

Law Enforcement Session

Managing a Controversial Goose Hunt on a Suburban Reservoir

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Abstract: A 1993 hunt for Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) on 15,390-ha Lake Sidney Lanier, near Atlanta, was the most controversial hunting event to date in Georgia. The hunt was proposed principally as an effort to reduce nuisance problems from a goose flock numbering 1,500–2,000 birds. Media and public attention was intense for several months preceding the hunt with at least 29 articles published in both local and statewide newspapers. Media attention peaked on the first day of the hunt with 4 television stations, 2 newspapers, and 1 radio station covering the hunt on site. Special regulations that limited the number of hunters and that designated specific sites at least 305 m from human development were devised to satisfy safety concerns of the public. Intense enforcement patrols were successfully used to prevent problems during the hunts. A combination of good wildlife management, strong public relations, and effective law enforcement are needed if hunting is to persist in suburban settings like the one described here.

Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 47:720–726

Hunting has come under increased scrutiny in recent years and can be particularly controversial in suburban areas with high human population density and an absence of a hunting tradition. In this paper we describe our experience with proposing, defending, and managing a hunting season for Canada geese on a Corps of Engineers reservoir located in a populated area about 72 km from Atlanta, Georgia.

Background

Canada geese were stocked on Lake Sidney Lanier between 1978 and 1981 as part of a statewide program to establish a resident, non-migratory flock in Georgia.

About 200 birds were transported from northeastern states and released on Lake Lanier. For several years geese were highly popular on the lake, with many homeowners actively placing feed and nest structures for them. At first the population increased slowly, possibly because many of the released geese were not sexually mature and not yet able to successfully nest. By the late 1980s the population had grown to several hundred birds and nuisance problems were common. As with Canada geese elsewhere in the United States, the typical complaint from the public involved droppings and feathers left by large flocks feeding on lawns and beaches and occasionally complaints from farmers that geese were destroying crops. The Game and Fish Division began providing nuisance abatement advice and materials to the public on a regular basis.

In response to the growth of the goose population, a limited hunting season was planned for the state in 1990. The area proposed for hunting included a portion of Hall County, one of the counties surrounding Lake Lanier. However, Lake Lanier itself was not opened for hunting. In 1983 the Corps of Engineers had stopped all hunting on Lake Lanier due to safety concerns. When the Corps was approached by the Game and Fish Division, it declined to reopen the lake for goose hunting in 1990, but did indicate a willingness to reevaluate the decision following 3 "experimental seasons" the state planned for the 1990–1992 period in surrounding counties. Obviously, the hope was that hunting the surrounding counties would provide sufficient control of the Lake Lanier population.

The 3 experimental seasons were held under a very restrictive set of regulations approved by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Hunting around the Lake Lanier area was initially limited to a portion of Hall County, then extended in 1992 to the entire county. A quota system limited the number of hunters to 150 in 1990 increased to 300 in 1991 and 1992. The season length was limited to 8 days in January each year.

Hunter access to geese using the Lake Lanier area was very limited. Generally, hunting was available only on a few farms in north Hall county where Lanier geese flew to feed. No public hunting areas existed in the county. The result was that hunter harvest those 3 years was estimated to be only 118 birds.

During the June molting period of 1992, surveys on Lake Lanier indicated a Canada goose population of about 1,500–2,000 birds with a recruitment of about 250 goslings. Nuisance complaints were more significant in both number and severity. The Gainesville office of the Georgia Game and Fish Division documented more than 50 complaints from landowners and lake users between July 1991 and June 1992. Complaints of economic loss had also become more frequent from golf courses, cemeteries, farmers, and marina operators. As a result, the Division captured, banded, and relocated 250 geese during the summer as a means of temporarily reducing complaints. Hunting regulations for the 1993 season were being developed in mid 1992 and indications were that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would allow a substantially more liberal season for the state. Therefore, the Game and Fish Division proposed to the Resource Manager's office that Lake Lanier be opened for hunting in January 1993.

Description of the Area

Lake Sidney Lanier is a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hydropower impoundment located in Dawson, Forsyth, Gwinnett, and Hall counties, Georgia. The 15,390-ha reservoir is on the Chattahoochee River, approximately 72 km northeast of Atlanta. Lake Lanier's nearness to the Atlanta area results in its being the most visited Corps of Engineers lake in the nation. In 1991 use was estimated at 19.1 million visitor days. Boating, skiing, sailing, fishing, camping, picnicking, and sightseeing are the most common forms of recreation enjoyed by visitors.

Recreational and residential development around the 869-km shoreline is heavy. Approximately 6,900 boat docks exist around the lake. Federal and local governments operate 62 parks, campgrounds, and day-use areas on Lake Lanier. Ten large marinas are present. The Corps of Engineers estimates that about 25% of the shoreline is protected from intense development. A substantial portion of that area is comprised of many small islands. Those protected areas and parks closed for the winter provided the potential for hunting sites on the otherwise heavily developed shoreline.

Hunting Plan for the Lake

The northeast Georgia goose unit contained 16 counties, including all those surrounding Lake Lanier. Goose hunting was to be allowed during 2 4-day seasons, 14–17 January and 28–31 January, 1993. Hunting would be by special permit with a quota of 800 persons per season. The bag limit was 1 bird per day and 2 per season.

