



Hunting for Wildlife Management in America

PERSPECTIVES AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

By Daniel J. Decker, Richard C. Stedman, Lincoln R. Larson and William F. Siemer



Courtesy of Daniel J. Decker

Daniel J. Decker, PhD, CWB, is a professor and department chair in the Department of Natural Resources and associate director in the Human Dimensions Research Unit, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y. He served as the 2006-2007 Wildlife Society President, was the 2012 recipient of the Aldo Leopold Medal and has been a TWS member for 33 years.

In most communities of the United States today, discussions about hunting can lead to heated debates. Yet survey data suggest that public approval of hunting is high and has been for decades. According to a recent study, 79 percent of all Americans approve of legal hunting, and similar public approval numbers have persisted since the early 1990s (Duda et al. 2010). However, this favorable attitude toward hunting does not extend to all reasons for hunting and has not translated into stable numbers of hunters. Instead, hunting participation has declined since the mid-1980s (United States Fish & Wildlife Service 2013), and the rural traditions, values and beliefs that have long formed the foundation of hunting in America seem to be shifting (Larson et al. 2014). In fact, a recent study suggests that in western states a large segment of the public values wildlife rights and protection more than wildlife use, which includes activities such as hunting (Manfredo et al. 2009).

How might these paradoxical trends coexist? If public values are indeed shifting toward wildlife rights

and protection and away from utilization, why does public support for hunting remain high? Moreover, does public approval of hunting persist because new benefits associated with hunting are gradually emerging and what might this mean for the future of hunting?

For example, anecdotal evidence over the last few years suggests a new cadre of hunters and hunting advocates is emerging. One such group, sometimes referred to as “locavores,” seem drawn to the benefits of local, free-range food (Tidball et al. 2013); however, empirical data on the prevalence of people having this new hunting orientation and the conditions that foster its emergence are lacking. In the absence of data characterizing the shifting landscape of hunting, it is prudent for wildlife managers to question unsubstantiated claims about the emergence and persistence of nontraditional hunters and avoid commitments to expensive programs designed to address the needs of such hunters before convincing evidence is collected.

The Contemporary Outlook on Hunting

To better understand attitudes toward hunting today, we designed a set of questions to explore Americans’ views of hunting. The questions were part of the 2013 Cornell National Social Survey (CNSS) of 1,000 adults living in the continental U.S. In this annual survey of Americans administered by the Survey Research Institute (SRI) at Cornell University, we wanted to re-examine two basic questions that have been a central component of the hunting discourse: How is hunting currently perceived in the eyes of the modern American public, and are certain reasons for hunting more socially acceptable than others?

In the survey, we first asked respondents a general question about whether they approved of regulated hunting. Next, we asked whether they approved of regulated hunting for a diverse set of six specific purposes—including traditional hunter-centric benefits such as obtaining a trophy, spending time with friends and family, and being close to nature—as well as contemporary, community-



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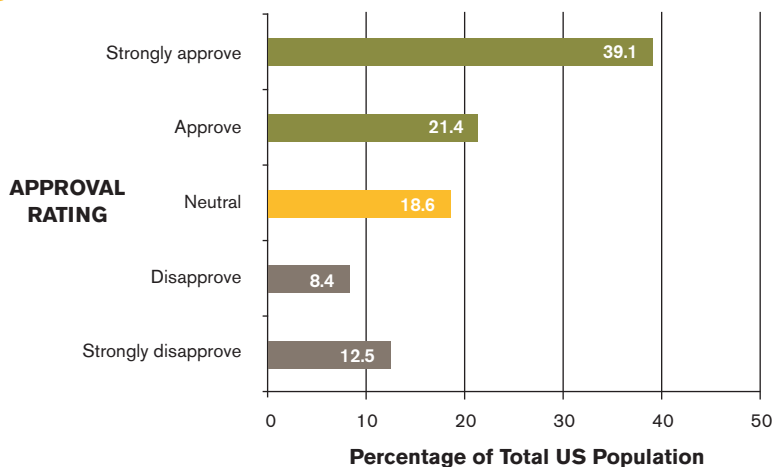


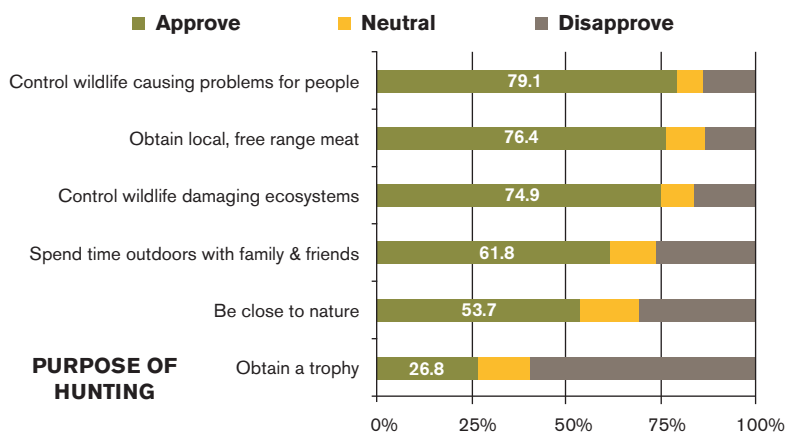
Figure 1. Questions about attitudes towards regulated hunting included in the 2013 Cornell National Social Survey of 1,000 Americans revealed a strong favorable response toward the controversial topic.

