

## THE SOUTHEASTERN PUBLIC HUNTING PROGRAM

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The present paper was prepared upon the request of the Game Program Committee for the 1951 meeting of the Southeastern Association of Game and Fish Commissioners. It is based largely on a questionnaire that was sent to and answered by all southeastern states. Grateful acknowledgment is due the many individuals throughout the southeast who contributed to this paper by their careful compilation of the public hunting data for their respective states.

At no time in the history of game management in the southeast has the establishment and management of public hunting areas assumed the importance that it has in the past five years. Largely responsible for the demand for public hunting areas have been three major factors: the increase in human population, the posting of private lands, and the destruction of game habitat through agricultural and other economic development. There is little possibility that the problems presented by these conditions can be totally eliminated, but there is every reason to believe that the harmful effects to game and the management of game for the average hunter of at least the latter two can be modified by wise land use practice and a better understanding between the landowner and the sportsman. Fortunately there exists the tool to accomplish these ends in the comparatively recent inception of progressive game management programs in the southeastern states.

At present many conservation agencies are accepting the realistic point of view that the day of free hunting for the average man is largely over and that every hunter is going to have to pay a reasonable sum for the privilege of hunting. The problem is not one of supplying free hunting, but one of supplying hunting at a price that the average man can afford to pay. The solution to this problem is divided into two main spheres of endeavor — the acquisition of land for public hunting purposes and the managing of this land in such a manner that its utmost game potential is realized.

Managed hunts are not new in the south. Apparently all of the early hunts were held on National Forests. These lands still predominate in the public hunting area picture, but other types of land ownerships are beginning to become of importance. At present managed hunts are being held on land belonging to state forest agencies, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, game departments, the armed services, and private individuals. It appears now that appreciable expansion of public hunting programs will be dependent upon the availability of lands other than National Forest lands — particularly private lands where ownership is such that they are adaptable to long-termed cooperative agreements with game agencies.

To date Florida is the only southeastern state that has a great deal of private land under public hunting agreements. Land ownership in Florida probably lends itself to such a program to a greater degree than in other southeastern states, since a very large percentage of the land in this state consists of large cattle ranches or timber holdings.

Florida is possibly also unique in the fact that it is more or less a pioneer state and that in many parts of the state neither the average man nor the local courts accept the fencing and posting against hunting of lands that until very recently were wide open. In many counties in Florida it is utterly impossible to obtain a trespass conviction for hunting. Regardless of whether or not this situation is just, it does exist and constitutes a major factor in negotiations for public hunting rights on private lands. In such negotiations probably the strongest talking point of the game agency is the contention that through the cooperation of the game agency and the general good will resulting from the land owners contributing his land for public hunting purposes, the area will be less subject to trespass and property damage, particularly of the malicious type. This has definitely proven the case on those private areas in Florida that have been under a public hunting agreement for one or two years. At present this fact is serving as a very useful tool in obtaining additional lands under similar agreements.

One of the most striking points brought out during the examination of the questionnaires was the variation in different states in types of hunting, techniques of hunt management, and general thinking and concepts regarding public hunting. As a rule the answers given reflect the fact that each state proceeded toward the development of a public hunting program along its individual pattern and almost completely independent of experience in other states. There are, of course, similarities between the techniques for public hunting area management in different states. Quite likely these independent developments of techniques necessitated a great deal of duplication of effort that could have been partially avoided by a greater exchange between the states of ideas and techniques. The authors are, of course, aware of the variety of problems presented by hunting areas in different states and the difficulty of working out a uniform management technique even for the different areas in one state. Not until the present year was a uniform plan put into effect for all of the game department managed hunting areas in Florida.

One public hunting management tool that is used in most of the southeastern states is the checking station. All of the nine southeastern states conducting managed hunts operated checking stations in one form or another. The most satisfactory form seems to be the check-in/check-out type maintained at entrances to public hunting areas. All states using this type report it of some value in controlling kill, enforcing hunt rules, improving public relations, and in collecting information necessary for proper management of the hunt area. The estimates of the value of checking stations varied greatly not only between states but between different areas in the same state. The checking station is a rather expensive activity that will quite likely diminish in importance. At present, however, it is probably the number one tool in the management of public hunting areas.

The extent to which individual southeastern states have undertaken a managed hunt program varies tremendously. In Table 1 is presented a breakdown by ownership classes of the acreages in managed hunting areas in the various states. Only those areas are included on which is practiced some special regulation of hunting such as the operation of checking stations or issuance of special permits. These acreages do not include those areas of public or private lands open to general hunting. No area closed to hunting is included in this table unless it is specifically associated with or a part of a managed hunting area.

Table 1. Acreage in public hunting areas and other pertinent data relative to the southeastern public hunting program.

