Shooting Sports Events: Introducing Youth to Recreational Shooting

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Abstract: Participants of youth shooting sports events held at the Chaparral Wildlife Management Area in southern Texas reflected the racial makeup of the region including a high percentage of Hispanics in attendance. Thirteen percent of participants indicated that they had never fired a gun prior to attendance of these events. Of those who had shot in the past, 61% did not currently participate in shooting activities other than hunting while 70% indicated that they hunt. Of those participants who stated that they hunt, only 40% had a current hunting license and 34% had the State required hunter education training. Shotgun events were the most popular shooting activity. Ninety five percent of attending students stated they would like to continue to participate in recreational shooting activities. Shooting events are an ideal way to encourage the participation of minorities and other non-traditional user groups in shooting sports.

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Although overall hunter numbers in the United States appear to remain relatively stable, there has been a decline in male hunters (Duda et al. 1995) and a sharp decline in the number of younger hunters (Duda et al. 1996). This decline in part may be reflective of the move of population centers to urban and suburban areas and an increased availability of other recreational opportunities. Other factors include increased cost, changes in attitudes toward hunting, and access to hunting lands (Duda et al. 1996). As hunting is a major management tool utilized by wildlife managers, it is imperative that the nation's population provide an adequate number of hunters to achieve management goals. The cornerstone of hunting skills is shooting

skills. Introducing young people to recreational target shooting, combined with education regarding wildlife habitat and population management, is a strong starting point for increasing the number of potential hunters. The Chaparral Wildlife Management Area (WMA) of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department began hosting shooting events, combined with wildlife management programs to high school age students from various schools throughout the region, in 1996. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how shooting sports events may be conducted and to present demographic data on participants of these events.

Methods

The site of these shooting sports events was the Chaparral WMA in Dimmit and LaSalle counties, Texas, which is located approximately 100 miles south-southwest of San Antonio and 60 miles north of Laredo, Texas. Events have been held semiannually since 1996, with 3 events being held in March 1996, October 1996, and March 1997. The March 1996 event was conducted during a 6-day period while October 1996 and March 1997 events were conducted over 3-day periods each.

Events were comprised of 8 to 9 stations. The initial station consisted of a presentation on wildlife ecology and management, firearms safety instruction, and general orientation. The 7 shooting stations operated at all 3 events were archery, .177-caliber air gun (pellet gun), .22-caliber handgun, trap/skeet, sporting clays, .22-caliber rifle, and muzzleloading rifle. A centerfire rifle station was added at the March 1997 event. Shooting stations were located in an open field of approximately 12 hectares in size. Spacing between stations was approximately 35 meters. Target locations included archery targets at 15 meters and 15.2-meter target placement for air gun, handgun, .22 rifle, and muzzleloader. Centerfire rifle targets, as well as an additional muzzleloader target, were erected at 100 meters. Targets at the archery station consisted of ethofoam type animal targets and bullseye type targets placed over round hay bales. Targets at the air gun, handgun, .22 rifle, and muzzleloader stations were paper bullseye type targets. clay targets, balloons, and various spinner type targets. One hundred meter targets at the centerfire rifle and muzzleloader station were steel silhouette type.

Firearms utilized at relevant stations included 2 .22-caliber double action revolvers (handgun); 2–3 pump action or CO_2 semiautomatic action .177-caliber air guns (air gun); 2 bolt action .22 rifles, 1 equipped with aperture sights and 1 with a 4x telescopic sight (.22 rifle); 2 muzzleloading rifles in .50-caliber (muzzleloader); 1 .222-caliber bolt action rifle and 1 .22–250 caliber rifle equipped with 4x telescopic sights (centerfire rifle); and several double-barrel (over/under) and semiautomatic shotguns in 12 and 20 gauges (trap/skeet and sporting clays). Recurve bows were utilized at the archery station. Because of liability concerns, factory ammunition was utilized in all centerfire and .22 firearms, as well as all shotguns.

Eighteen instructors were needed to supervise the 8 shooting stations, with 2 instructors at each station except the 2 shotgun events where 3 instructors were best utilized. In addition to Chaparral WMA staff, instructors included personnel from the

Wildlife and Law Enforcement Divisions of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, United States Border Patrol, and volunteer hunter education instructors. The majority of instructors were certified hunter education instructors.

Major costs for the event were the mobile sporting clays trailer and ammunition. Other significant costs included clay targets, muzzleloading supplies, shooting glasses, and ear protection. Firearms were provided by the Education Branch of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Wildlife Division personnel, and the Texas Agricultural Extension Service. Materials which were not directly donated were purchased from cash donations. There was no cost to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department other than personnel time. The approximate cost for conducting a 3-day event was $2,400 ($16 per student).

Points of contact at regional schools were agricultural science (vocational agriculture) teachers who regularly taught wildlife management and hunter education classes. Questionnaires and standard liability releases were completed by each student prior to each event. The questionnaires asked for general information about the students' previous shooting experience and types of shooting activities in which they were most interested. Each participating school attended 1 day of each event. The optimum number of participants for each day's event was approximately 50 students. Daily group size ranged from 10–65 students.

Upon arrival, students attended the first station which was conducted at the Chaparral WMA checkstation meeting room. Students were given a slide presentation on the history of plant and wildlife resources and management of those resources of the south Texas ecosystem. Students were then given basic firearms safety instruction. Based on information obtained from the questionnaires, students were divided into groups of equal size with group members having similar shooting experience. Each group was assigned to a starting station in the field. Groups of less-experienced students were generally started at the archery or air gun station, thus allowing for more instruction prior to more advanced events. More experienced shooters began at the trap/skeet or sporting clays station. Group size generally ranged from 5–8 students.

