

Game Warden Role and Responsibilities Associated with Metropolitan Areas

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Abstract: The need for game wardens in metropolitan areas is greatly underestimated. Demographics are used to show comparisons between tasks performed by wardens in metro vs. rural areas. This is demonstrated by tabulating the activity from wildlife agency reports. Results from Oklahoma hunter participation surveys are used to calculate regional hunting pressure and illustrate the volume of investigations. Wildlife revenue data from 3 county-based license categories are used as relative indices to show sportsmen density. This paper will show the great disproportion of sportsmen density to wardens deployed. Much of the information presented in this paper is based on 20 years of practical field experience as a game warden in the 2 major metropolitan counties in Oklahoma.

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I am frequently asked by the public, “Why is there a game warden here in the city?” Public perception that more game wardens across the state are needed is true. The intensity of warden activity varies with the seasons giving some relief between hectic high-demand periods. Densely populated areas contain a proportionately higher number of outdoor enthusiasts. Opportunities for wildlife enforcement activities are limited only by the warden’s energy level and personal obligations. Fortunately, a large population is also served by numerous agencies whose responsibilities often expose them to situations under the purview of local wardens. Mutual respect and cooperative effort with other agencies play a key role in the efficiency of the outnumbered metro wardens. Support provided by Lydia Land of the Tulsa County Sheriff’s Office and Phyllis Curry that made this paper possible and is greatly appreciated. Also, hunter survey data funded through Oklahoma Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration, Grant W-82-R, Project 4 was provided by Andrea Crews.

Population

The population of Oklahoma is estimated at 3.3 million people (C. Williams, Tulsa, Okla., Chamber of Commerce, pers. commun.). Of its 77 counties, 5 combine

for 47% (1.55 million) of the inhabitants. Oklahoma and Tulsa counties alone contain 630,000 and 531,000 people, respectively, which represents 35% of the state's population. The entire state has 115 game wardens whose deployment is linked to population and land area. The 5 most populated counties are assigned a total of 11 wardens, with Oklahoma County and Tulsa County having 2 each. Anonymity exists in cities with highly mobile residents that typically utilize large apartment complexes and rental properties and often have ever-changing employment. Wildlife law enforcement with an emphasis on public relations is more challenging when working with a wide array of cultural and economic groups. These responsibilities are further burdened by a high incidence of urban animal complaints.

A large population requires many schools and educators. This translates into a heavy demand for information and presentations from metro wardens. Currently, Oklahoma has 1,891 schools, approximately 47,000 teachers and 624,00 students. The 5 most populated counties of the state possess approximately 870 schools or an average of 174 per county; 21,000 teachers or 4,200 per county with Oklahoma and Tulsa counties each having over 7,000; and approximately 291,000 children averaging 58,000 per metro county. These numbers are compared with an average of 14 schools, 360 educators, and 4,620 students per rural county.

Literature Distribution

A metro warden's time is often compromised by many peripheral duties. The distribution of hunting and fishing literature occurs periodically and for the metro warden, is usually a large task requiring several full days. In 1998, 937,000 pieces of outdoor literature were distributed to Oklahoma sportsmen by 115 game wardens (R. Fuller, Okla. Dep. Wildl. Conserv., unpubl. data). Of those, 12 metro wardens (almost 10%) distributed approximately 200,000 pieces of literature (21% of the total literature distributed) or 16,600 pieces per officer. The balance of 104 rural officers distributed the remaining 737,000 pieces or just over 7,000 pieces each. This activity is reported periodically throughout the year for all types of literature including special hunt applications, season and waterfowl posters, etc. These numbers may reflect the sportsmen density that must be dealt with by all wardens. This will be later addressed in greater detail.

Outdoor Education

Hunter Safety

Another responsibility that falls heavily on wardens is education. Hunter safety and aquatic resources education are both key elements directly linking population and future agency funding. In 1999 Oklahoma wardens were credited with certifying 6,748 people (J. D. Peer, Okla. Dep. Wildl. Conserv., unpubl. data). There were 1,391 (20%) of the students accounted for by 11 metro wardens (10%). Metro wardens averaged 126 students while rural officers averaged 53. Although metro wardens

certified 2.5 students in their county to every rural student certified, these numbers do not show the volume of certified students by volunteer instructors in a metro area. Metro classes are often large and create a large demand for a volunteer force that has to be recruited, interviewed, and approved by the warden. Those volunteers will receive credit for many students that a metro warden will help teach. Further, because student numbers are not as large in rural areas, those wardens have no need to build a volunteer force of instructors.

Aquatic Resources

Aquatic resources education is primarily the responsibility of the Information and Education division. These courses are intensively scheduled throughout the summer with teaching support given by both fisheries division and the local game wardens. The entire states program attendance in 1999 was approximately 15,000 pupils. There were 8,400 students who participated in the 5 most populated counties with Tulsa and Oklahoma counties leading with 3,000 each (S. Finney, Okla. Dep. Wildl. Conserv., unpubl. data). The other 72 counties accounted for 6,600 participants (91 students per county) which may reflect a lack of fishing opportunities and volunteer support in those areas.