	AL	AK	FLA	GA	KY	LO	MS	NC	SC	TN	VA	Total
National Forest Lands												
Open to Hunting	82,000	50,000	345,000	158,000			183,066	345,484		54,000	1,465,000	2,682,550
Closed to Hunting	30,000	13,000	222,000				5,300	22,789			35,000	328,089
State Forest Lands												
Open to Hunting										104,512	46,000	150,512
Closed to Hunting												
T.V.A. Lands												
Open to Hunting	8,000								27,000			35,000
Closed to Hunting												
U.S. Air Force Lands												
Open to Hunting			390,000									390,000
Closed to Hunting			168,000									168,000
Private Lands												
Open to Hunting	10,000		874,000									884,000
Closed to Hunting			20,000									20,000
Game Dept. Owned Lands										13,900		70,900
Open to Hunting			57,000									57,000
Closed to Hunting			57,000									57,000
U.S.F.W.S. Lands												
Open to Hunting			25,000		37,000		10,500	1,000				73,500
Closed to Hunting			65,000		31,000		21,000	49,000				166,000
Total												
Open to Hunting	100,000	50,000	1,691,000	158,000	37,000		193,566	346,484		199,412	1,511,000	4,286,462
Closed to Hunting	30,000	13,000	532,000		31,000		26,300	71,789			35,000	739,089
No. of Managed Hunting Areas	5	1	14	5	1	0	3	11	0	7	3	50
Special Permit Required	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
Charge for Permit	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No		No	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
Estimated No. of Hunt Participants	200+	6,000	14,000	1,800	600		9,500	4,300		3,315+	50,000	89,715+
Estimated Deer Kill	10	350	2,200	181	111		438	311			2,275	5,867

Acreages in Table 1 do not necessarily reflect progressiveness with regard to a public hunting program since those acreages under management and protection for eventual public hunting are not included. Also some states are purposely avoiding as undesirable regimentation special regulations for public hunting areas. Such regulations are good management only if they are needed to prevent overhunting, help finance the program, equitably distribute public hunting privileges, or as is usually the case with private lands, acquire public hunting rights. It appears that in most southeastern states present conditions are such that special hunt controls do constitute good management for public hunting areas. There is, however, every reason to believe that this situation will change in many areas as deer populations increase and hunters become more conservation minded. Special hunting regulations designed to reduce kill or prevent property damage should eventually eliminate themselves. This, of course, does not necessarily apply to those designed to distribute hunting or finance special programs.

Because of fire hazard, regulation of camping or forestry areas — whether they be public or privately owned lands — presents a troublesome management problem. There is either the danger of fire or the headache resulting from the dissatisfaction of hunters who are not permitted to camp on the hunt area, or are required to camp in designated camp sites. In the experience of the authors and others, restrictions on camping have caused more unfavorable criticism of the public hunting program than any other aspect, including the charging of special permit fees.

The opposition to camping regulations is easily understandable since one of the major satisfactions in hunting lies in camping and the relief it offers from the regimented vexations of present day civilization. Here, as with any other type of regimentation of hunting under a public hunting plan, we are faced with the necessity of accepting the inevitable. The unavoidable regimentation though unquestionably not as pleasant as the hunting freedom of 100 years ago, is still the best we can do in the face of the growing human population and the necessity for making every parcel of land available for public hunting satisfy the largest possible number of hunters. The danger is that regimentation and artificiality in hunting may increase to such a degree as to destroy the finer aspects of the sport. This factor should be given a great deal of thought in planning a public hunting program. Many persons, including the authors, feel that all game administrators should make a positive effort to limit regimentation to the minimum compatible with practical management of a given area.

Consistently expressed in replies to the questionnaire is the opinion that the public hunting program is very popular. Five of these seven states commenting on this question stated that the program had an excellent effect on public opinion, two reported a good effect. Particularly encouraging from the public opinion point of view is the fact that all states who have tried it believe that restocking of one species can be carried on successfully where other species are being hunted. This seems to reflect a much needed awakening of conservation mindedness in the southeastern hunter.

The kill reports submitted show that very few of the southeastern states have in effect, on public hunting areas, an adequate game kill inventory program. All states gave a figure for the deer kill on hunt areas but only North Carolina was able to present figures for all species hunted. At least in some cases this reflects the newness of the program and the attitude that the immediate establishment of

the areas is the important thing and such not absolutely essential activities, as game kill inventory, can come later.

The total amount of game killed on public hunting areas in the southeast is at present small, but will undoubtedly increase with improved management. In Table 1 is presented the 1950 - 51 deer kill for the various states. Data on other kills were too meager for tabulation.

