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A SURVEY OF HUNTERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS HUNTERS AND HUNTING DOGS ON THE OCALA NATIONAL FOREST, FLORIDA

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A stratified, random sample of hunters on the Ocala National Forest produced 1,598 questionnaires which were coded and analyzed at Florida State University's Computing Center. One section of the survey explored hunter attitudes concerning other hunters and toward hunting white-tailed deer with dogs. This paper discusses the results from part of the survey. The cooperation of personnel in the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission and U. S. Forest Service in conducting the interviews is gratefully acknowledged.

DOG OWNERSHIP AND USE

Hunting with dogs is the most popular method of hunting on the Ocala. Of the hunters interviewed, 65 percent hunt with dogs and 44 percent indicated they owned 2,975 deer hunting dogs. These hunters average 4.2 dogs per dog owner, 2.9 dogs per dog user and 1.9 dogs for every hunter on the Forest.

These averages only tell part of the story. Forty-two percent of the hunters that use dogs use five or less dogs and yet these animals make up only 17 percent of the total dog population. A full 80 percent of the dog-using hunters use 10 or less dogs and these animals make up 47 percent of the total dog population. Conversely, 20 percent of the hunters that use dogs are using 53 percent of the total dog population.

This is an area where restrictions can be effectively placed. One-fifth of the hunters use one-half of the dogs. The innate disturbance caused by these animals could be reduced by regulating the number of dogs per party, per vehicle or per hunter.

HUNTER ATTITUDES*

*See Table 1 for summary of hunter attitudes

Table 1. Summary of Hunter Attitudes

	Strength of Feelings	Total Sample	Successful Hunters	Urban Hunters	Rural Hunters
Attitudes on limiting the number of hunters					
No limits		68.0	68.5	67.4	68.0
Limit all the time		12.9	14.2	10.8	14.4
Limit first two weeks		15.4	13.4	17.7	14.3
Other limits		3.7	4.0	4.2	3.3
Attitudes on limiting the number of dogs					
No limits		76.0	78.0	72.4	78.2
Limit all the time		15.0	7.8	16.9	13.7
Limit first two weeks		6.3	11.8	7.7	5.6
Other limits		2.7	2.3	3.0	2.2
Attitudes on excluding dogs					
No limits		84.4	91.3	81.5	86.4
Limit all the time		8.6	4.7	11.1	6.8
Limit first two weeks		4.4	0.8	5.0	4.1
Other limits		2.6	3.2	2.4	2.7
Attitudes on restricting dogs statewide					
No restrictions		60.7	60.6	61.6	59.7
Restrict all the time		33.3	36.2	30.8	35.3
Restrict first two weeks		2.7	2.4	6.1	4.2
Other restrictions		3.3	0.8	1.4	0.8

The conflict between dog hunters and still hunters appears to be more imagined than real. Still hunters make up 35 percent of the Ocala hunting population and 78 percent of them feel dogs add to their recreational experience. Eighty-seven percent of the total hunting population, 83 percent of urban hunters and 90 percent of rural hunters shared this view.

There are significant differences in urban-rural attitudes on limiting the number of hunters and excluding dogs from the Ocala for part of the hunting season. Differences in attitudes on limiting the number of dogs are not significant.

The majority of hunters do not want restrictions of any kind. But then who does? Restrictions impose hardships on the individual for the benefit of the group; individuals would logically be opposed to any restrictions.

Rural hunters prefer to limit the number of hunters all the time and urban hunters tend to favor limiting hunters for the first two weeks of the season. Proximity to the Ocala may partly explain these differences in attitudes. Seventy-eight percent of the rural hunters live within 100 miles of the Ocala but only 35 percent of the urban hunters reside within that boundary.

Rural hunters may feel they will get their turn, if not today, then tomorrow. Urban hunters on the other hand, have more specific requirements regarding time available to hunt and would not want restrictions placed on when they were allowed to hunt.

The attitude difference on excluding dogs is due to patterns in dog ownership. Fifty-six percent of the rural hunters owned deer hunting dogs but only 23 percent of the urban hunters owned dogs. Restricting dogs does not impose the hardship on a dog owner that excluding dogs would. Dog owners would be expected to be more opposed to this restriction than non-dog owners.

Significantly more hunters favored limiting the number of hunters than limiting the number of dogs. With the rapid influx of both hunters and dogs on the Ocala, it is obvious that the forest's recreational carrying capacity has been reached. Methods for limiting dogs and hunters have been proposed throughout the 40-year history of the Ocala Wildlife Management Area. Dogs were limited to 3 per hunting party during the 40's but these restrictions were removed in 1950. Since then the hunter population has jumped from 3,500 to 21,000 and dogs have increased correspondingly. The first attempt to limit hunters occurred in 1940 when the Forest Service restricted the number of hunting permits to 2,500. No serious attempts have been made since.

As more land is developed and becomes urbanized, there is less area available for nimrods to pursue their sport. The net result is public lands are receiving more and more hunting pressure. As the number and concentration of hunters increase, the quality of sport hunting decreases. By restricting the number of hunters, the number of dogs will automatically decrease. This will occur; the only question is when.