Crime and Enforcement

With a larger population comes a proportionate increase in crime. Comparing 3 categories of lesser crimes (larceny, burglary, and DUI) in metro and rural counties illustrates the reduction of relative importance usually imposed on metro wildlife enforcement. The entire state totaled 166,451 incidences of these 3 categories reported in 1996. Of those crimes, 5 metro counties account for 114,574, or 69% (G. Feuerborn, Okla. State Bur. Invest., pers. commun.). That is 22,915 of the lesser category crimes per metro county compared to 721 per rural county. Giving no consideration to other lesser crimes (auto theft, assault, traffic violations, etc.), one sees the enormous burden on all law enforcement as well as the communities in a metro area.

Local Law Enforcement

Oklahoma has approximately 11,600 peace officers in its 77 counties. The 5 higher populated counties of Oklahoma have approximately 6,400 peace officers (J. Helm, Tulsa Co. Sheriff's Off., pers. commun.) with Oklahoma County having almost 4,000. The remaining 72 counties have a total of 5,200 officers, that averages 1,277 officers for each metro county compared to 72 per rural county. Tulsa and Oklahoma counties account for nearly 50% of all law enforcement officers in Oklahoma.

When only 11 wardens occur among so many police officers, working relationships become more difficult to maintain and the game warden becomes a rare entity in the law enforcement community. If this can be overcome there lies vast resources available through agencies that share the common goal of fighting crime. Effective methods must be developed in both individual and collective communications, underlining the need for good interagency cooperation. High visibility and good communicative skills are required by metro wardens to maximize public awareness

for wildlife enforcement. The many law enforcement officers in a metro area can either enhance effectiveness or dilute a warden's visibility. Rural wardens, however, usually enjoy close working and personal relationships with their local law enforcement. Large metro enforcement agencies are more self-sufficient and by and large, close interaction with wardens is uncommon.

Courtroom Support

Many police officers, including game wardens, who make arrests often monitor their cases throughout prosecution. When an officer makes an arrest, collects evidence, and performs the required paperwork, he usually follows the case to its conclusion. The rapport a warden builds with prosecutors is necessary to elevate the attention given to wildlife laws. The volume of criminal cases that besiege the metro prosecutor force him to negotiate many cases in order to maintain a manageable docket. A rural prosecutor usually has ample time to discuss a wildlife case. A metro warden must compete with officers of other agencies for their prosecutors' time and attention. Another obstacle in successful prosecution is the frequent turnover of personnel in the misdemeanor section of the metro prosecutors' office. Wildlife prosecution is additionally hindered because legal interns often staff the misdemeanor division. If proper training is not offered to prosecutor trainees then cases can often be lost in court. There were 308 state prosecutors in Oklahoma in 1997. The 74 most rural counties employed 195, averaging less than 3 prosecutors per county. The remaining 3 metro counties employed 113 prosecutors, averaging over 37 attorneys per county. The equally large support staff associated with metro counties can make tracking or accomplishing paperwork more complicated for a metro officer. The average number of a prosecutor support staff in 74 rural counties is 7 people. The metro county prosecutor's office employs an average of 42 support persons.

Revenue

Determining Sportsmen County of Residence

A variety of hunting and fishing licenses are offered to sportsmen throughout Oklahoma but only 3 categories of revenue can be traced to the users county of residence. Lifetime licenses, senior citizen licenses, and accrued lifetime license interest can be tabulated and tracked by county (R. Taylor, Okla. Dep. Wildl. Conserv., unpubl. data), because their processing requires verification of residence. All other types of licenses can be purchases anywhere in the state (e. g. wherever the sportsmen may decide to hunt or fish), and therefore would present unreliable data. These revenue statistics reveal an average of 8.25% of county-based license revenue from each of the top 4 metro counties and 0.92% from each of the remaining 73 rural counties. The 2 most populated counties (Tulsa and Oklahoma) are staffed by just over 3% of the warden force but account for 25.7% of the agencies county based license sales. Revenue comparisons show an average ratio of 9 license buyers in the metro area for every 1 in the rural areas.

Table 1. Ratio of metro versus rural hunters pursuing 4 species calculated by percentage of hunters and county-based license revenue.

Hunter origin	Species pursued	Participants (%)	License revenue (% by county)	Hunter ratio values
Metro	Dove	33.55	0.082	2.75 (11:1)
Rural	Dove	27.03	0.009	0.24
Metro	Quail	33.12	0.082	2.71 (9:1)
Rural	Quail	31.94	0.009	0.29
Metro	Turkey (fall)	36.96	0.082	3.03 (9:1)
Rural	Turkey (fall)	35.6	0.009	0.32
Metro	Deer	78.43	0.082	6.43 (8:1)
Rural	Deer	83.95	0.009	0.75

Phone Survey

Oklahoma’s federal aid research section has recently conducted telephone surveys across the state. Hunters were randomly contacted in both metro and rural areas of the state and asked if they hunted certain species of game in Oklahoma during that year and was that game pursued in their own county of residence. Combining revenue data with this federal data one (Table 1) concludes a majority of hunters disperse into rural counties to hunt, and the metro areas are home to a high percentage of Oklahoma hunters.