Also Table 1 gives the estimated numbers of hunt participants in the various states. These figures are either actual permit sales for 1950 - 51, permit allotments for 1951 - 52, estimates based on the 1950 - 51 permit sales plus expected sales for 1951 - 52, or estimates based on checking station records. Virginia leads the field in hunt participants with Florida a distant second. Neither of these states at present limits the number of hunters on most of their hunting areas.

As with other phases of the public hunting programs, there is a great deal of variation in the types of permits used by different states. These range in cost from the \$5.00 per day charged for shooting quail on one area in Florida to no charge for hunting on public hunting areas in Mississippi.

All states except three have separate permits for individual hunts: Virginia has a \$1.00 stamp for National Forest hunts and \$1.00 stamp for State Forest hunts; Florida has one \$5.00 stamp good for all hunts except two special quail hunts, two special bear hunts, and the Air Force conducted deer hunt at Eglin Field.

All states with managed hunts except two charge a special fee for hunting on managed hunting areas. This charge appears to be completely justified on the grounds of at least partially supporting such areas from funds contributed by those persons directly benefitting.

The likelihood of big game and waterfowl hunting areas becoming self-supporting is very good. With waterfowl the southeastern hunt manager is able to take advantage of birds produced somewhere else at no cost to his particular management area, and with big game self-support is made more likely by the fact that, for example, it takes a much smaller amount of land to produce a satisfactory bag of deer than it does to produce a satisfactory bag of quail. Illustrative of this situation is the following comparison of Florida deer and quail kills: approximately 1,400 legal deer were killed last year by 5,530 hunters on the 350,000-acre Eglin Military Reservation hunting area to give a legal kill of approximately one deer per 250 acres. Since this area is widely proclaimed as very satisfactory deer hunting, and a kill of one deer per four hunters is certainly outstanding in the southeast, I believe that it is reasonably safe to assume that in this case four deer hunters were satisfied with 250 acres of land. The best quail kill, of which we have record on unmanaged land in Florida, was 1,673 birds on a 15,000-acre pasture, or roughly one bird per nine acres. Since the average quail hunter who keeps bird dogs will probably not be satisfied with less than fifty or sixty birds a year, we see that it would take at least 500 acres to satisfy one hunter, or 2,000 acres to satisfy four hunters, as compared to the 250 acres necessary for the four deer hunters. These figures are, of course, theoretical with any use of the term "satisfied." Nevertheless, they do indicate a fundamental probability that it will take at least ten times as much land to produce satisfactory quail hunting as to produce satisfactory deer hunting. In view of this, it appears unlikely that it will ever be practical to maintain public shooting areas for quail on a self-supporting basis at a cost the average hunter can afford to pay unless tremendous improvements are made in quail management techniques. Probably the basic difference between

quail and deer hunting is the fact that in general the actual bagging of quail is essential to satisfactory quail hunting whereas the hunting of deer with a reasonable chance to kill one provides satisfactory hunting.

Complete data covering total costs (including law enforcement, research, development, maintenance, and administration) of operating public hunting areas were obtained from only three states. The approximate annual per acre cost for these three states was: North Carolina—55 cents, Georgia—15 cents, and Florida—9 cents. The great variation in these costs reflects two principal considerations—the availability of land for public hunting purposes and the degree of development of the hunting areas. Illustrative is the fact that costs on Florida areas range from 34 cents per acre on the Gulf Hammock tract, which is an important timber producing area and has a heavy law enforcement and development budget, to 0.4 of a cent per acre on the Collier tract, an area of relatively minor economic value whose expense at present is limited to employment of wildlife officers and operation of checking stations. Operational costs on such areas as Collier will undoubtedly increase considerably.

In planning further expansion of Florida's public hunting program, principally on private lands, ten cents per acre per year is being used as the basic cost consistent with the Game Department's budget and the demand for public hunting. This ten cents is considered as rental payment for the land although no outright rental is generally paid. From 1 to 2 cents of this amount is to be spent for initial development such as fence construction or pasture improvement, and the remainder is for law enforcement and non-technical development or maintenance—all construed to be directly beneficial to the landowners, but also of importance to game. To this cost, where desirable, will be added the expense of specific game management activities such as food planting, control burning, or other habitat improvement measures, operation of checking stations, and research.

Several states expressed doubt as to the value of refuge areas. The feeling exists that we are rapidly approaching or, in some cases, have already reached the stage where adequate regulation of hunting is possible without resorting to closing areas to hunting. If we have reached this stage in conservation development then the primary function of the refuge—the preservation and restoration of breeding stock is no longer important.

The overall picture of public hunting area acquisition and management in the southeast is most encouraging. Certain states have had more opportunities along these lines and some have been more aggressive in taking advantage of the opportunities that exist. Nevertheless, all are cognizant of the problem and anxious to take aggressive steps toward its solution. In view of this, there is every reason to believe that the progressive public hunting program apparent already in most of the southeast will be continued.