

A Workable Approach to Houndsman-trapper Relationships

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Abstract: After 2 years of discussion with key members of trapper and houndsman organizations the Arkansas Furbearer Council met for the first time. Subsequent meetings and cooperative efforts with the officers and members of the concerned groups have molded a relationship whereby problems are worked out "across the table." Over 2 dozen joint actions have resolved many problems affecting the interests of these groups. The Arkansas Furbearer Council is highly regarded by the Commissioners of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission and recommendations from the Council have been approved consistently.

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It has become increasingly apparent in recent years that more and more users of wildlife resources are operating on less and less area. Conflicting land uses adjoin, overlap, or are being attempted on the same acreage. Pursuit of hunting and trapping activities requires a considerable acreage of land or habitat. We have been forced to multiple use whether it is organized or not.

Some of the users of wildlife seem to be in direct conflict in the manner of use and in the rate of harvest. The most extreme example of this may be in the case of the trapper-houndsman relationship where the viewpoints range from a desire to pursue furbearers for pleasure only to that of an attempt at maximum harvest for commercial purposes.

We have too often lumped all of these activities into the 2 categories of "houndsman" or "trapper" when actually there are several classes within each category and also some combinations. For example, a furtaker may use both hounds and traps to take furbearers for commercial purposes.

Serious problems are created by the violator, the unscrupulous, and the inexperienced in each group who are taking advantage of everyone else. These include the use of the hound as a tool to take game illegally and the indiscriminate use of the trap so that it takes non-target animals, including the hound. Trapping or chasing furbearers in a legal and proper manner minimizes problems.

Because of the overlapping and heavy utilization of furbearers, especially rac-

coon and fox, for sport and fur, consideration should be given for a management area or zone concept as is used in the management of other species.

Under our present regulations, furbearers have done well, generally. Harvest pressure may be greater on raccoon than on any other game species in Arkansas; however, over 100,000 raccoon have been harvested annually for several years. If this take should show a downward trend, the situation should be given careful and immediate study. An independent survey of coonhunters by the Arkansas State Coon Hunters Association in 1982 indicated that after the first 2 weeks of the hunting and trapping season on raccoon, the number of treed raccoons per hunt falls off rapidly. This is also the pattern with certain other game species. With the numbers of unemployed people who are now in rural areas over the state and with raccoon and other furs at fairly high prices, there may be even more pressure on furbearers each season. Impacts of harvest upon populations should be carefully monitored.

The effectiveness of dogs as an aid to deer hunting, whether legal or illegal, has been addressed in some of Arkansas' northern zones with no-dog zones or beagle-only zones because the mountainous terrain and the running pattern of deer there make them more susceptible. All restrictions or regulations on the use of dogs or on trapping should be based on the zone concept as it is for other species.

The perceived decline of red fox in Arkansas may be linked to the expanding coyote population. Some feel coyotes are at least a competitor of the fox and possibly a predator. Coyotes carry a number of diseases that affect fox, especially red fox. Coyotes may be replacing the fox and dog as a predator to some extent.

License sales for hunting dogs have decreased 35% in recent years in Arkansas. Until recently, these licenses were our fifth largest source of license income, behind only the basic resident and non-resident hunting and fishing licenses. Generally, hunting dog owners want to be licensed in Arkansas.

Approach

Two years were spent in preparing for the first meeting of the Arkansas Furbearer Council. This Council is composed of representatives of the Arkansas State Coon Hunters Association, Arkansas Trappers Association, Arkansas Fox and Wolf Hunters Association, Arkansas Free-Trappers and Blackpowder Association, Arkansas Deer Hunters Association, several regional trapper and houndsman organizations, and by Game and Fish Commission employees who are directly connected with activities of these groups.

Attendance at the meetings is by invitation of the Council. Generally, officers of the groups make excellent representatives since they have been elected by the membership. These officers are invited to bring a limited number of key members from their group.

At this first meeting, the representatives of various organizations gave their viewpoints on mutual problems and openly expressed their concerns. The initial meeting was designed only to air problems and establish an orderly mechanism for communication. At the second meeting, representatives began to focus on issues of common interest and general agreement, including the first draft of a hunter-

harassment bill designed to head off harassment of Arkansas hunters by anti-hunting forces such as has occurred in the Florida Everglades and in other states.