The metro warden is not only occupied by those fish and wildlife consumers near home, but also by a large number of them returning from rural county outings. The 4 species addressed in table one exhibits similarities in the percentage of surveyed

1999 Game Warden Activity

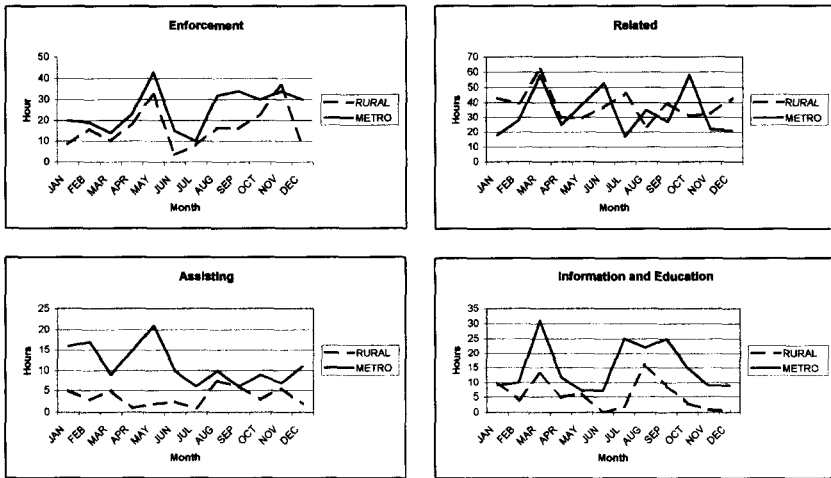


Figure 1. Four major categories of metro and rural game warden activity for a 12-month period are charted by hours reported to illustrate similarities and differences.

hunters that pursued them regardless of region. The percentage of hunters that reside in an area, however, greatly inflates the occurrence of investigations (Fig. 1) during and especially following the end of each particular season. The high frequency of metro hunters (9:1), also create the same relative surge of hunting pressure that exists in rural areas because a portion of them stay and hunt in their home area. Survey statistics show an even higher ratio of metro dove hunters occur than for any other species and account for an increase in baiting violations and expensive leases indicating heavy competition for birds and hunt areas. Successful metro deer hunters usually bring home all or part of a harvested animal. As venison processors reach their capacity, trashcans, dumpsters, and remote ditches are often reported as having discarded parts or whole carcasses. The percentage of those involved in a violation can only be theorized, but all contribute to a backlog of investigations for the metro warden.

Sportsmen Groups

The density of sportsmen in the metro areas also explains the high number of organized outdoor clubs, chapters, and groups in those areas. Oklahoma had 479 such organizations in 1996 (S. Finney, Okla. Dep. Wildl. Conserv., unpubl. data). There were 191 groups in 5 metro counties. That's an average of 38 groups of outdoor enthusiasts per metro county compared to the rural average of 4 per county. This organized volume creates a significant number of requests for programs, field trials, and game breeder's licenses. This also translates into numerous individual calls for general information pertaining to all areas of the state.

Warden Activity

In order to compare activity levels between rural and metro wardens, one officer was selected from 4 different rural areas of the state. The assistant chief of law enforcement for Oklahoma submitted 12 months of activity reports for each man who had been either a candidate for or been selected for warden of the year honors in the past. Those activity records were averaged together and compared to an activity average derived from 2 wardens assigned to 2 separate metropolitan areas (Table 1). The warden activity reports are uniform and broken down into 4 categories. They are enforcement, enforcement related, assistance to other groups, and information education. There were distinct similarities throughout the reports with the notable exception of the time expended in the "enforcement" category. These reports confirm a high percentage of time in rural counties is devoted to patrol in the field, observing and encountering hunters, while metro wardens show a steep rise in investigations as hunters presumably bring harvested game back home to the metro area.

Summary

It has been established that metro game wardens have a large workload. That does not imply that rural wardens are not busy, but rather that they apply a much larger percentage of time to general patrol of hunting and fishing areas. The crucial

need for interagency cooperation is underscored by the metro officers' higher frequency of contacts with other officials and general population as compared to the high fluctuations of seasonal activity for rural counties. Typically, a greater percentage of resource users, e.g., sportsmen, are urban residents while those who own land or control access to it are not. Thus, a significant number of license buyers receive a reduced share of conservation agency services due to the disparity between numbers of license buyers and available wildlife professionals in the metro areas. There exists a need to satisfy their requests for assistance and information. These needs are not limited to matters directly related to law enforcement, but also other services such as hunter safety education, aquatic resources education, and most of all a push to introduce wildlife management concepts to the elementary school level. Non-game, survival skills, species identification, outdoor ethics, and other related topics should also be offered more intensively in the metro areas.

The trend of declining sportsmen numbers could be reversed by redirecting more resources and personnel in those areas where most potential sportsmen live.