that is open and accessible to hunting license holders across the nation.**