

Hunters' Perspectives about Conservation Leadership

Jody W. Enck, *Human Dimensions Research Unit, Department of Natural Resources, Fernow Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853-3001*

Abstract: In this paper, I address 2 main questions. First, what do hunters expect in terms of conservation leadership? Second, to whom do hunters look for conservation leadership? Various hunters think about leadership in different ways. All hunters think of conservation leadership in terms of making sure they can continue to do whatever it is that they absolutely need to do to think of themselves as hunters—not to go hunting, but to be hunters.

Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 51:532-536

Conservation leadership is one of the most important topics faced by individuals and groups interested in fish, wildlife, and other natural resources. The kinds of leadership to be provided and from where that leadership should emerge are 2 questions that have generated much discussion. In an earlier presentation, Don MacLauchlin spoke about conservation leadership from the perspective of wildlife management agencies. In a later talk, James Earl Kennamer spoke about this topic from the perspective of a well-known nongovernmental conservation organization. This paper discusses conservation leadership from the perspective of a public stakeholder group—one with which many wildlife agencies and nongovernmental organizations are very familiar—that is, hunters.

In this paper, I address 2 main questions. First, what do hunters expect in terms of conservation leadership? Second, to whom do hunters look for conservation leadership? My answers for these questions come partly from my experiences over the last decade studying hunters and hunting as a member of the Human Dimensions Research Unit (HDRU) at Cornell University. These responses are also based on the accumulated insights from my colleagues in the HRDU and across the country.

What does conservation leadership mean to hunters?

Over the years, researchers in HDRU have found that different kinds of hunters think of conservation leadership in different ways. It does not matter whether the context for leadership pertains to: opportunities for hunters to have satisfying experiences, mechanisms for recruiting more hunters, or the establishment of hunting policies and regulations. Various hunters think about leadership in different ways.

For example, in a recent study we looked at the kinds of things people said they had to do to think of themselves as hunters. In other words, we determined how people develop personal identities as deer hunters. There are certain activities and behaviors in which people need to engage to be deer hunters. These can be thought of as "rites of passage." These rights of passage and the behaviors associated with them are facilitated by specific combinations of groups. In New York State, 8 groups ensure that rites of passage happen: (1) state wildlife agency, (2) manufacturers and retailers of hunting equipment, (3) outdoor press, (4) family members, (5) hunting companions, (6) local hunting and fishing clubs, (7) state and national hunting organizations, and (8) hunters themselves.

We categorized hunters based on the combinations of groups they relied on to facilitate their important rites of passage. We found 9 distinct types of hunters among people who buy a big game license in the state. Using insights from that identity study and other studies looking at hunter satisfactions and hunter recruitment and retention, I developed a partial answer to the question about what conservation leadership means to hunters:

All hunters think of conservation leadership in terms of making sure they can continue to do whatever it is that they absolutely need to do to think of themselves as hunters—not to go hunting, but to be hunters.

The second part of my answer is that different types of hunters think about themselves as hunters in different ways, and that impacts what they think conservation leadership is. Here are 3 examples from the hunter identity study.

One type of hunter in New York is called a politically-connected hunter. This type of hunter is skilled and experienced. These persons get actively involved in being conservation leaders themselves. They think of conservation leadership in terms of political support for hunting, public recognition of the role of hunters as conservationists, and the establishment and enforcement of standards for hunting safety, ethics, and competency.

Most people attending this conference may think about conservation leadership in similar ways. However, most rank-and-file hunters do not. In fact, these politically-connected hunters think about conservation leadership very differently from most hunters, and they represent only about 3% of license buyers in New York.

Another type of hunter is called a close-knit community hunter. This kind of hunter operates within a social hierarchy of family members, hunting companions, and themselves. Within this social hierarchy, the more experienced and skilled members teach and encourage the less experienced. There is quite a bit of local control by the people at the top of the hierarchy over what it means to be a hunter and how people become hunters.

Close-knit community hunters think of conservation leadership as facilitating their efforts to make decisions about what it means to be a hunter and what they do as hunters within the group and at the local level. They are not looking for some centralized set of standards. They only want general conservation guidelines within which they can operate. This group accounts for about 10% of all license buyers in New York.

The third kind of hunter I want to describe is called a highly-dependent hunter. Persons in this type rely on a combination of many different groups so that they can be hunters. They rely on others because they do not want to have to work hard at becoming hunters themselves. These highly-dependent hunters believe all hunters are about equal, and they want to have equal opportunities—even if they don't have the skill, knowledge, or time to take advantage of those opportunities.

These highly-dependent hunters think about conservation leadership in terms of somebody else setting the standards and defining what it means to be a hunter. They have no expectation of becoming a hunter through a social hierarchy like in close-knit community hunters. They have no expectation that they will help develop the standards for other hunters like politically-connected hunters. They simply want to be able to meet the standards—as long as they are not too high—whenever they chose to be hunters. This group makes up about 15% of license buyers in New York.

