



# Can the Role of Online Hunting Communities Lead Us to New Hunters?



Office of  
**CONSERVATION INVESTMENT**  
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**ASSOCIATION of FISH & WILDLIFE AGENCIES**

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# Executive Summary

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As digital platforms increasingly shape how people seek information, state fish and wildlife agencies have a growing opportunity to better engage new and novice hunters through online and social media channels. The results from this project will help guide recruitment, retention, and reactivation strategies by clarifying the digital use of novice hunters, identifying the platforms that drive impact, and highlighting the most efficient ways that agencies and partners can engage with them on different platforms.

To address these needs, the project focused on three core research questions:

- How do new and beginner hunters use online and social media throughout their hunting journeys?
- Does platform usage vary among novice hunters?
- How can agencies and partners tailor engagement strategies to maximize impact and efficiency?

The DJ Case & Associates and Southwick Associates teams gathered insights through a mixed methods approach that included a social listening exercise, regional focus groups, and a cross regional survey. Together, these methods provided both breadth and depth of understanding into novice hunters' behaviors, preferences, and unmet needs regarding their usage of online and social media.

Across both survey and focus group data, novice hunters consistently reported relying on digital platforms, most commonly Google, YouTube, and Facebook to find information about regulations, seasons, techniques, equipment, and places to hunt. However, participants expressed frustration with fragmented information, overly technical or bureaucratic language, and content that lacked regional relevance.

While state fish and wildlife agencies were not always the first resource that novice hunters turned to, trust in these agencies was high. Participants indicated strong openness to agencies playing a more visible and proactive educational role, provided information is clear, practical, beginner focused, and easy to navigate. The analysis from this project illustrates how agencies can capitalize and leverage their high position of trust and additionally how to cultivate awareness amongst participants who are not aware of the purpose and existence of their state agencies.

Taken together, the findings highlight clear opportunities to improve how agencies engage and support novice hunters through digital channels. The patterns observed across platforms, content preferences, and learning behaviors point to specific, actionable strategies that can enhance outreach effectiveness, strengthen recruitment and retention, and ensure limited R3 resources are deployed with greater precision.

Building on this evidence, the following bullet points translate these insights into practical, implementation-focused strategies designed to optimize online and social media engagement for new and beginner hunters and to inform future scalable efforts across Southeastern and Midwestern states.

- **Coordinate internal agency functions** - Form cross-functional teams (R3, marketing, communications, program staff) that link social media strategies to target audiences with clearly identified objectives.
- **Social media & online communities should enhance your website, not replace it** - posts and response should serve to provide basic elements while driving participants to website for details.
- **Use existing online communities instead of building from scratch** - Agencies should engage where hunters already are rather than defaulting to building new platforms.
- **Adopt a helpful, approachable tone** (Not bureaucratic) - Show up as a conversational, supportive guide using plain language. Tone should reduce intimidation and make hunting feel accessible.
- **Agencies should act as translators, not just rule publishers** - Translate rules into practical, real-world explanations using simple language
- **Leverage YouTube and visual learning** - Use YouTube as a core instructional platform and integrate video learning into resources
- **Connect online learning to in-person experiences** - Provide pathways from online content to classes, mentored hunts, and events
- **Leverage institutional trust** - Findings from this project indicate that state agencies occupy a prominent position of trust among participants. Emphasize transparency and credibility in strategy

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# Introduction

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Recruitment, retention, and reactivation (R3) practitioners operate in an increasingly digital landscape where new and beginner hunters are learning, asking questions, and building confidence long before they ever interact directly with a state fish and wildlife agency. While agencies have made significant investments in websites, handbooks, and educational resources, far less is known about how novice hunters engage in *online communities* and how these digital spaces influence new hunter decision making, learning, adoption of and continuation in hunting. This gap in understanding limits the ability of agencies to deploy limited R3 resources strategically.

## The Problem and Why It Matters

State fish and wildlife agencies and their partners are increasingly encouraged to “meet hunters where they are” online. However, without a clear understanding of how new and beginner hunters use social media platforms, staff are often left to assume where to engage, what content to provide, and how much to invest. Key questions remain unanswered. How do new and beginner hunters use social media throughout their hunting journeys? Does usage vary by platform? Should agencies seek to engage novice hunters within these online communities, and if so, how? How can agencies and partners engage with specific hunter segments in ways that maximize return on investment?

## Project Approach

This project sought to comprehensively understand how novice hunters utilize online communities for learning and social support, and to translate those insights into actionable guidance for agency staff. By examining novice hunters’ social media behaviors, fish and wildlife agencies can develop more targeted outreach strategies, allocate resources more effectively, and improve recruitment and retention outcomes.

# Objectives

**Objective 1:** Conduct a social listening inventory across the SEAFWA and MAFWA<sup>1</sup> regions to better understand how novice hunters use and interact on social platforms and to inform the development of focus groups.

**Objective 2:** Conduct focus groups with novice hunters from multiple SEAFWA and MAFWA states to understand their desires and experiences related to social media use for learning and social support and to inform a scalable regional survey.

**Objective 3:** Administer a survey of new hunting licensees and a complementary survey of online platform users to obtain reliable information about their use of social media for hunting related information and social support.

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<sup>1</sup>SEAFWA States: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia  
MAFWA States: Kansas, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio

# Online Communities vs. Online Resources

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For the purposes of this project, it is important to distinguish between *online resources* and *online communities*. Online resources are one directional and informational in nature. These include agency websites, digital handbooks, instructional videos, and downloadable materials designed to deliver content to users. Online communities, by contrast, are interactive environments that allow for two or multi-directional engagement. These include social media platforms, forums, group chats, comment threads, and messaging applications where users can ask questions, share experiences, provide feedback, and build social connections.

This project primarily focused on *online communities*, yet respondents also shared feedback pertaining to online resources which provide added value to the findings. While both play a role in the novice hunter journey, online communities uniquely shape social learning, confidence building, and perceptions of credibility. Understanding how novice hunters participate in digital spaces that allow for two-way or multi-directional engagement is essential for designing social media and engagement strategies.

# Best Practices for Creating a Digital Community

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## Leverage Institutional Trust

Findings from this project indicate that state agencies occupy a prominent position of trust among participants. Use this existing public trust and enhance it with transparent and credible communication.