With these state regulations as a framework, proposals began to be developed for presentation to Corps officials. We borrowed ideas from the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency regulations for Big Hickory Reservoir and modified them to fit Lake Lanier. The basics of the regulations presented to the Corps were that with its concurrence we would identify specific sites for hunting, that we would limit the number of hunters, and that the Division would provide intense enforcement during the hunts. Our agency would administer an additional quota system for selecting hunters, and we would take the lead in explaining the reasons for the hunt to the public.

Agreement to proceed with the hunt was reached in late October, giving interested hunters time to apply for a goose permit before the 15 November state deadline. Ninety-four sites were identified by Corps and Division personnel and marked in the field with highly visible, numbered placards. All sites were located at least 305 m from residences and open parks and inhabited areas. That distance was determined after consulting ballistics statistics provided by the Federal Cartridge Company. Those data indicated the maximum range and impact velocity of various shotshells used for goose hunting. The maximum range calculated was 307-m for a 7.6 cm 12 gauge shell with BB shot and maximum powder charge. Based on this information, we felt that the 305-m buffer distance would provide the public with an assurance of safety. This became an important factor in successfully defending our hunt plan.

Hunter numbers were limited by specifying that no more than 4 hunters could occupy each hunting site. After the statewide drawing for goose permits, successful applicants had to submit another request to be considered for the Lake Lanier hunt. This second quota drawing was administered by the local Game and Fish office. A separate drawing was held for each of the 2 hunting periods. Sites were given to successful applicants under the condition that they were to be occupied by 0800 hours each day, or any other hunter with a Unit 2 goose permit could use the site.

Hunter interest was high for the first season, with 313 applications received for the 94 sites. For the second season, 28–31 January, only 68 applications were received. Persons drawn were mailed a permit card and many came to our office to examine a large scale map and ask questions about the regulations. Overall, we had personal contact with a high percentage of the hunters who were issued site permits for Lanier.

Controversy and Media Coverage

Media coverage of the Lake Lanier goose problem began during the summer of 1992 when we captured, banded, and relocated geese. The Gainesville Times newspaper printed an article on our capture efforts, and subsequently followed closely our proposal to ultimately allow hunting to reduce goose nuisance problems. As part of the Corps of Engineer's desire to obtain public input into the hunting decision, the proposal was presented to a citizen advisory council on 16 September 1992. The Lake Lanier Advisory Council was made up of representatives of local governments, homeowner associations, environmental groups, and private citizens. Their September meeting provided a forum for the Game and Fish Division to present the hunting plan. An individual opponent of the proposal at that meeting became one of our most outspoken critics, and later strongly criticized the hunting proposal in a lengthy article published on the editorial page in *The Atlanta Journal*, Georgia's most influential daily newspaper. The chairman of the advisory council was also opposed to hunting of Lake Lanier, and subsequently called for a vote on the issue. The results were 5 against, 2 for the hunt, and 3 abstentions. Safety concerns were cited in the resolution that the council passed. Interestingly, only 10 votes were cast in an organization of 17 members.

The results of the Lake Lanier Advisory Council poll were not binding on the Corps of Engineers, but council opposition increased the media and public attention focused on the hunt. A news story that began on the outdoor page of a local newspaper moved to the front page of that paper, and ultimately became a front page story in one of the largest newspapers in the Southeast. Eventually, at least 20 news articles and editorials were written prior to the hunting season, and approximately 9 more were published during or after it. Unquestionably, this was the most news coverage ever given a hunting issue in Georgia. The coverage remained local for the most part, but news articles were also published by the largest radio, newspaper, and television media outlets in the state.

The public interest in the hunt led the local newspaper to publish a front page article, complete with a map of the hunting sites in their 13 December 1992 Sunday

edition. The paper asked readers to call in and "vote" as to whether the hunt should be held. A total of 372 persons responded to the newspaper's query and 58.6% were opposed. Those results were not unexpected, but surprisingly, the number of protest calls to our office did not increase.

On 13 January 1993, one day before the first hunting season, a group of lake residents attempted to obtain a court injunction to block the hunt. The injunction was denied in Fulton County (Atlanta) Superior Court because the plaintiffs did not provide sufficient legal notice to the state and because the Court ruled their claims lacked sufficient merit.

Throughout the controversy, the most often raised issue was the perceived danger posed by hunting on a reservoir with a heavily developed shoreline and such intense recreational use. The humane issue was secondary, and largely seemed to be the concern of individuals in the Atlanta area that may have been affiliated with an anti-hunting group. Persons who called to protest on that basis did not claim an affiliation, nor did critics who published editorials in the Gainesville and Atlanta newspapers.

Because most of the concerns expressed were related to safety, we were able to address those by referring to the limited number of sites to be hunted, the controls on the number of hunters, and the 305 m buffer provision. We also pointed out that all other major lakes in the state were hunted without any problems. We used hunting accident statistics to show the absence of problems during previous goose seasons and to show the relative safety of hunting compared to other forms of recreation.