Students traveled by school bus from the checkstation to the site reserved for the shooting stations. Upon arrival at the range site, students were allowed 20–40 minutes at each station depending on group size and the time available to each school.

At each station, students were given instruction regarding the operation of each firearm along with further safety instruction. Active participation at each station was limited for safety purposes, with up to 4 students allowed on the firing line at the archery station, 2 students allowed on the firing line at the air gun, handgun. .22 rifle, and centerfire stations, and 3 to 5 students allowed on the firing line at the shotgun station (with only 1 student firing at a time). One student was allowed on the firing line at the muzzleloader station. Students were encouraged to participate in all facets of the shooting activities to include operation of manual target throwers at the trap/skeet station and loading of all firearms including the muzzleloading rifles. During the time allotted at each station, students were permitted to fire as many rounds as safely possible. In general, students fired a total of 25 rounds at the

2 shotgun stations, 25–35 rounds at the 2 .22 stations, 10–20 rounds at the air gun station, 2–3 rounds at the muzzleloader station, and 4 rounds at the centerfire rifle station.

After the event, students were asked to complete follow-up questionnaires in which they were asked to 1) list their top 3 favorite events, 2) rank the instructors at each event, 3) indicate a desire to continue to participate in the shooting sports, 4) indicate which type of shooting activities they would like to pursue, and 5) grade the overall event.

Results

Four hundred forty-one students from 11 schools participated in the 3 events during the 1996–1997 period. Seventy-two percent of the participants were male. Sixty-six percent were Hispanic with the remainder being Caucasian. Average age of the students was 16 years (range, 12–21). Twenty-three percent resided in cities (population >100,000), 43% in towns (population <25,000) and 34% in rural areas. Eighty percent said that there were firearms in their households, while 87% said they had fired a gun prior to their attendance. Seventy percent indicated that they currently hunt, with 83% of male and 38% of female students stating that they have hunted. Of those that presently hunt, 60% did not have a current hunting license and 66% had not completed the mandatory hunter education training required by the State of Texas. A higher percentage of city residents did not have a hunting license or hunter education training (78% and 83%, respectively) as compared to small- to medium-sized town residents (56% and 63%, respectively) and rural residents (51% and 61%, respectively). A higher percentage of female participants stated that they did not have a current hunting license or hunter education training (78% and 68%, respectively) than male students (57% and 65%, respectively). Only 39% of those who had previously fired a gun indicated that they currently participate in recreational shooting activities other than hunting. Forty-eight percent of those who hunt said they participate in other recreational shooting activities. Shooting interests were highly variable between male and female respondents (Table 1).

Three hundred seventy-five students completed the follow-up questionnaires. Sporting clays received the highest ranking, with 77% of the students listing it as 1 of their 3 favorite events (Table 2). The only other stations which were ranked in the top 3 by more than 50% of the participants were the trap/skeet station (59%) and the muzzleloader station (51%). Air gun was ranked the lowest at 6%. Ninety-five percent of the students indicated that they would like to continue participating in shooting sports, with 5% saying they were not sure. Shooting activities in which the students would like to continue to participate were similar to the top 3 rankings (Table 1).

Shooting interest appeared to change following the event. While 76% of students indicated an interest in handgun shooting prior to the event, only 30% indicated such an interest following the event. Interest in shooting .22 rifles dropped from 74% to 31%. The only shooting activities in which students appeared to have a greater interest in pursuing following the event were sporting clays and muzzleloader.

Table 1. Shooting interests of male and female students attending shooting sports events at the Chaparral WMA, Dimmit and LaSalle counties, Texas, 1996–1997 from pre- and post-event questionnaires.

	Pre-event		Post-event	
Shooting event	Male[a]	Female[b]	Male[c]	Female[d]
Pellet gun (air gun)	45%	56%	8%	18%
.22 Rifle	76%	69%	23%	49%
.22 Handgun	81%	62%	26%	40%
Trap/Skeet	72%	49%	55%	45%
Sporting clays	72%	49%	71%	61%
Muzzleloader	45%	31%	46%	38%
Archery	57%	54%	42%	42%
Centerfire rifle[e]	74%	47%	46%	39%

a. $N = 317$

b. $N = 124$

c. $N = 261$

d. $N = 114$

e. $N = 97$ males, 33 females for post-event survey.

Post-event surveys indicated high ratings for the event by students. Eighty-six percent of the students ranked the overall event as excellent, 13% good, and 2% fair. Instructors at the events received good ratings by more than 83% of the students, with the exception of archery and air gun, which received good ratings of 75% and 69%, respectively.

Discussion

Participants in the shooting events generally reflected the ethnic makeup of the region, indicating that these type of events could be ideal in providing recreational shooting experiences to minorities and other user groups which do not typically

Table 2. Percentage of shooting events that received a top 3 ranking by male and female students attending shooting sports events at the Chaparral WMA, Dimmit and LaSalle counties, Texas, 1996–1997.

Shooting Event	Male[a]	Female[b]
Pellet gun (air gun)	3%	13%
.22 Rifle	16%	39%
.22 Handgun	25%	38%
Trap/Skeet	67%	42%
Sporting clays	81%	69%
Muzzleloader	53%	46%
Archery	39%	39%
Centerfire rifle[c]	40%	42%

a. $N = 261$

b. $N = 114$

c. $N = 97$ males, 33 females.