Figure 2. When asked why they approved of hunting, 75 percent or more respondents favored three community-centric purposes over traditional hunter-centric reasons.

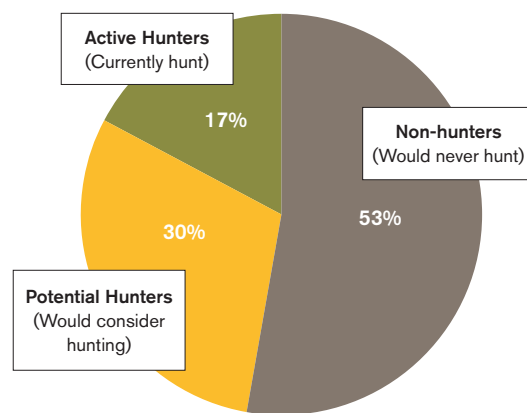
Figure 3. Although active hunters are a minority of the population today, an additional 30 percent of Americans would consider hunting; a slight majority said they would never hunt.

Figure 4. When results about Americans' approval of hunting for different purposes are broken out by the "likelihood of hunting," the majority of hunters and non-hunters alike approved of community-centric reasons.

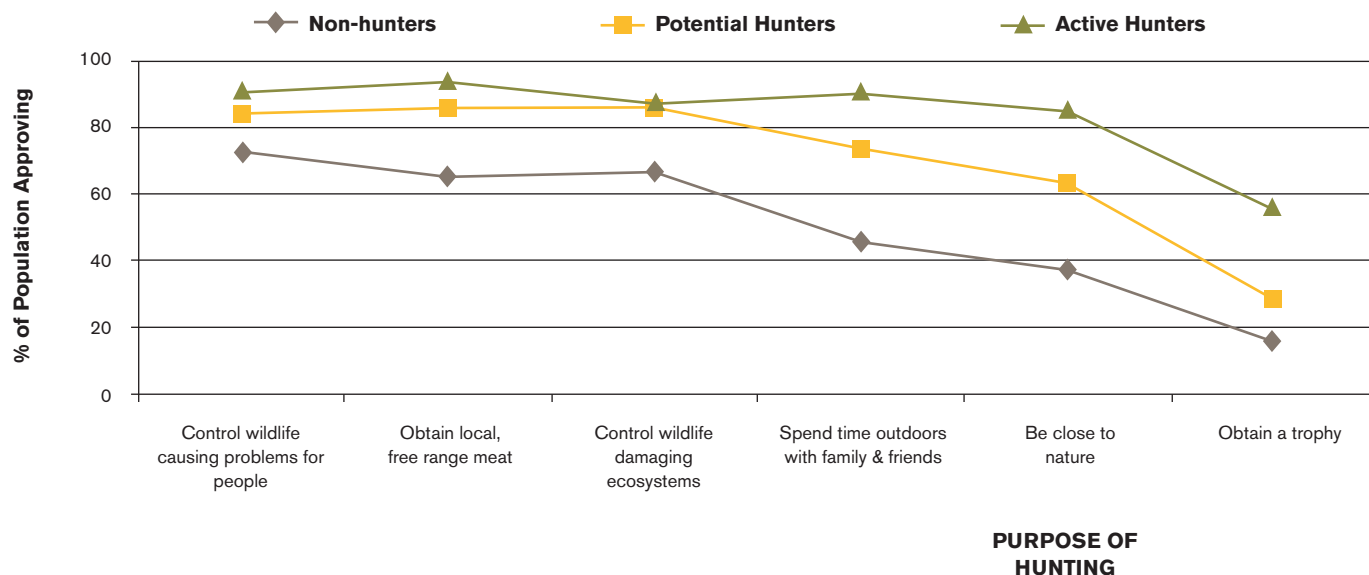
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centric benefits such as controlling wildlife causing damage to ecosystems or creating problems for people. The sixth purpose—obtaining local, free-range meat—may be relevant to both the hunter-centric and the community-centric perspectives. Finally, we asked respondents how likely they would be to participate in hunting, with responses grouped into three categories: active hunters consisting of regular and sporadic hunters; potential hunters including former hunters and individuals who said they would consider hunting in the future; and non-hunters who said they would never hunt.

