

ROLE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER IN HUNTER SAFETY

DARRELL A. FERRELL, George Washington District, Commission of Game & Inland Fisheries, Falmouth, VA

Abstract: Virginia's Hunter Safety program began as a voluntary effort of game wardens in the field and has always depended heavily on law enforcement personnel. Wardens were among the first instructors trained and have been involved in training the majority of the 192,000 safe hunters graduated to date. The recent creation of an Assistant Supervisor for Education in each of the 6 districts has given the hunter safety program a big boost. These people facilitate the flow of equipment and materials in the district. The training is usually offered as a part of the Physical Education Program. Field experience indicates the program is having a positive effect. Graduates of the course are usually courteous and law abiding, a far cry from the trouble makers often encountered. It provides a golden opportunity for law enforcement officers to relate to young and old alike. Getting into the school system with the safety message also opens doors for other school programs in the conservation field. It has done much to improve the image of Virginia Game Wardens.

Proc. Ann. Conf. S.E. Assoc. Fish & Wildl. Agencies 32:850-852

During the hunting season of 1955-56 in Stafford County, one of our county residents, Aston Way's son, was fatally wounded by his own shotgun. The gun was a double barrel hammer gun. The investigation revealed that Way and a young friend were hunting rabbits in Stafford County. They became tired, sat down on a large rock and Way laid his shotgun against the rock. The gun fell down and discharged, striking Way in his chest—he died almost instantly. At the time, Stafford County was a rural county. This accident had a very disturbing effect on the young hunters and their parents. This is when I became involved. Discussing this problem with a good friend, Ralph Ramer, the athletic coach at Stafford High School which the deceased had attended and a hunter, I suggested we should try to teach younger people the proper ways of handling firearms, to practice identification of their target, and to follow other accepted safety rules. At this time, the Virginia Game Commission had not been involved in a Hunter Safety Program. The only experience with firearms that I had was while serving in the U.S. Army when I had the occasion to break down, clean, and fire most of the Army weapons. I had also instructed on the rifle range.

While on my grandmother's farm, my father had started teaching me the skills of hunting at a very young age and hunting had become a very important part of my life. At this time most farm boys were fascinated with the opportunity to go hunting. Most people worked very hard with little time for recreation, and it was a real treat when you father gave you a couple of shells and carried you with him for a hunt.

Ralph Ramer and I made arrangements with the principal to teach all boys in physical education classes. We taught the proper way to handle firearms. The only training aids we used were our rifles, shotguns and pistol. We taught the students approximately 4 hours per student. We taught how to load and unload, how to aim and the basic position, using the Army Manual to help us with our instruction. At this time, my supervisor was R. S. Purks, who felt this was a great idea. We began to teach hunter safety over the entire George Washington District.

Interest in the program continued to grow and in 1960 when the National Rifle Association launched its Hunter Safety Training Program, the Virginia Game Commission decided to participate in this worthwhile program. In October 1961, the Virginia Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries put into operation a volunteer Hunter Safety Program in cooperation with the National Rifle Association of America. As a result of population changes and urbanization a new type of hunter had evolved unfamiliar with firearms and lacking in woodsmanship.

Since the inception of the Virginia Hunter Safety Program 17 years ago, 192,000 "safe hunters" have been certified. During the 1974-75 year alone 35,838 students were certified. At present 780 volunteer instructors, 150 of whom are Game Commission personnel (mostly wardens), are carried in the active file of instructors. Volunteer instructors are listed on IBM cards by city or town. This method is utilized so that anyone in any part of the state can contact the Game Commission and obtain a complete list of instructors within that area. Virginia Hunter Safety Instructors are now required

to pass the more comprehensive Virginia Hunter Safety Instructor's Examination in lieu of the normal N.R.A. certification. Instructors are required to have 8 hours of classroom training prior to certification. Each instructor is carried for a period of 1 year. If he fails to conduct any Hunter Safety Training or does not wish to continue as an instructor he is dropped from the rolls.

The Hunter Safety Program is now active in all counties within the state and in most counties the program has been introduced into the schools from the eighth through the twelfth grades. The acceptance of the Virginia program and its incorporation as an integral part of the health curriculum of the State Department of Education is the result of a concerted effort over a long period of time to achieve maximum use of physical education courses to advance hunter safety training in the schools. We look forward confidently to at least doubling the present output of certified students from the school system.

Six members of the Game Commission's field force occupy the position of Assistant Supervisor for Education. These 6 assistant supervisors, 1 in each of the 6 districts within the state, coordinate along with other education programs, the Hunter Safety Program within their respective districts. New equipment such as movie projectors, slide projectors, movie screens, new training films, and hunter safety course slides have been supplied each district. This equipment, training aids and hunter safety material, is made available through the district supervisors to all volunteer instructors, schools, Boy Scouts of America, 4-H Camps, physical education workshops and to Game Commission's field force.

Training programs have been conducted through the medium of educational TV. A home study hunter safety course is also available. With the help of the 6 educational men in the field and expanded coverage in educational and closed circuit TV, it is anticipated that the Virginia program will soon be available to every boy and girl at some point between the eighth grade and twelfth grade in the Virginia school system. We are making great strides in the Virginia Hunter Safety program and our present goal of training 40,000 students per year is definitely attainable.