Two take-home messages emerge from these findings. First, hunters think of conservation leadership in broader terms than just ensuring the political survival of hunting as an activity and in terms of making sure they have a place to hunt. Second, hunters think of conservation leadership in broader terms than just things that happen during the hunting season. In fact, ensuring that seasons are as long as possible and bag limits are as big as possible are not even part of the conservation leadership expectations for most hunters.

To whom do hunters look for conservation leadership?

In discussion with people at conferences like this, it has become apparent to me that many attendees expect that hunters would look to wildlife agencies for conservation leadership. After all, agencies provide hunting opportunities through establishment of regulations, protect wildlife populations and habitat, manage public lands for wildlife, and often provide access opportunities. Other people seem to expect that hunters would look to hunting organizations for leadership. After all, those organizations publicize the importance of hunting, lobby for the protection of hunting opportunities, and work with agencies to help develop hunter safety and training courses.

Still others may expect hunters to look to the hunting industry. That group of manufacturers and retailers makes and sells hunting equipment and clothing. Through these efforts, the hunting industry markets various images of hunters to both hunters themselves and to the nonhunting public. Other people may expect hunters to look to the outdoor press for conservation leadership. After all, the outdoor press is thought by some to be the voice of hunters, the one group with the capacity to issue a clarion call for hunters to get involved or clean up their act or be proud in their hunting heritage.

However, some of the insights I have already shared suggest that at least some hunters do not want “external help” in defining what hunters should be like and how hunting should be done, or even if hunting opportunities are available in the future. In reality, most hunters look internally, either to their local groups or to themselves for conservation leadership.

We have found that in New York State, only about 1/5 of hunters look to any of these groups. Nineteen percent of people who buy a hunting license look to either the

wildlife agency or hunting organizations for conservation leadership. Twenty-one percent of hunters expect the hunting industry to provide leadership. Twenty-two percent of hunters look to the outdoor press. Further, these 19%–22% of hunters are all the same people. That is, if a hunter looks to any of these groups for conservation leadership, they usually look to all of these groups.

However, the other 4/5 of license buyers look elsewhere for leadership. Where do they look? They look locally. If conservation leadership is aimed at facilitating whatever they need to do to become and continue to be hunters, then they look to their own family members (36%), their own hunting companions (38%), and even themselves (49%).

What does all this mean?

These findings indicate that hunters do not all think alike in terms of what they believe conservation leadership is. Hunters do not all look to the same groups for conservation leadership as people who already consider themselves to be conservation leaders. These findings are challenges to be dealt with in this conference session. Nonetheless, some important positive foundations emerged from these insights and can be built on for the future.

One positive is that many hunters look at themselves and their closest associates as conservation leaders. Because many hunters think about conservation leadership differently than some folks who consider themselves to be conservation leaders, hunters' efforts at being conservation leaders broadens the value and impact of all combined leadership efforts. In this broader sense, conservation leadership does not focus on specific issues like political support for hunting, publicity about the role of hunters in conservation, or establishment of hunting and safety standards—which all are efforts aimed in some way at external, nonhunting audiences as much as at hunters. The conservation leadership efforts of many hunters are more personal. Those efforts are aimed at ensuring hunters' own ability to continue enjoying and participating in hunting and ensuring that other people they care about get shaped as hunters in ways that are meaningful to them.

Another positive is that groups we might traditionally think of as leaders—the wildlife agencies and hunting organizations—do not have to carry the conservation leadership load all by themselves. In fact, our findings and experiences have shown that these groups cannot and do not carry the conservation leadership banner for most hunters. Many other groups also carry the leadership banner and play essential leadership roles. My overall message is that we cannot safely assume that all hunters think of conservation leadership in the same ways, and we cannot safely assume that all hunters look for conservation leadership in the same places.

Parting Shot

We gain much by knowing what hunters mean by conservation leadership, and by knowing to whom they look for their leadership. With a better understanding about how broadly hunters think about conservation leadership, we have an opportunity to communicate better with other segments of the population who are not involved in

hunting and other conservation-related activities. For example, we can communicate better with the nonhunting public about what hunting means from a very personal perspective. Many hunters are looking for conservation leadership to help them to be hunters, not how to go hunting, yet the conservation leadership message heard by many nonhunters has more to do with the latter than the former.

Further, because we know hunters look to a broad array of groups for conservation leadership, we have an opportunity to enter into new kinds of conservation partnerships. We now have a better sense of the value of family members, hunting companions, and even individual hunters in providing conservation leadership. With knowledge of what hunters expect from these groups, public agencies and private organizations can use their combined strength to facilitate the efforts of these groups. New insights about the old issue of conservation leadership can make those opportunities become reality.