Managing the Hunt

On 13 January 1993, the day before the first season, we held a briefing and planning session for all the enforcement officers assigned to patrol the lake and for the clerical and wildlife staff that was to handle telephone and media inquiries during the hunt. We candidly discussed the likely problems, and tried to provide each staff member the information needed to handle complaints and criticism from callers or persons encountered on the lake. We reviewed Georgia's hunter harassment law and developed an approach to be used if protesters were encountered. Lastly, we designated staff persons to deal with media representatives. At the time of our briefing, we knew of 1 television station and 2 newspapers that planned to have reporters on the lake. We were to provide for 1 reporter to accompany a patrol boat. The television reporter would accompany a biologist who would be in our department helicopter.

The lake was already divided into sectors for the purpose of boating safety patrols during the summer months. Most of the enforcement officers were very familiar with the lake and this greatly facilitated patrols during the goose seasons. On 14 January, we fielded a patrol effort of 12 enforcement officers and 2 biologists. Additional staff manned telephones and two-way radios in our Gainesville office. We deployed 5 boats and used a helicopter for an early morning patrol that first day.

Officers checked 48 hunters who had killed 10 geese on 14 January. For the entire 14–17 January season, 47 man-days of patrol effort resulted in 133 hunters and 28 geese checked, and 20 hunting violations detected. Most violations were license infractions and did not represent safety problems. Nineteen violations of boating or other statutes were detected while patrolling for hunting problems. Three minor incidents of possible hunter harassment were investigated. Those involved non-hunters driving boats through decoy sets or yelling insults at hunters.

Because the first season was basically problem-free, patrol effort was greatly reduced during the 28–31 January season. No hunting violations were detected during that period. Rangers checked only 25 hunters and 9 geese during the second season.

The major problem encountered during the actual hunting period was the amount of unexpected news media interest that developed on 14 January. As indicated already, we were prepared for 1 television reporter and 2 newspaper reporters, and had staff members available to accompany them and provide interviews and opportunities for photographs. By about 1000 hours on 14 January, 3 additional television stations and 1 major Atlanta radio station telephoned to request interviews and boat trips on the lake for filming purposes. Their interest in the event likely resulted from either a front-page story in the morning edition of the Atlanta Constitution newspaper, or from calls made by a lake resident who wanted to appear on camera to protest the hunts. Fortunately, the arrival of the media during mid-day allowed the use of patrol boats for tours without compromising enforcement efforts necessary earlier in the morning. Also, the availability of 2 biologists and an informed field staff who fully understood the issues made handling several reporters at one time easier. By the time of the hunt, key staff members were well versed on the issues and could speak the agency position informatively and consistently. We felt the television reports airing the night of 14 January were all objective.

Hunt Results

All persons who received a Canada goose permit were required to return a survey questionnaire to be eligible for future permits. Data received by our state waterfowl biologist indicated that 132 persons hunted the first period and killed 94 geese whereas 31 hunters harvested 31 geese the second season. If projections are made for hunters who failed to respond, then a total estimate of 267 hunters killed 204 geese during both seasons. Our harvest goal had been 200 to 400 geese, so we were on the low end of the desired harvest, even if we accept the questionable estimate of 204. We believe low hunter participation because of adverse publicity and/or the complex regulations were responsible. However, the lake harvest did exceed the previous 3-year total for the entire county. Survey data indicated that our patrols were effective at locating most hunters but less effective at checking for harvested birds.

Summary and Conclusions

The Georgia Game and Fish Division was able to successfully propose, defend, and manage the most controversial hunting event in our history as a result of several factors. First, we employed sound justification for the hunt that included the need for population control to abate nuisance problems. This need was well understood by public and media, and supported by the Corps of Engineers which controlled hunter access to the lake. A justification based solely on providing hunter recreation would have been more difficult to defend. Secondly, we answered the safety concerns of most people with strict regulations governing sites and hunter density. We delivered on the promises made to enforce all regulations with a substantial patrol effort, that by most staff assessments was excessive. Next, we faced media scrutiny with credible spokespersons and a professional field staff of officers and biologists which was particularly important during television coverage. Lastly, no serious objections developed from local or state elected officials. Although opponents attempted to involve officials up to at least the Lieutenant Governor, none became involved in decisionmaking. The issue remained a resource problem under the control of the Division.

Fortunately, the mistakes made were relatively minor. We overregulated the hunt, possibly resulting in less harvest than desired because of low hunter turnout. More critically, we failed to develop support from citizens who could have publicly advocated the hunt for either nuisance abatement or hunter recreation. This omission left the Game and Fish Division in the position of primary promoter and defender of the hunting plan. As an agency of state government, we could not be aggressive in defending the plan or ourselves against some of the editorial page criticism. Lastly, we did not fully identify our opposition. That would have been critical if political concern had developed.

Hopefully, our experience in Georgia will provide some insight into problems of this type. Certainly, hunting will become increasingly more controversial, particularly in suburban environments. Resource agencies must employ a combination of sound wildlife biology, good public relations, and effective law enforcement if hunting is to persist as a wildlife management tool and as an acceptable form of recreation in such settings.