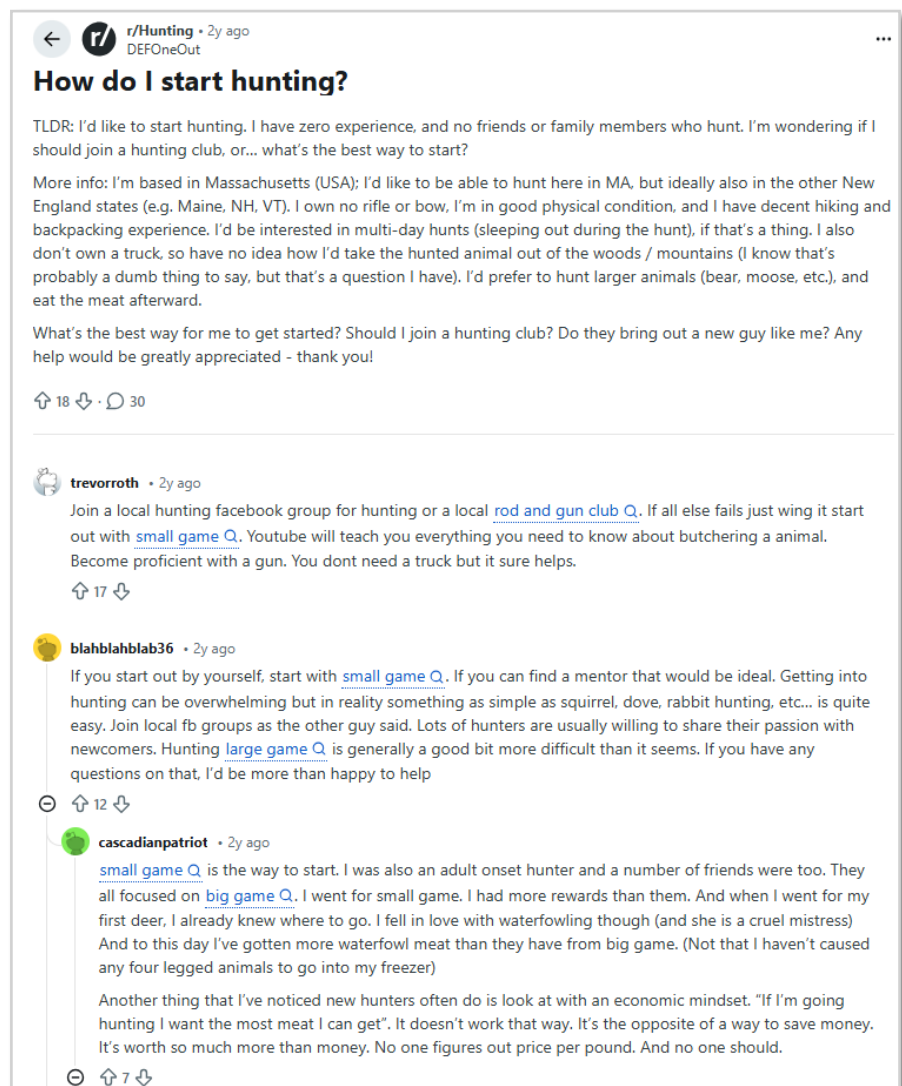
## Cross-Functional Cooperation

The first step is to create a coordinated internal structure that supports shared ownership across departments. Agencies should convene a cross-functional working group that includes representatives from R3, marketing, communications, and relevant program staff. Roles and responsibilities related to platform participation, messaging, and audience engagement should be clearly defined. Agencies should identify a way to facilitate communication between teams and ensure alignment with broader agency priorities.

# Create content, drive traffic

It is important to remember that your organization’s website should remain in the clearinghouse of all content created to support hunting. There is an inherent risk in storing content on any platform not solely controlled by your organization. One policy change at Google, Meta or any other platform could wipe out years of carefully created content if the only place that content was stored was outside of your organization’s control.

Participation in forums can create community and build trust, but ultimately the advice and information shared in an online community should provide links to content safely stored on your website. That’s not to say that you shouldn’t ever post content on social media, but copies of should always be housed in the online real estate under your organization’s control – its website.



The screenshot shows a Reddit post from the subreddit r/Hunting, posted 2 years ago by user DEFOneOut. The post title is "How do I start hunting?". The post content includes a TLDR summary, more detailed information about the user's location and interests, and a request for advice on how to get started. There are three replies from other users: trevorroth, blahblahlab36, and cascadianpatriot. Each reply provides practical advice, such as joining local groups, starting with small game, and finding a mentor.

← r/Hunting • 2y ago  
DEFOneOut

### How do I start hunting?

TLDR: I'd like to start hunting. I have zero experience, and no friends or family members who hunt. I'm wondering if I should join a hunting club, or... what's the best way to start?

More info: I'm based in Massachusetts (USA); I'd like to be able to hunt here in MA, but ideally also in the other New England states (e.g. Maine, NH, VT). I own no rifle or bow, I'm in good physical condition, and I have decent hiking and backpacking experience. I'd be interested in multi-day hunts (sleeping out during the hunt), if that's a thing. I also don't own a truck, so have no idea how I'd take the hunted animal out of the woods / mountains (I know that's probably a dumb thing to say, but that's a question I have). I'd prefer to hunt larger animals (bear, moose, etc.), and eat the meat afterward.

What's the best way for me to get started? Should I join a hunting club? Do they bring out a new guy like me? Any help would be greatly appreciated - thank you!

↑ 18 ↓ · 30

trevorroth • 2y ago  
Join a local hunting facebook group for hunting or a local [rod and gun club Q](#). If all else fails just wing it start out with [small game Q](#). Youtube will teach you everything you need to know about butchering a animal. Become proficient with a gun. You dont need a truck but it sure helps.

↑ 17 ↓

blahblahlab36 • 2y ago  
If you start out by yourself, start with [small game Q](#). If you can find a mentor that would be ideal. Getting into hunting can be overwhelming but in reality something as simple as squirrel, dove, rabbit hunting, etc... is quite easy. Join local fb groups as the other guy said. Lots of hunters are usually willing to share their passion with newcomers. Hunting [large game Q](#) is generally a good bit more difficult than it seems. If you have any questions on that, I'd be more than happy to help

↑ 12 ↓

cascadianpatriot • 2y ago  
[small game Q](#) is the way to start. I was also an adult onset hunter and a number of friends were too. They all focused on [big game Q](#). I went for small game. I had more rewards than them. And when I went for my first deer, I already knew where to go. I fell in love with waterfowling though (and she is a cruel mistress) And to this day I've gotten more waterfowl meat than they have from big game. (Not that I haven't caused any four legged animals to go into my freezer)

Another thing that I've noticed new hunters often do is look at with an economic mindset. "If I'm going hunting I want the most meat I can get". It doesn't work that way. It's the opposite of a way to save money. It's worth so much more than money. No one figures out price per pound. And no one should.

↑ 7 ↓

# Be helpful and approachable

People are searching for a trusted, approachable guide who helps make hunting feel possible rather than overwhelming. (Not a bureaucrat).

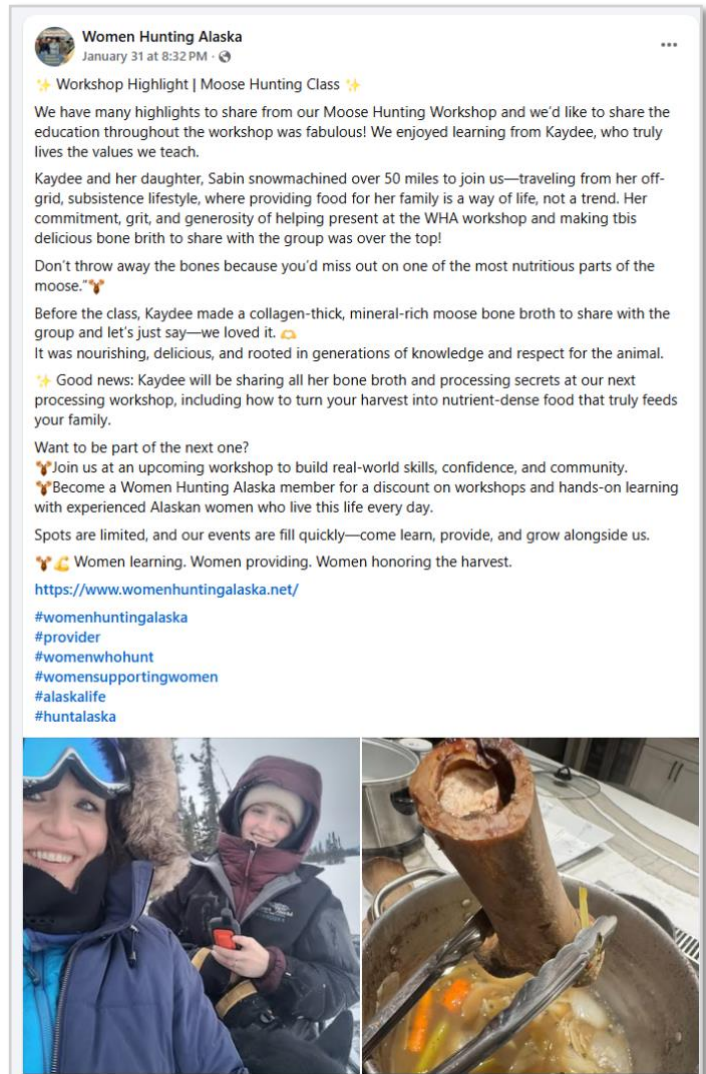
- Make rules and season dates easy to find and understand. Translate rules into practical, real-world explanations using simple language.
- Connect new hunters to local opportunities, mentors, and in-person experiences. Cut through fragmented, unreliable information and point people toward credible resources
- Create opportunities for novice hunters to engage directly with experts in friendly online spaces.
- Platforms such as YouTube and Facebook Groups are well suited for fostering peer connections, questions, and shared learning experiences.
- The entire team should use the same consistent presence across platforms with the same tone, values, information, and reliability



# Content and Tools to Prioritize:

At the end of the day, helping new hunters is a matter of education and sharing information. Certain tools and strategies are preferred by new hunters. They include:


- Develop a comprehensive, centralized website that includes regulations, simplified how to guides, videos, vetted creator content, and local event listings. Then link to it regularly in community, social media and forum posts.
- Partner with local organizations, mentors, and respected content creators to ensure materials are engaging, accurate, and culturally relevant. This can increase relevance and credibility. Content should be curated and endorsed on platforms that novice hunters already use, including YouTube, Google, Facebook Groups, and TikTok, with clear pathways directing users to deeper learning resources.
- Recognize platform differences by using TikTok and short form content for discovery and awareness, and directing users to longer form resources such as YouTube and agency websites for depth and accuracy.
- Balance technological innovation such as online classes, AI tools, and digital learning with traditional supports like printed field guides and in person instruction.
- Leverage YouTube and Visual Learning. YouTube was highlighted in both focus group and survey results as a major learning tool by novices. Share key hunting information on YouTube for learning and engagement. Use YouTube as a core instructional platform and integrate video learning into resources.