The chiefs of police of the cities of Virginia Beach, Norfolk and Chesapeake have endorsed the Virginia Hunter Safety Program along with many other police agencies.

Many Virginia outdoor writers have endorsed the program, along with the Boy Scouts of America, 4-H centers and American Red Cross.

No charge is made for instructor material; however, a nominal fee of 30 cents is assessed each student to cover the cost of the student handbook and patch. Often this expense is assumed by a local sponsoring sportsmen's association or civic club.

The objectives of the Virginia Hunter Safety Program are: to encourage and promote the acquisition of knowledge and development of desirable attitudes among hunters and other citizens of the State of Virginia in the safe and skillful handling, use and proper care of firearms and bowhunting equipment, and to cultivate those characteristics of honesty, self-discipline, self-reliance, mutual consideration and environmental concern which are the essentials of good sportsmanship and good citizenship.

Student Training—Actual training in the classroom consists of 6 hours. Subjects covered and approximate time spent on each subject are as follows:

Introduction . . . How the Course is Conducted	60 minutes
Hunters and Hunting . . . A Tradition of Caring	20 minutes
Safety Basics . . . The Do's and Don'ts	40 minutes
Guns and Ammunition . . . How They Work	30 minutes
Shooting Basics . . . Form is the Key to Accuracy	30 minutes
Gun Handling . . . Muzzle Control and Alertness	40 minutes
Muzzle Loading . . . In the Tradition of the Mountaineer	20 minutes
Bowhunting . . . Doing it the Hard Way	30 minutes
Outdoor Skills . . . Your Life May Depend on Them	30 minutes
Review and Exam . . .	60 minutes

Due to our terrain and dense population minimum time is spent on survival and wilderness first aid. Few Virginia hunters get beyond the sounds of civilization.

Student text: *NRA Hunter Safety and Conservation Program Student Manual*
Instructor text:

1. *Virginia Hunter Safety Instructor's Manual*—Custom Prepared
2. *Wildlife Management Principles-Practices* by NRA
3. Series of 144 35mm slides covering aforementioned subjects
4. Blown up guns and other demonstration weapons
5. Hunting and Fishing News series of flip charts
6. Training films such as *Sweet Sunday's Gone, A Question of Hunting, A Hunter's*

Challenge and *Before You Hunt* are used in conjunction with other training aids. Due to the lack of range facilities live firing is not required for certification. However, when possible, students do fire the air gun for familiarization. Live firing is required at all 4-H and Boy Scouts of America classes.

In cases where a student has a reading problem, he or she is administered the student examination orally; interpreters are being used very successfully in classes of deaf students. In cases of disabled students, the use of closed circuit TV is substituted for actual classroom instruction.

Educational TV has been used in some areas. However, it is felt that the Hunter Safety Home Study course will be much more effective since there are places in Virginia where families do not own television sets or do not get adequate reception.

About one-third of the Virginia Hunter Safety Instructors are Game Commission personnel and the remaining two-thirds is made up of volunteer semi-professional men and women. The State of Virginia does not go out and recruit hunter safety instructors. In most cases, gun clubs, physical education teachers, Boy Scout and 4-H Leaders or individuals interested in the hunter safety program contact the Game Commission as to how they may become instructors.

In most cases hunter safety instructors are recommended by one of the Virginia Game Commission field force. In all cases, a fish and game violation check is conducted.

All Virginia Hunter Safety instructors must complete an 8 hour course prior to certification. They are carried in the roll as an instructor for 1 year. If at the end of a year he or she has not trained any students or they request to be dropped they are removed from the active roll as an instructor. Instructors attend regional or district workshops. Periodic newsletters are sent to all instructors advising them of changes in the hunter safety program, the hunting laws or any other pertinent information.

Instructors are given a copy of the Virginia Instructors Manual and loaned movie and slide projectors, screens, movies, slides, flip charts, demonstration guns and all other related material on request by the Assistant Supervisors for Education in each of the 6 districts within the state. All student material is maintained at the Richmond office and ordered by the assistant supervisors on a need basis.

Youth groups such as 4-H, Boy Scouts of America, church groups, police athletic groups, individual sportsmen's clubs, Izaak Walton League of America Chapters, local police and sheriff departments have been instrumental in sponsoring or conducting hunter safety courses for the local youth. These groups have also spread the word about the Virginia program very effectively.

Working in the field, I can see the effects of this program on hunters. Most who have taken the course are a cut above the old trouble makers of yesteryear. Many a father has personally thanked me for the training his son received. In some cases, they have tactfully pointed out the error of the old man's ways and they were grateful.

As Law Enforcement Officers, this is a golden opportunity for us to be able to relate to the young as well as the old. In our personal experience as Law Enforcement Officers in the field of Hunter Safety, through this program we have been able to get our foot in the door of the school, which gives us the opportunity to initiate other programs in the field of conservation. I know all of you can appreciate and enjoy the self satisfaction in a job well done. I personally feel teaching Hunter Safety to the young people has created a good working relationship and has improved the image of our Virginia Game Wardens, or I should say Law Enforcement Officers. I am proud to be a part of the Hunter Safety Program in Virginia.