Accomplishments

A number of accomplishments followed as a result of subsequent meetings:

(1) Sight-baiting of traps was regulated to reduce the incidence of capture of birds-of-prey, including eagles. This has been effective and has served to keep areas open to trapping within refuges that might otherwise have been closed.

(2) Traps now can be marked or tagged with vehicle license numbers or drivers' license numbers instead of names and addresses, which has helped reduce disagreements in some areas.

(3) Organized houndsmen's groups requested that their local chapters and others avoid major turkey hunting areas during the spring turkey season. This has been monitored by these groups.

(4) Two weeks were taken off the tail end of the proposed 1982-83 hunting and trapping season on furbearers by mutual agreement of the various groups at that time.

(5) The houndsmen's groups supported the trappers by writing the Arkansas delegation in Washington expressing opposition to SB 2239 which would have prohibited the sale of fur taken with the use of leg-hold traps.

(6) A number of new studies and surveys on furbearers are being initiated including scent post surveys, raccoon age and reproductive data, data on bobcat life history, age data on otter and raccoon through tooth analysis, and possibly otter-beaver studies.

(7) Recently a Pulaski County leash law was enacted, but this exempts legally-licensed hunting dogs. The above groups were able to achieve this exemption. The law is a vehicle whereby landowners and others can have protection from unlicensed, free-running dogs which are a problem and an enemy of all users of wildlife, landowners, wildlife managers, and houndsmen themselves, and are recognized as such by the Council. In addition, the concept of a statewide law similar to our stock law is being considered to reduce unlicensed, free-running dog problems statewide. The essence of the stock law is that the owner is responsible for keeping his animals off another's property. Licensed hunting dogs used during open seasons would be exempted.

(8) This past year these groups worked out a mutually agreeable season opening date and related regulations.

This list could go on to include at least 2 dozen such items. Basically, there seems to be an inner desire to find ways to reduce conflicts in connection with one's sport if only a triggering mechanism can be found.

The reputation of this group as "problem solvers" is now such that it is virtually automatic for their proposals to be approved by our Commissioners. It is recommended that, for the best success in using this approach, someone employed by the wildlife agency at the level of division chief or above be the instigator, promul-

gator, and coordinator. However, it is critical for this person to have the respect of participating organizations and the experience and finesse to guide sensitive negotiations. Commission personnel at all times are actively involved in fur clinics, fur sales, and field trail activities. Their presence is requested at these events.

Future Needs

There is a need to consider specific management programs for furbearers and a need for positive suggestions along these lines. This might include restoration areas utilizing habitat improvement practices for certain species or specialized use areas for various trapping and chasing activities. In Arkansas there are at least a dozen privately-operated fox chase pens which are filling a very important need. These are supported by the Council. Trappers furnish fox for these operations. In addition, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission has established 2 large field trial training ground and meeting facilities for use by all of the above groups.

An effort is being made by the Council to promote a coordinated approach to anti-hunter, animal "rights," animal "liberation," and other such movements. These groups now have an annual budget in the tens of millions of dollars and a force of many effective, well-educated, and informed full-time workers. This is rapidly becoming one of the most significant threats facing professional wildlife management. Russ Cookingham in 1985, near the end of his term as president of the IAFWA, expressed this concern.

Perhaps the main benefit of more than 7 years of work with these people is the mutual consideration of the overall situation and, hopefully, the realization the Game and Fish Commission is going to assist in trying to develop solutions based on firm ground that will be longlasting. We have just started.

At a recent Southeastern Association Conference at least 7 Directors attended the Furbearer Committee meeting because of their concern for the issues we are discussing. One result of this concern was the drafting and approval by the Southeastern Association in 1980 of the attached resolution submitted by the Fur Resources Committee.

With the cooperation of the people in the various organizations that attend the Arkansas Furbearer Council meetings we can come up with solutions to most problems. We are also going to have to get a better expression of the feelings of the thousands of "Saturday night" fox and coon hunters and independent trappers who do not belong to any organization. At this time we do not know how many of these people there are. We are probably in for a big surprise when we find out.

On problems where there are differences of opinion, or on which all of the information is not at hand, the Council can become aware of the positions of the respective groups and can provide a mechanism for future solutions.

Finally, the atmosphere for such a cooperative approach seems to be maintained by the fact that no officers are elected and no votes are taken. All present must be in favor of any proposed action or it is tabled until agreement can be reached.