Overall, the results of this 2013 national survey corroborate other research indicating that regulated hunting is generally acceptable to most Americans. Similar to other studies (Duda et al. 2010), 61 percent of Americans we surveyed approved of regulated hunting (Figure 1). Our study also revealed that approval ratings for hunting varied markedly depending on purpose. People were much more likely to support hunting for community-centric benefits (74.9 to 79.1 percent) compared to traditional hunter-centric benefits (26.8 to 61.8 percent) (Figure 2). Respondents also strongly supported hunting to obtain local, free-range meat—popularly regarded as an environmentally friendly practice providing benefits such as a healthy, sustainable source of protein.

About 17 percent of Americans surveyed considered themselves active hunters, and an additional 30 percent responded that they had hunted sometime in the past or would consider hunting in the future (Figure 3). When we examined hunting approval ratings by the three likelihood-of-hunting categories, approval ratings for community-centric benefit perspectives were high for both hunters and non-hunters (Figure 4). Whereas a majority of currently active hunters also supported hunting for more traditional, hunter-centric reasons, these purposes received substantially less support among the 53 percent of Americans who would never hunt.

Hunting Is a Wildlife Management Tool

Our results indicate that it may be time to revisit and reinforce the historic rhetoric surrounding hunting as a wildlife management tool. Results of

this and other recent studies suggest Americans by and large favor controlling wildlife populations that pose economic, health and safety risks to people and cause damage to ecosystems. Americans also approve of hunting to obtain locally harvested meat, which can be interpreted as providing benefits to participating hunters as well as communities wanting to address problems associated with increasing populations of some species of wildlife such as deer. Given contemporary concerns about human-wildlife conflicts and effects of some wildlife species on ecosystems, it is reassuring to know that most Americans—regardless of their hunting status—agree that hunting to manage wildlife that produce negative ecological or social impacts is a good thing.

Somewhat surprisingly, organizations representing hunting interests have been slow to adopt this community-centric philosophy in modern hunting messaging and practices. The need for this approach has been pointed out previously. For example, 25 years ago researchers found that very few deer hunters cited deer population management as a motivation for their hunting activity, prompting the researchers to encourage greater emphasis on hunting as an effective tool for deer population management (Decker and Connelly 1989). Since then, the wildlife management and hunting community has had little effect on changing the wildlife management orientation of hunters (Holsman 2000). If wildlife impact-reduction outcomes are indeed more palatable to non-hunters and accepted by most active and potential hunters, a renewed emphasis on hunting as a wildlife management tactic aimed at providing ecological and community benefits may appeal to a broader swath of the American public. Wildlife managers and hunters should consider the importance of this message and hunters' role in delivering the management outcomes society seeks.

Outlook for the Future of Hunting

In light of the data gathered in this survey, what insights about the future of hunting in the U.S. might we deduce? The results of this survey as well as anecdotal evidence and popular media reports suggest that a new and expanding range of individuals who are being drawn to hunting for community-centric reasons will likely

Co-authors

Richard C. Stedman, PhD, is an associate professor and director in the Human Dimensions Research Unit, Department of Natural Resources, Cornell University.

Lincoln R. Larson, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management, Clemson University. He engaged in the survey reported here while serving as a postdoctoral research associate in the Human Dimensions Research Unit, Department of Natural Resources, Cornell University.

William F. Siemer, PhD, CWB, is a research associate in the Human Dimensions Research Unit, Department of Natural Resources, Cornell University. He has been a Wildlife Society member for 27 years.



reinforce the generally positive attitude of the American public toward hunting. These “civic-purpose” hunters bring new motivations for participating such as procuring local, free-range food and reducing ecological footprints in the process (Cerulli 2012, The mindful carnivore: a vegetarian’s hunt for sustenance, [Ljung et al. 2012](#), McCaulou 2012, Call of the mild: learning to hunt my own dinner). Others may be motivated by the desire to control wildlife impacts on local ecosystems and therefore embrace the role of conservationists and environmental stewards ([Holsman 2000](#), [Stedman et al. 2008](#), [Siemer et al. 2012](#)). Still others might view hunting as a civic duty, responding to concerns about local economic, public health and safety impacts of overabundant wildlife populations ([Gkritza et al. 2010](#), [Williams et al. 2013](#)).

Although these benefits of hunting are not entirely novel, it seems that they are being accepted by more diverse segments of the American population—including women, urbanites, and environmentalists who traditionally have expressed

little enthusiasm for hunting. If the new hunters we identified in our study persist and existing hunters begin to adopt similar community-centric motives, perhaps a new public face of hunting will emerge. This new cadre of hunters could sustain public acceptance of hunting by renewing the “hunter-as-conservationist” ethos and ensuring hunters’ role in America includes civic purposes such as limiting undesirable impacts of overabundant wildlife on society.

The discourse surrounding what hunting is and what it should accomplish will continue to evolve as social and ecological conditions change, and it is incumbent upon wildlife management agencies and the hunting community to recognize the importance of these changes and respond effectively. Capacity to adapt—rather than simply react—to societal shifts regarding hunting will be optimized if built on a solid foundation of social science research that explores public acceptance of hunting and the “social habitat” that enables hunting participation. Our survey hints at exciting possibilities that need greater exploration. ■

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