# Connect Online Learning to In-Person Experiences

Ultimately, hunting is a real-world experience and while a new hunter can learn many valuable things online, online resources can never surpass real world experiences on the path to becoming a hunter. You need to maintain and protect in-person experiences, which participants consistently viewed as essential for confidence building. Online engagement should be a bridge, not an endpoint.

- Create opportunities for novice hunters to connect and learn through communities.
- Provide pathways from online content to classes, mentored hunts, and events
- Share trusted resources instead of creating everything internally.
- Provide guidance and expertise while leveraging platforms and communities.
- Share links to vetted creators and trusted external resources.



The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook post. At the top, the post is from Mike Quirin, Admin, dated January 15 at 9:30 AM. Below the name is a profile picture and a blue verified badge. The main content is a photograph of two people in a field. One person, wearing a blue shirt and a vest, is pointing upwards with their right hand. The other person, wearing a red shirt and blue jeans, is also pointing upwards. They appear to be engaged in a wingshooting activity. Below the photo is a post from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, dated January 15 at 7:30 AM. The text of the post reads: "Youth between the ages of 10 and 17 can apply now for the youth wingshooting clinic and pheasant hunt opportunities scheduled at Pere Marquette State Park in Jersey County on March 7 and the World Shooting and Recreational Complex in Randolph County on March 21. Young hunters will participate in a wingshooting clinic in the morning taught by National Sporting Clays Association and Illinois Department of Natural Resources certified instructors. Participants will practice safe shotgun handling and operation while advancing their wingshooting skills. A pheasant hunt will take place in the afternoon. Participants must have successfully completed an approved hunter safety course and have a valid hunting license. Learn more here: <https://www.illinois.gov/.../32082-011326-01052026...>". Below the text are interaction buttons for Like, Comment, and Share. At the bottom, there is a comment input field with the text "Comment as Holly" and a small profile picture of Holly.

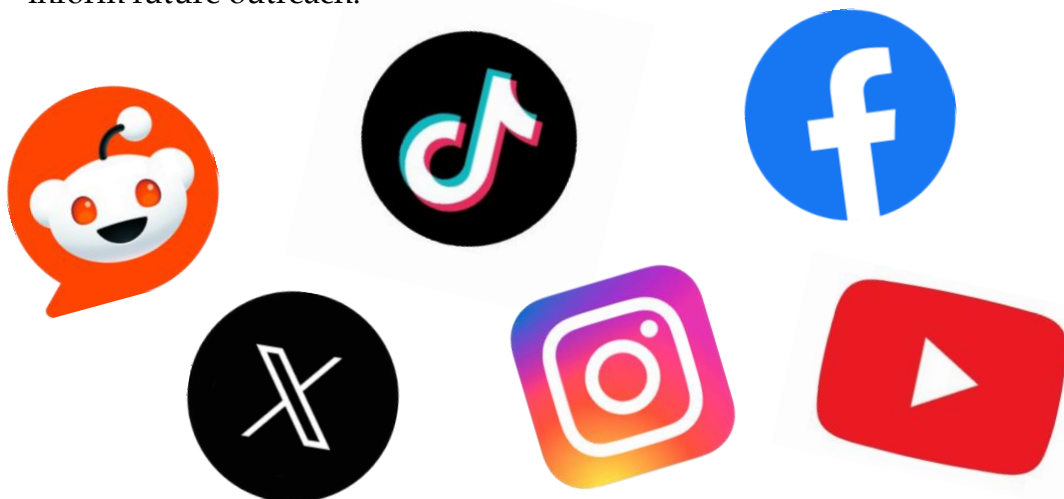
# Best Platforms for an Online Forum

The best platform depends on the type of interaction and depth of information needed. Purpose-built forums or community platforms are best suited for centralized discussion and long-form learning. YouTube is critical for instructional and visual learning and should be integrated as a companion resource rather than a stand-alone solution. Facebook Groups and Messenger are effective for community discussion, peer support, and localized engagement. TikTok and other short-form platforms are valuable for discovery and awareness but should primarily funnel users toward more detailed resources. Agencies should recognize these platform differences and use them strategically rather than attempting to treat all platforms the same.

Because there are so many effective, popular, purpose-built platforms, it is more logical for your organization to **use existing online communities** rather than **building** your own **from scratch**.

This strategy allows you to:

- Engage where hunters already are rather than putting in a great deal of effort to build a new platform and attract users to it.
- Engage in pre-existing communities as supportive participants, not owners.
- Leverage existing audiences for efficiency, reach, and authenticity.
- Curating credible content builds trust and saves capacity.
- Validate questions from new hunters and normalize confusion, especially around regulations and gear.
- Correct misinformation gently and respectfully, focusing on education rather than enforcement.
- Listen more than post and observe what questions are being asked repeatedly to inform future outreach.



## If you ARE going to build your own forum, you should:

1. Create a centralized one-stop destination that combines regulations, beginner education, tutorials, and community discussion in one easy to navigate space.
2. Design the forum specifically for beginners with plain language explanations, simplified regulatory breakdowns, and clear next steps for getting started.
3. Prioritize regional relevance by organizing content by state, species, season, and location so users can quickly find information that applies to them.
4. Include beginner friendly features such as searchable threads, local tags, frequently asked questions, and clearly marked starter guides.
5. Ensure active moderation focused on accuracy, inclusion, and respectful interaction rather than enforcement or formality.
6. Integrate visual and video-based learning such as short clips, longer tutorials, and links to vetted YouTube content.
7. Offer pathways from digital learning to in person experiences by highlighting local classes, mentored hunts, and events.
8. Design should prioritize clarity, regional relevance, and beginner-friendly features such as searchable threads, local tags, and clear pathways for next steps. Agencies should plan for active moderation and long-term maintenance, not just the launch of the forum.

# Research Methodology

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The research team employed a multifaceted research approach that combined a literature review, regional social listening inventory, focus groups with novice hunters, and a survey of new hunting licensees and online platform users. Together, these methods provide both contextual understanding and scalable, data-driven insights into how novice hunters engage across platforms and communities. After the team completed the literature review, the next phase of the research was conducting social listening and visiting forums.

## Literature Review

R3 efforts are central to the long-term sustainability of hunting in North America. As traditional entry points into hunting such as family ties, rural upbringing, and intergenerational mentorship decline, there is growing interest in how social media and online platforms may serve as new pathways into hunting. Prior to 2015, most literature emphasized traditional forms of hunter recruitment. Entry into hunting was often guided by family members, community programs, and in-person mentorship. Digital tools were largely absent from R3 research, but this is beginning to change.

The rapid growth of social media and online communities began to shift the landscape of hunter recruitment. Scholars increasingly focused on how novice hunters interacted with digital platforms as alternative avenues for learning, engagement, and community-building. Recent research is identifying non-traditional pathways in which adults develop their interest in hunting. Research on non-traditional hunters in Alabama shows that individuals without family hunting backgrounds often enter hunting through alternative social channels such as friends, mentors, or organized programs, and that their motivations differ from those of traditionally socialized hunters (Butler et al., 2021). These hunters frequently emphasize learning opportunities, social belonging, and personal growth alongside more conventional motivations such as harvesting game. Importantly, motivations associated with initiating hunting do not always align with motivations that sustain long-term participation, underscoring the need to distinguish recruitment strategies from retention strategies when designing hunter engagement efforts (Butler et al., 2021).

Across studies, social interaction – both in-person and online – emerges as a critical driver of hunter identity formation and persistence. Analyses of online hunting communities show that achievement remains a dominant satisfaction expressed by hunters, but it is commonly intertwined with social affiliation and appreciation of nature (Schroeder et al., 2017). Online platforms function as informal socialization spaces where hunting norms, values, and meanings are shared and reinforced,

particularly for individuals who lack traditional familial entry pathways (Schroeder et al., 2017; Dayer et al., 2023). Collectively, this body of research suggests that effective recruitment and retention efforts must recognize multiple motivational dimensions and strategically leverage both interpersonal and digital social networks to support a broader and more inclusive hunting community.

Online communities and social media platforms are increasingly recognized as important mechanisms for shaping participation in, planning for, and attachment to outdoor places. Studies show that engagement with recreation-related social media content influences individuals' intentions to participate in outdoor activities by providing information, inspiration, and social reinforcement (Hung & Liou, 2023). Online interactions with content affiliated with parks, protected areas, and recreation destinations can strengthen place attachment and emotional connections, suggesting that digital engagement serves as a meaningful precursor to in-person recreation experiences (Song & Schuett, 2023). Peer-generated content, including trip reports, photos, and recommendations, plays a particularly influential role in how users learn about destinations and evaluate risks, benefits, and expectations prior to visitation (Sung, 2024). Collectively, this body of research highlights how online communities function as informal socialization spaces that shape recreation norms, motivations, and decision-making. Digital platforms not only support information exchange but also reinforce shared identities and values associated with outdoor recreation, similar to patterns observed in hunting and other consumptive activities. From a management perspective, scholars note that social media and digital tools offer opportunities for agencies to reach new audiences, support responsible recreation behaviors, and enhance communication before and during visits (Mangold et al., 2024). At the same time, the literature cautions that the influence of online communities is not uniformly positive and depends on social context, platform use, and user characteristics (Hung & Liou, 2023). Overall, these studies suggest that online communities play a growing and consequential role in sustaining outdoor recreation participation by complementing traditional social pathways with digitally mediated forms of learning, motivation, and belonging.

A growing body of research supports the idea that online communities, forums, and social media platforms are powerful tools for reaching and supporting novice hunters. From YouTube tutorials to Reddit advice threads, these digital spaces serve as both gateways and guides. As younger, digital-native generations express an interest in hunting, state agencies and R3 specialists have a timely opportunity to engage with them with authenticity and strategic intent. Future research must examine:

- Long-term outcomes of digital engagement.
- Platform-specific efficacy.
- How digital interaction translates into license purchases, field time, and cultural adoptions.

# Social Listening and Visiting Forums

The research team conducted a pilot social listening approach in the initial phase of this project. Social listening in marketing is the strategic process of tracking and analyzing online conversations (mentions, keywords, hashtags) about a brand, competitors, and industry across social media and other digital channels to understand public sentiment, identify trends, gauge perception, and gain actionable insights to inform marketing, product development, and customer engagement strategies. The approach used included identifying and visiting seventy different forums (listed below). Albeit the vast array of channels located, it was determined that social listening alone was not the most effective approach for this project. While it provided access to traditional social media channels, it did not capture communities characterized by active, two-way engagement, such as forums. In addition, social listening made it difficult to distinguish new hunters from experienced hunters based solely on their posts.

A review of the discussions of several online communities revealed several shared patterns across participant conversations:

- Unless users self-identify, it is difficult to know whether they are beginners, intermediate, or avid just based on their posts.
- When questions are asked, they are answered by a broad mix of people including some subject matter experts and some that simply have anecdotes to share. As such, feedback can be a mix of high-quality responses and pure opinions.
- Forums are seldom in areas featuring storytelling or narratives. They are generally discussion points for gear, technique, or miscellaneous hunting news/events.
- Forums represent niche areas. While there are a few large forums (i.e. Bowhunters of America), they are generally more specific (i.e. Bowhunters of Minnesota). They break down by topic, geography, demographics, species, method of take, and others.
- Controversial topics garner wide attention and engagement.
- Forum managers appear to generally police any advertising or surveys posted to a group.
- Facebook Forum managers may often have a tie to the formal hunting industry in some way (they come from manufacturers, guides, marketers, land managers, etc.) and are not generally public personas. Though this was not true in all cases.

As such, the research team pivoted to visiting forums, including:

1. .410 Turkey Hunters
2. All Things Turkey Hunting
3. Archery Talk Forum
4. Backcountry Hunters and Gear
5. Buck Outdoors
6. Central Illinois Hunting & Fishing
7. Colorado Elk Hunters
8. Crossbow Hunting Facebook Group
9. Crossbow Nation Facebook Group
10. Deer & Deer Hunting Community
11. Deer Hunters
12. Deer Hunting
13. Deer Hunting Community
14. Deer Processing/Butchering of All Wild Game
15. Do It Yourself Hunter
16. Dialed In Hunter
17. Duck Hunting Facebook Group
18. East Coast Bucks
19. Elk Hunting North America
20. Facebook Deer Hunting Blinds and Stands
21. Facebook Group: Hunt Gather Cook
22. Facebook Kayak Hunting Group
23. Facebook Public Land Whitetails Group
24. Facebook Train To Hunt Community
25. Food Plots 101
26. Reddit/ New Hunters
27. Reddit/ Way of the Hunter
28. Hunters Of America
29. Hunting 101 Facebook Group
30. Hunting 24/7
31. Hunting 4 Connections
32. Hunting 4 Connections Facebook Group
33. Hunting And Fishing
34. Illinois Deer Hunting
35. Indiana Deer Hunting Facebook Group
36. Korthals Griffon Club
37. Long Island Deer Hunting
38. Louisiana Deer Hunting Clubs Looking 4 Members & Advice
39. Maine Deer Hunting
40. Meat Eater Fans Facebook Group
41. Michigan Crossbow Hunters & Friends
42. Michigan Turkey Hunters Facebook Group
43. Minnesota Waterfowlers
44. Montana Hunting, Fishing, And Outdoors
45. Native Retrievers
46. Nebraska Deer Hunting
47. Nebraska Hunting!

48. New Mexico Elk Hunters
49. Non-Resident Western Big Game  
Hunters
50. North Georgia Deer Hunting
51. North Idaho Deer Hunting
52. Pa Deer Hunting
53. Pheasant And Quail Hunters of  
Southern Illinois
54. Public Land Turkey Hunters 1
55. Public Land Turkey Hunters 2
56. Rock River Kennels
57. Run'n Gun Whitetail Hunters
58. South Carolina WMA Hunters
59. South Dakota Elk Hunters
60. Steven Rinella Meat Eater Fans +  
Your Own Experiences
61. Tenpoint Crossbow Shooters
62. Tenpoint™ Crossbow Technologies  
Friends
63. Texas Waterfowlers
64. The Real Hunters
65. The Sporting Life Notebook
66. The Trophy Mule Deer Hunter
67. Whitetail Hunters
68. Whitetail Deer Hunting
69. Whitetail Hunters
70. Women Who Shoot, Hunt and Fish

# Focus Group Methodology

As part of this effort, DJ Case & Associates recruited and conducted four focus groups with novice hunters. The focus groups were designed to gather in-depth insights into how participants use online resources, discussion forums, and social media platforms to learn about hunting, seek advice, and connect with other hunters. The primary purpose of the qualitative portion of this research was to make sure the subsequent survey addressed the most salient issues. Some questionnaire items, especially response options, were modified based on the key findings of the focus groups. Participants were recruited through state license data, existing volunteer lists in select states, and a recruitment firm called *User Interviews*, a service that connects researchers to a specified group of participants. The groups were first screened for their experience level with hunting and how they use online resources and online communities for hunting (see screener in Appendix A).

Participants received 100-dollar gift cards as an incentive for their time. Focus groups were recorded on Zoom with participant consent. Focus groups were conducted between June 5<sup>th</sup> and June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025 (see Table 1). To maximize participation, sessions were held in the evenings (generally 6-8 PM EST).

These focus groups explored topics related to:

- How novice hunters use online resources to learn about hunting and regulations.
- Which digital platforms they rely on most frequently, including social media, video platforms, websites, and online forums.
- How novice hunters find, evaluate, and decide which online hunting information and communities to trust.
- Their experiences participating in online discussion forums and digital hunting communities, including perceived benefits, barriers, and opportunities for improvement.
- The role of social media content, influencers, and online communities in shaping hunting knowledge, confidence, and motivation.
- How online platforms support social connection, mentorship, and a sense of belonging among new and beginner hunters.

The team used a combination of virtual, online meeting software based on their ability to manage participant recruitment, technology checks before each session to evaluate a participant's connection, and compatibility with a wide range of computers, tablets, and smartphones. Teams, Zoom, and YouTube live streaming allowed participants and spectating research partners to use the audio and video options on their devices.

Table 1. Focus group schedule.

| <b>Session</b> | <b>Date</b>                  | <b>Number</b> | <b>From</b>        |
|----------------|------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Focus Group 1  | June 5 <sup>th</sup> , 2025  | 6             | Mixed MAFWA/SEAFWA |
| Focus Group 2  | June 9 <sup>th</sup> , 2025  | 8             | Mixed MAFWA/SEAFWA |
| Focus Group 3  | June 10 <sup>th</sup> , 2025 | 7             | Mixed MAFWA/SEAFWA |
| Focus Group 4  | June 11 <sup>th</sup> , 2025 | 7             | Mixed MAFWA/SEAFWA |

Following the completion of the focus group sessions, the data were analyzed using thematic coding of responses to questions posed in the focus group guides (Appendix B). First, the facilitation team reviewed and discussed their recollection of what was discussed during the focus group sessions. Then, those initial reactions were set aside, and the focus group recordings and transcripts were reviewed for trends in how novice users seek information, advice, and community online.

Individual summaries of the focus group discussions are provided in Appendix B. These summaries do NOT include every point that was made in the discussions; rather, they capture the main points and/or notable responses of the discussion that informed the primary research questions being explored.

# Survey Methodology

## Sampling Frame Identification

The population of interest was hunting license holders from across the southeastern and midwestern regions of the United States who were considered a novice hunter based on the following criteria:

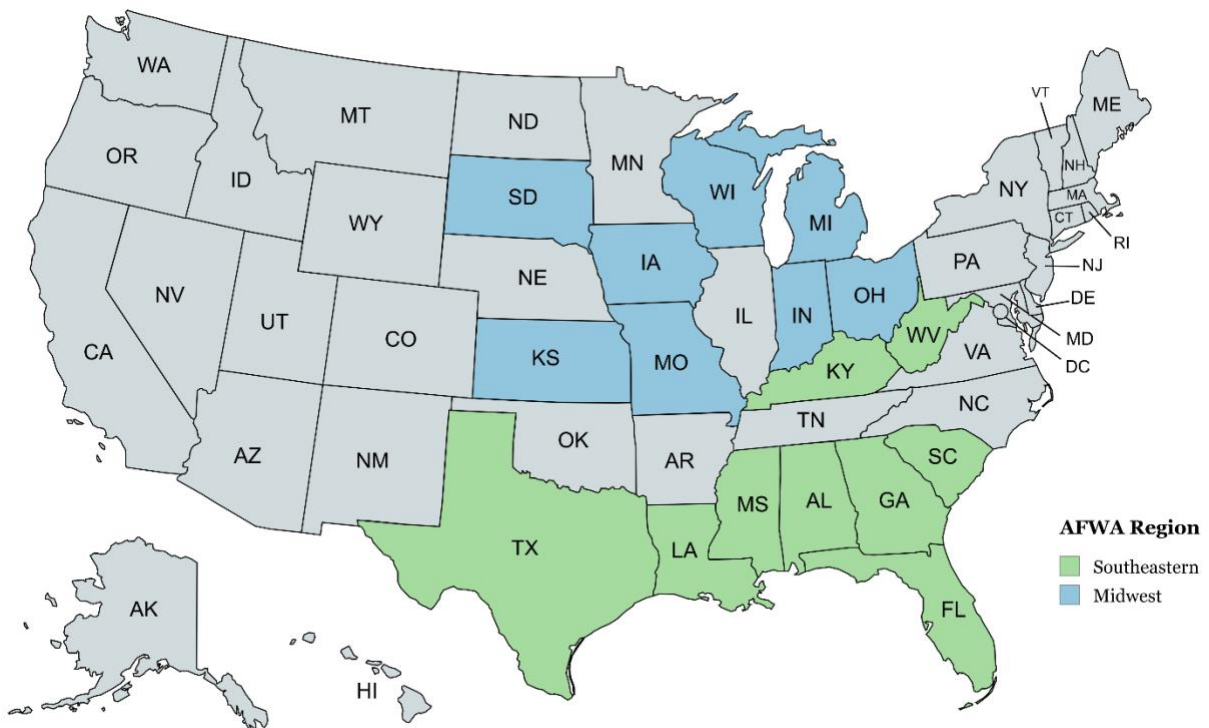
- At least 23 years old.
- Purchased licenses at least 1 year from 2022-2024.
- Did not purchase a license before 2022.

Extensive solicitations were made to enroll states in this project. All 26 state fish and wildlife agencies in SEAFWA and MAFWA were contacted multiple times, with follow-ups conducted as needed. Ultimately, 17 states (Figure 1) participated in the project. States' database files were synchronized at the state level to create one harmonized database of individuals along with their hunting license purchasing behavior over the period.

Processing the raw databases revealed a variety of challenges due to the limitations of the data and the purchasing history duration under evaluation. In most cases, state-level electronic license databases are an effective and accurate means of tracking hunters' purchasing behaviors. However, instances arise that challenge the ability to link the purchases of an individual from year to year over a decade, which in turn impacts the ability to harmonize an individual's purchase history. These include shifts in states' license structure (e.g., creating a new license, discontinuing an existing license, and implementation of new license databases), the consistency of data collected and associated with a particular license type, or the consistency of unique customer numbers. Every effort was made to work with states to identify when such instances occurred to help this project achieve the highest level of accuracy regarding individuals' license purchasing behavior.

Adding to the complexity is the definition of “new” license purchasers. Some customers identified as such based on license sales within a given state may have hunted in other states, but that history cannot be known as customer ID numbers are state-specific and do not track across states. Also, some states require individuals to purchase a license at varying ages, thereby limiting the ability to fully understand a hunter’s experience by assessing their license buying history. Given the need to know each respondent’s license buying history, only individuals who met the defined age criteria were included in the study. Since states have different licensing requirements for youths, the research team opted to constrain ages such that individuals would have been at least 23 years old during the period at which they were recruited to participate in the survey. This helps ensure that the participants were indeed beginner hunters and did not just age into purchasing a license as an adult.

Figure 1. Participating states in the SEAFWA/MAFWA hunter study, by AFWA region.



In this study, across the 17 participating states, 75,666 individuals qualified based on their purchase histories.

## Survey

The survey questionnaire was developed collaboratively with project partners and participating states. The states were also given the opportunity to ask state-specific questions, if desired. The framework of the survey was guided using the findings from the focus groups as well as the research questions and objectives for this study. The final survey consisted of sections that addressed: 1) their background as hunters, 2) sources of hunting information, 3) preferred hunting information, 4) frequency of online community usage, 5) desired features for online resources, and 6) demographics. The full survey can be found in Appendix C.

To ensure consistency among respondents' interpretation of different online resources, the following definitions were provided after the screener questions on the survey.

**Social media resources** - Places where people share and post photos or videos with a wide audience. Examples: Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X.

**Online community resources** - Discussion boards or forums where people post questions and replies in topic threads. Examples: Reddit, Quora, Lemmy, blogs, or other message boards.

**Messaging apps** - Tools for direct, private, or group conversations. Examples: Messenger, WhatsApp, GroupMe, Slack, or built-in phone messaging apps.

The survey was fielded to two audiences. The first audience was license holders in participating states in the SEAFWA and MAFWA regions. The second audience was new hunters active on social media, specifically those identified from the social listening exercise conducted previously in this study. Southwick Associates developed and managed the survey, and DJ Case & Associates posted invitations to 61 different forums. The intent behind fielding to social media users was to understand experiences and learn of recommendations from hunters who actually use social media, providing us with input directly related to the study. The only difference between the survey shared to social media users and the survey fielded to license holders is that there was no requirement of living in the SEAFWA or MAFWA region for the former. The reasoning behind this is because it would be difficult to only target people who live in these regions when posted online. Also, the research team thought it would help ensure a large enough sample size to conduct analyses from the data of this survey. Both surveys were fielded through the online platform, Qualtrics.

The license-based survey was conducted between October 24, 2025, and November 13, 2025. A total of 68,347 individuals were contacted up to 6 times. This number accounts for bounced or undeliverable emails (n = 7,319). A total of 4,139 responses were obtained, which resulted in a 6% response rate. After accounting for participants who were screened out of the survey for not satisfying the qualifying criteria (n = 3,476), 663 completed responses were utilized for analyses.

The survey fielded to social media users was posted online on October 24, 2025, and generated 17 completed responses. Due to the low response rate, the data cannot be used to conduct statistically sound analyses to draw conclusions.

Since there was not enough data to gather results from the social media-based survey, the survey team used an alternative method to obtain more data to boost the robustness of the results. Respondents of the license-based survey effort who had up to six total years of hunting experience were added to the data set. Statistical tests were conducted to determine if there were any differences between the respondents who indicated they had 1-3 years of experience in the survey and those who indicated they had 4-6 years of experience. Ultimately, these differences were not significant and therefore would not alter the results of the survey. Consequently, respondents were only screened out of the survey if they had over six years of hunting experience.

## Survey Distribution

The team received 200 responses from each of the AFWA regions (Table 2).

Table 2. Number of responses, by state and AFWA region.

|                    | <b>N</b>   | <b>Percent</b> |
|--------------------|------------|----------------|
| <b>MIDWEST</b>     |            |                |
| Indiana            | 39         | 6%             |
| Iowa               | 96         | 14%            |
| Kansas             | 54         | 8%             |
| Michigan           | 21         | 3%             |
| Missouri           | 60         | 9%             |
| Ohio               | 59         | 9%             |
| South Dakota       | 38         | 6%             |
| Wisconsin          | 67         | 10%            |
| <b>TOTAL</b>       | <b>444</b> | <b>67%</b>     |
| <b>SOUTHEAST</b>   |            |                |
| Alabama            | 13         | 2%             |
| Florida            | 22         | 3%             |
| Georgia            | 30         | 5%             |
| Kentucky           | 42         | 6%             |
| Louisiana          | 21         | 3%             |
| Mississippi        | 10         | 2%             |
| South Carolina     | 38         | 6%             |
| Texas              | 16         | 2%             |
| West Virginia      | 37         | 6%             |
| <b>TOTAL</b>       | <b>219</b> | <b>33%</b>     |
| <b>GRAND TOTAL</b> | <b>663</b> | <b>100%</b>    |

## Analysis

Data were cleaned after the survey was fielded. Respondents who did not complete at least half of the survey were removed from the analysis. Furthermore, checks were made to ensure that the data came from only those respondents from participating states in the SEAFWA and MAFWA regions. Although the research team only received license records from the states who agreed to participate in the study, the records may not reflect people's most up-to-date status. Therefore, any participants who may have been in the license records of a participating state, but who responded that they do not live in a participating state, were removed from the data set.

# Results

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## Focus Groups

### Focus Group Key Findings

This report presents findings from regional focus groups conducted to understand how new and novice hunters use online communities, social media, and digital tools to support their hunting journeys. The purpose of this work is to inform more effective R3 strategies by identifying where novice hunters seek information, how they assess credibility, and how fish and wildlife agencies and partners can engage with novice hunters in a digital landscape.

Participants consistently reported using digital platforms, most commonly Google, YouTube, and Facebook to learn about hunting regulations, techniques, equipment, and local opportunities. Online communities and social media were also used for social support and confidence building. However, participants expressed caution about misinformation, lack of regional relevance, and content that is overly technical or difficult to navigate.

A strong preference emerged for clear, trustworthy, and beginner focused resources. Many participants described frustration with fragmented information and language perceived as overly bureaucratic. While agencies were not always viewed as the first stop for learning how to hunt, trust in state wildlife agencies was high. Participants indicated openness to agencies playing a more visible educational role, provided content is practical, approachable, and regionally relevant.

### Key Insights

Focus group findings consistently highlighted four priority needs among novice hunters:

1. A centralized “one stop shop” for hunting education and regulatory information that reduces confusion and simplifies the learning process.
2. Localized and personalized learning that reflects state specific regulations, regional species, seasons, and hunting contexts.
3. Credible and entertaining content that balances authority with approachability and keeps new hunters engaged.
4. A balance between digital access and traditional methods, including continued use of print handbooks and in person classes alongside online resources.

# Survey

## Demographics

Overall, 70% of respondents were male and 89% identified as White or Caucasian. The average age of the respondents was 37 years old. Almost a third (28%) of respondents grew up in a small town between 2,501 and 10,000 people, and a similar but smaller percentage (23%) still live in one.

## Key Survey Findings

Below are the key findings according to the study's research questions:

1) How do new and beginner hunters use online and social media throughout their hunting journeys?

- More than half of new hunters look online for hunting information regarding the following topics: rules, regulations, or seasons (93%), places to hunt (64%), how to process and cook harvested game (61%), hunting ethics/shot placement (60%), hunting techniques (59%), how to field dress game (58%), what firearm, gear, or ammunition to buy (55%), and hunting etiquette (51%).
- Half of new hunters use Facebook to both read/write posts and to join/participate in hunting groups.
- 61% of new hunters use online hunting communities (such as Reddit, Discord, Quora, or Lemmy) to read and watch content that is posted. Less than 15% of the hunters use these communities to post content, post questions, or make comments.

2) Does platform usage vary among novice hunters?

- To prepare for their first hunt ever, novice hunters went to get hunting information from the following: 53% from websites/online community resources, 49% from social media, and 3% from messaging apps.
- 90% of novice hunters knew that their state fish and wildlife agency provided hunting information on its website even before they went on their first hunt.
- The top three online resources that novice hunters use to get hunting information currently are state fish and wildlife agency websites (74%), social media resources (56%), and Google or other search engines (46%).

- The top two social media resources they use for hunting information currently are YouTube (88%) and Facebook (47%). These findings are consistent with previous R3 research.<sup>2</sup>
- A quarter of novice hunters use podcasts more than 10 times per hunting season. More than a quarter of novice hunters use Google or other search engines, artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT, state fish and wildlife agency websites, online articles, and online discussion communities at least six times per hunting season, but no more than 10.
- A little more than a quarter (27%) of novice hunters use YouTube more than 10 times per hunting season. More than a quarter of novice hunters use Facebook and TikTok about six to 10 times per hunting season.
- 41% of novice hunters indicated that they strongly like receiving hunting information from YouTube.
- Almost a third of novice hunters (29%) indicated that after experiencing a negative interaction while using an online resource to learn about hunting, they did not use that same resource again.
- Of the novice hunters who use online hunting communities (such as Reddit, Discord, Quora, or Lemmy), more than half indicated that they use YouTube most often to connect with other hunters or share hunting tips and experiences. The second and third online resources used most often for these same purposes are Facebook groups and Reddit (36% of hunters selected each of these resources).
- Messenger is the most commonly used messaging app (41%) to talk with other hunters, from those hunters who indicated that they use messaging apps to connect with other hunters or share hunting tips and experiences.

### 3) How can agencies and partners tailor engagement strategies to maximize impact and efficiency?

- About two-thirds (66%) of novice hunters indicated that they would like to see more content on the rules, regulations, and seasons for a specific area; more online posting of this content would be impactful. A close secondary option, at 63% of hunters, is posting more information about places to hunt.
- The following describes the features that novice hunters would like to see:

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<sup>2</sup>International Hunter Education Association (IHEA). “The Factors Hindering Many Hunter Education Graduates From becoming Independent Hunters And How To Overcome These Hurdles”. Produced by Southwick Associates and DJ Case & Associates for the IHEA under Multi-State Conservation Grant #F23AP00565. 2024.

- For social media resources used for hunting – information specific to their region or local area (56%), and a “know before you go” checklist (47%).
- For online community resources or discussion boards used for hunting – opportunities to talk with an expert hunter (33%), and a comprehensive guide to hunting different game (29%).
- Since state fish and wildlife agency staff were considered the most trustworthy out of all the sources listed (86% of novice hunters indicated agency staff are trustworthy), use them as a source for hunting resources and information.
- Just under 20% of novice hunters are open to connecting with other hunters online through a community (such as Reddit, Discord, Quora, or Lemmy).

# APPENDIX A:

## Survey Screener

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### SEAFWA/MAFWA Role of Online Hunting Communities Focus Group Screener

We are working with state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast and Midwest to understand how new hunters use online communities to learn about hunting and receive social support. We realize that people use online platforms differently, and we would like to learn more from you directly. Our ultimate goal is to develop engaging marketing tools that fish and wildlife agencies can use on their social media.

You must be at least 23 years old to participate. Please select 'Yes' to continue.

- Yes
- No

[Disqualify if they select No]

From 2021-2025, did you hunt in any state for any species?

- Yes
- No

[Disqualify if they select No]

Do you use online discussions (Reddit, forums, Discord, Facebook groups) to learn about, get support, and/or advice on hunting?

- Yes
- No

We are interested in hearing more about your hunting experiences, and the kinds of information that play a role in your interest in hunting. To do this, we will be conducting 60 - 90 minute online focus groups (small group discussions). Since the

focus groups are online, you must have access to a computer with a microphone and camera. We will assist with technology checks before the meeting.

For participating, you will receive a **\$200 VISA gift card** as compensation for your valuable time. Please select the dates that work for you:

- Tuesday May 20th at 6pm EST, 5pm CST, 4pm MST, 3pm PST
- Wednesday May 21st at 7pm EST, 6pm CST, 5pm MST, 4pm PST
- Tuesday June 10th at 6:30pm EST, 5:30pm CST, 4:30pm MST, 3:30pm PST
- Wednesday June 11th at 7:30pm EST, 6:30pm CST, 5:30pm MST, 4:30pm PST
- None of the above

[Show if None of the above dates work for them]

Since you can't make the dates, would you be available for a one-on-one interview at a later date?

- Yes
- No

[Disqualify if they select No]

Thank you for agreeing to participate. Please confirm your name and email address and provide your phone number. This information will not be shared outside our small research team.

You will receive information soon to confirm the date and time and walk you through the tech check process.

- Name: \_\_\_\_\_
- Email: \_\_\_\_\_
- Phone Number (including area code): \_\_\_\_\_

As a reminder, you will be **compensated with a \$200 VISA gift card** for participating in this project.

# APPENDIX B:

## Focus Group Guide

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### Focus Group Discussion Guide: Novice Hunters & Online Forums

#### Verbal Consent Script

Hello, and thank you for joining us today. This focus group is part of a research project designed to understand how new or novice hunters are using online platforms-like forums and social media to learn about hunting. Your feedback will help improve how outdoor education programs are designed and shared with the public.

Participation is voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question, and you can leave the group at any time. With your permission, we'll record today's session for transcription and research purposes. Your name and identifying information will be kept confidential.

#### I. Introductions

Let's go around and introduce ourselves. Please tell us your name (or first name only) and briefly share how long you've been interested in or involved with hunting.

#### II. Online Resource Use

A. How often do you use online resources to learn about hunting, and what types of resources do you find most helpful?

B. Which specific online platform do you use to find hunting resources?

YouTube videos

State wildlife agency websites

Instagram

TikTok

Facebook groups

Online articles

Online forums

Podcasts

None of the above

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

C. How did you find those resources?

Google search

Recommended by a friend

social media algorithm

### III. Online Discussion Forum Experience

A. "Can you describe a time when advice from an online forum helped you during a hunt? What was the advice, and how did it impact your experience?"

B. What do you look for when using a discussion forum?

It's easy to use

It has helpful users

I trust the information

It was recommended to me

It has lots of threads and topics I'm interested in

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

C. When you visit hunting discussion forums or online communities, what do you usually go there to do?

Ask questions

Read threads or discussions

Share your own hunting experiences or stories

Look for people to go hunting with

Find gear/location reviews

Post photos or updates

Search for hunting regulations

Learn hunting techniques

Browse just for fun or entertainment

Something else?

D. What discussion forums/groups do you use the most?

E. What makes a discussion forum easy to use?

F. What makes a discussion forum difficult to use

G. How do you decide which forum to trust? How do you know what information you can trust online?

H. How welcoming do you find forums for new hunters?

I. What would improve your experience on forums? (Together let's design your fave forum. What do you like about it). *You can prompt participants with examples if needed:*

Beginner-friendly threads

Less judgment

Better search tools/ability to find content specific to your local area

Expert presence

More "fun" content/jokes etc

Less "fun" content/jokes etc

More moderator involvement

Less moderator involvement

Easier mobile use

Ability to connect with other hunters either on or off the forum

Community

Do you enjoy meeting other hunters like you in online communities? Why or Why not?

#### IV. Social Media Use for Hunting

A. Do you follow hunting-related accounts or influencers, and if so, which platforms do you use the most?

Instagram

TikTok

YouTube

Facebook

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

B. What kind of content do you find most helpful or inspiring?

Gear reviews

Tutorials

Personal stories

How to tips

Conservation topics

Ethics/laws

Culture-related posts

#### VI. Final Reflections (if there's time)

Once you identify a hunting forum, how do you find the type of information that you are looking for?

If you have ever stopped using a forum, you quit?

What's one thing you wish more experienced hunters understood about being new

What would make your journey as a hunter easier or more fulfilling?

Anything else you'd like to share about your online hunting experience?

## VII. Summary & Close

[Facilitator summarizes key themes from the discussion and invites participants to confirm or clarify]

Thank you for your time and insight. Your experiences are extremely valuable.

Provide Payment details

## Appendix Emerging Themes from Each Focus Group

This section of the focus group report summarizes key themes that arose from each focus group.

## Focus Group 1

**1. Trust in State Agencies** Participants expressed strong trust in state wildlife agencies when it came to rules, regulations, seasons, and licensing. There was strong support for these agencies to expand their role into education and outreach, particularly if they can provide up-to-date, engaging, and vetted information.

**2. Digital Tools: Mixed Reception** YouTube, Google, and Facebook Groups were the most frequently cited sources of hunting information. Participants appreciated visual learning, real-time tips, and regional insights. However, they cautioned that not all content is reliable and emphasized the need for agencies or trusted entities to curate and/or endorse educational content.

### 3. Learning Preferences

The group highlighted a wide variety of learning preferences:

- Some participants preferred learning from local mentors and guides.
- Others used AI tools or google to ask questions
- Print materials and field handbooks were seen as essential for remote areas without service.
- In-person classes or workshops were considered effective for safety and advanced skills.

**4. Recommendations to State Agencies** Participants suggested the following to improve outreach and education:

- Develop a comprehensive, centralized website that includes not only regulations but educational materials, links to vetted content creators, and local event listings.
- Partner with local groups or respected content creators to ensure materials are engaging and accurate.
- Balance technological innovations (e.g., AI, online classes) with traditional supports like field guides and local in-person events. There was a strong support of striking the balance. People don't want to lose the benefits of having "in person experiences," but they also understand and want agencies to keep up with the times.

Focus group #1 underscored the complexity of modern outdoor education, especially in a digital-first world. While many new and returning hunters are turning to online platforms, they are doing so with caution and still value traditional sources of

information. Blending credibility with accessibility and entertainment, and offering multiple pathways for learning, will be key to successful engagement in the future.

## Focus Group 2

The following key insights emerged from the focus group discussion:

1. Trust in State Agencies – Participants overwhelmingly valued content from fish and wildlife agencies. These were seen as the most credible and authoritative sources, particularly for understanding local laws and safety.
2. Fragmented Online Information – Users described the challenge of “piecemealing” together knowledge from various unverified sources. There was frustration with the lack of a centralized, comprehensive learning hub.
3. YouTube and Google as Starting Points – These tools were commonly used to look up hunting techniques, how-tos, and gear reviews. However, participants expressed difficulty in identifying reliable content tailored to their location or experience level.
4. Skepticism of Influencer Content – Several participants voiced concern that influencer videos were more for entertainment than for practical learning. This impacted their trust and led some to seek more official or low-profile instructional sources. Participants saw an opportunity for State Agencies to certify certain Influencers...or endorse etc.
5. Need for a Centralized Hub – Participants recommended creating a one-stop online destination that houses regulations, videos, local classes, tutorials, and a community for beginners.
6. Desire for Hands-On or Mentored Experiences – While digital tools were valued, many emphasized the irreplaceable value of in-person learning, mentorship, and community-based knowledge transfer.
7. Inclusivity and Accessibility – There was a desire to see more cultural, economic, and geographic diversity in hunting media. Some participants felt that mainstream representations did not reflect their experiences or communities.
8. Interactive and Personalized Tools– Though less frequent, A few people said they liked using hunting apps or tools that let them interact and learn in a way that fit their own pace or needs like showing tips based on where they live or helping them track what they’ve learned.

The second focus group reinforced the importance of clear, accessible, and trustworthy digital resources for new and novice hunters. While participants are actively seeking information through platforms like YouTube and Google, they consistently expressed a need for centralized, beginner-focused content from credible sources, particularly state agencies. Their insights highlight a key opportunity for outdoor education programs to bridge gaps in accessibility, representation, and hands-on learning through both digital and in-person offerings.

### Focus Group 3

The following key insights emerged from the focus group discussion:

1. Trust in State Agencies and Official Resources – Participants repeatedly emphasized the value of information coming directly from wildlife or natural resources departments. These sources were considered reliable and essential for understanding regulations and safe hunting practices.
2. YouTube and social media as Starting Points – Many participants began their learning through online videos and social platforms. While helpful, the accuracy and regional relevance of this content were sometimes in question. However, many participants mentioned that Tik Tok is their first stop for information and that they go to YouTube and other sources for longer form and in-depth information.
3. Skepticism Toward Influencer Content and Misinformation – Some felt that content from influencers was more about entertainment than education and often lacked the accuracy or depth new hunters need.
4. Desire for Region-Specific and Localized Content – Participants expressed a strong need for hunting guidance that is specific to their local geography, laws, and available species.
5. Frustration with Fragmented or Hard-to-Find Information – The lack of a centralized resource meant that beginners had to put together information from many places, leading to confusion or gaps in learning.
6. Preference for In-Person Experiences and Mentorship – Hands-on experience and access to a mentor were seen as some of the most valuable ways to learn. Digital content was helpful, but not a replacement for real-life exposure.
7. Challenges Understanding Hunting Regulations and Process – New hunters often

find state regulations difficult to navigate, especially without guidance or a simplified breakdown. Hard to know how to do something when you cannot understand the rules and regulations.

8. Lack of Centralized Beginner Resources – Participants emphasized how helpful it would be to have one go-to place for laws, gear lists, how-to content, and safety information specifically designed for new hunters.

9. Use of Reddit and Forums – These platforms serve as helpful tools for asking questions and learning from others, though participants cautioned against accepting everything at face value.

10. Interest in Step-by-Step and Visually Guided Content – Beginners appreciated visual, tutorial-style content that broke down gear use, shooting, and field dressing into manageable steps.

11. Barriers to Entry– High costs, gear confusion, and general lack of access to knowledge or hunting spaces made it harder for many to start.

12. Need for Inclusive and Diverse Representation – A few participants noted that they would feel more comfortable and welcomed if hunting media showed a broader range of backgrounds and experiences.

The third focus group added valuable perspectives, reaffirming that new hunters often face a maze of unclear, scattered, and inconsistent information. Participants emphasized the need for trustworthy, regionally relevant, and clearly explained guidance from credible sources. Centralized resources and expanded mentorship programs, both digital and in-person, stand out as critical opportunities for improving the beginner experience in the hunting community.

## Focus Group 4

The following key insights emerged from the focus group discussion:

1. Trust in State Wildlife Agencies – Focus group participants emphasized their trust in state agencies when it comes to accurate information on hunting laws, safety, and getting started.
2. Need for a Centralized Resource for Beginners – Participants expressed frustration about scattered resources. A one-stop-shop for new hunters that includes regulations, gear lists, how-to videos, and mentorship options was voiced widely and supported.
3. YouTube and Podcasts as Learning Tools – These platforms were praised for making information accessible and easy to understand. However, participants still noted the need to verify what they learn.
4. Desire for Mentorship and Community Connections – Many participants wanted to connect with more experienced hunters in real life, not just online, and saw mentorship as critical for building skills and confidence.
5. Skepticism of Influencer Content – Some participants felt that much of what’s popular online is more about branding than helpful education, making it hard to know who to trust.
6. Barriers to Entry – High costs of gear, not knowing where to start, and lacking local knowledge were mentioned as challenges.
7. Localized Information – Participants wanted content that reflected the rules, terrain, and species in their specific local area, not just general advice.
8. Forums and Reddit – These were used by some to ask questions and see what other beginners were learning, though users were cautious about the quality of advice.
9. Beginner-Friendly Content – Several people noted how difficult it is to find material that truly breaks things down for real beginners.
10. Digital Tools and Apps – While not widely used, a few participants shared good experiences with apps that help track hunts, identify animals, or show regulations.
11. Hands-On Learning – There was a strong agreement that nothing replaces being

outside and learning directly, especially with a guide or mentor.

12. Representation and Inclusion – A few participants called for more diversity in hunting media to reflect who’s really trying to get into the outdoors today.

13. Misinformation Concerns – Repeated across groups, participants were wary of inaccurate or misleading information online and wanted to know what sources were safe to trust.

The findings from the fourth focus group affirmed the importance of trustworthy, accessible, and beginner-focused resources for new hunters. While digital platforms like YouTube and podcasts are helping fill the gap, many participants felt overwhelmed by scattered, sometimes unreliable information. Their feedback reinforces the need for centralized, credible tools...especially those supported by wildlife agencies in order to help build knowledge, skills, and confidence in the next generation of hunters.

Insights from the focus groups directly informed the survey design, allowing the research team to test and quantify these themes across a broader population.

# APPENDIX C: Survey

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## Questionnaire used in the Role of Online Hunting Communities project.

This study is being conducted on behalf of the [insert agency name]. The goal of the project is to learn how various media channels help you as a hunter.

You are among a small group of people who were selected to participate in the project. Your contact information has been provided under strict confidentiality and security agreements. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential. This survey should take less than 10 minutes to complete. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may stop taking the survey at any time. You must be at least 23 to participate.

Are you at least 23 years old?

- Yes
- No

[Disqualify if they select No]

Which state do you live in?

- Alabama
- Alaska
- Arizona
- Arkansas
- California
- Colorado
- Connecticut
- Delaware
- District of Columbia
- Florida
- Georgia
- Hawaii
- Idaho
- Illinois
- Indiana
- Iowa
- Kansas
- Kentucky
- Louisiana
- Maine
- Maryland
- Massachusetts
- Michigan
- Minnesota
- Mississippi
- Missouri
- Montana
- Nebraska

- Nevada
- New Hampshire
- New Jersey
- New Mexico
- New York
- North Carolina
- North Dakota
- Ohio
- Oklahoma
- Oregon
- Pennsylvania
- Puerto Rico
- Rhode Island
- South Carolina
- South Dakota
- Tennessee
- Texas
- Utah
- Vermont
- Virginia
- Washington
- West Virginia
- Wisconsin
- Wyoming
- I do not reside in the United States

You said you live in [insert state], is this correct? If so, click "Yes" to continue. Otherwise, use the "back arrow" button to correct your response.

- Yes, I live in [insert state]

[For the license-based survey, participants should be disqualified if it's not one of the SEAFWA or MAFWA states]

Which of the following outdoor recreational activities did you participate in in the past 3 years? *Please select all that apply.*

- