

## ADVANCED HUNTER EDUCATION AND SHOOTING SPORTS RESPONSIBILITY

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When I began to put this piece on hunting and hunter education together, I thought that it would probably be a fairly easy task. I was wrong. I've been an active hunter for 36 years, and intimately involved in hunter education for over 20. That still didn't seem to help very much. As I began to develop my material, I started to see why it was so tough to do. Hunters and hunting are in big trouble. The related problems are many and complex.

Twenty-five years ago, as a young Forester in Idaho, I could hardly have imagined that hunting, the sport of millions, would ever face serious threat. But, the world turns, social attitudes change, and not only does a threat exist, it becomes more serious by the minute. The number of those dedicated to slandering the hunter is increasing. The news media gladly cooperates with anti-hunters by editorial attack and biased reporting. Politicians seek to improve their electoral prospects by writing legislation that would once have been political suicide.

In the midst of all this, the hunter must often feel more than a bit confused. And, there are no easy answers. But let's step back a bit, and take a good look at our problem—Respect. Webster defines "respectable" the following way: worthy of esteem, of moderate excellence, conforming to socially acceptable behavior, attitudes, and ethics. Is that us? Sometimes I'm led to wonder.

Aldo Leopold, in his Sand County Almanac, had a few things to say on the subject:

*"There is a value in any experience that exercises those ethical restraints collectively called sportsmanship. As hunters, our tools for the pursuit of wildlife improve faster than we do, and sportsmanship is a voluntary limitation in the use of these armaments. It is aimed to augment the role of skill, and shrink the role of gadgets—in the pursuit of wild things."*

*"A peculiar virtue in wildlife ethics is that the hunter ordinarily has no gallery to applaud or disapprove of his conduct. Whatever his acts, they are dictated by his own conscience. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this fact!*

*"Voluntary adherence to an ethical code elevates the self-respect of the sportsman, but it should not be forgotten that voluntary disregard of ethics degenerates and depraves him."*

Perhaps then, we should take a better look at ourselves. Additionally, however, we must not overlook a second opportunity—to take a better look at those around us. Specifically, the non-hunting public. Note that I said the non-hunting public, not the anti-hunters.

The United States has approximately 18-20 million hunters. On the other side, a perhaps smaller, yet extremely vocal group of anti's. Somewhere in the middle, you'll find the non-hunters, 200 million of them. About 90 percent of our total population. Along with our own self-examination, this is surely the group upon which we must concentrate. And we can do just that, through education. Educating ourselves, and in the process, educating them. For that is where the battle for hunting acceptability will be won or lost. Not by preaching to the already converted hunter, or by dragging Cleveland Amory out of his closet and flogging him publicly at every turn. You may persuade the hard core of the hunting fraternity that you are doing great work with that effort, but I guarantee you that

it will have just the opposite effect on the people you really need to convert in order to win. This concept is the basic premise for the National Wildlife Federation's Advanced Hunter Education program.

Let's take that look at the general public. On November 30, 1979, the initial findings of a 3-year study on public attitudes about wildlife were announced by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Among the study's important findings was the fact that public attitudes toward hunting depend on the purpose of the hunt. The people overwhelmingly supported hunting for subsistence, translated into more readily understood outdoor jargon—meat on the table. And the public was little concerned about who did the killing. To be more specific, 64 percent approved of hunting for recreation, if the meat was used; but, about 60 percent opposed hunting simply for sport or recreation. Over 80 percent opposed hunting exclusively for a trophy.

Some time ago, the National Shooting Sports Foundation completed the second of 2 public opinion surveys on the nonhunting public's view of the hunter. Among these studies' important findings was the perception that the hunter is inexpert at his avocation because:

- 1) He shoots other humans accidentally.
- 2) His aim is inaccurate and amateurish. He wounds his quarry which then suffers unnecessarily because of his poor marksmanship.
- 3) He is no respecter of private property. He does not ask permission to trespass, he litters, and in other respects he is somewhat of an outdoor slob.

The summary findings of all these public attitude studies have been cited to illustrate a very significant conclusion. Whether or not sport hunting continues in America as an acceptable avocation will not depend upon the growing, well-financed, and vociferous band of anti-hunters. Instead, it will depend on the 200 million non-hunters, and whether or not the majority of them can be convinced that:

- 1) Hunting will not impair or adversely affect variety and optimal breeding stocks of wildlife.
- 2) Hunters will continue their active support of wildlife habitat conservation and restoration programs, including those for non-game wildlife.
- 3) Hunters are willing to put forth the time, effort, and money to qualify themselves to pursue their sport as experts, proficient in the use of arms, and knowledgeable about their quarry.

As regards points 1 and 2, I would like you to know that the National Wildlife Federation publishes 3 educational booklets, targeted at the non-hunter who has expressed either concern about, or outright opposition to hunting and trapping. These are: "Hunting and Conservation," "Should We Hunt?," and "Trapping and Conservation." If you haven't read these publications, get a copy and see how we inform and educate the non-hunter. We have distributed over a quarter-million of these booklets, and we have met with notable success in persuading the non-hunter that the removal of surplus wildlife does not adversely affect wildlife populations, if the taking is well regulated by competent professionals. We have found that reasonable people agree that the decision to hunt or not to hunt is a personal one, and that the preference is motivated by their own moral or philosophical persuasions.

Now, concerning point 3. The National Wildlife Federation is committed to reversing the anti-hunting trend and to encouraging higher standards of hunter behavior in a wider segment of the hunting population. We have asked all NWF affiliates, and the thousands of affiliate member clubs across the country to take part in a program to help educate our ranks, and to make the public aware of our efforts in the process. We are seeking to promote advanced hunter education courses in colleges and universities throughout the nation. And, we are in the process of implementing pilot courses within the Continuing Adult Education Systems.

To assist in this significant effort, the Federation has recently published a new manual<sup>1</sup>, "Advanced Hunter Education and Shooting Sports Responsibility." The 286-page illustrated manual is designed as a course guide for those interested in conducting advanced hunter training courses at universities, adult education centers, secondary schools, and sportsmen's clubs.

Based on the big "Rs" of hunting—respect, responsibility, restraint, and resources—the manual is divided into 43 lessons which detail 150 hours of study and activities. Lessons focusing on public attitudes about hunting include "The Hunting Controversy," "Hunting Ethics in America," "Respect for Resources and People," and "Improving the Hunter's Image." Other lessons concern wildlife habitat, populations, and laws, and advanced hunting methods and techniques.

Presently, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies is conducting a comprehensive research study on hunter education in all its facets. As a member of the advisory panel to the study team, I feel sure that when the project is completed some strong recommendations will be made concerning the need for advanced training.

I am more and more convinced that the hunter needs to go "back to school." First, to provide a trained hunting population, skilled in their sport, well-versed in game management concepts and needs, and fully aware and supportive of outdoor manners. And second, to reflect a positive image to the non-hunting public. An image that says, "We're aware of our shortcomings, and are doing something about them."

The advantages are clear, and the challenge unavoidable. We can no longer be satisfied with being just "average." Someone once said, "average means, the best of the worst, and the worst of the best." I don't think that being average is good enough, and I hope you agree. Our hunting tradition is at stake. As John Donne reminded us, "No man is an island; we are all diminished when any part of our inheritance is lost. So when that alarm bell sounds, don't ask for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee. It tolls for all of us."

<sup>1</sup>Authors of the manual are Delwin E. Benson, extension wildlife specialist and advanced hunter education instructor at Colorado State University, and Rodd E. Richardson, wildlife biologist with the U.S. Forest Service.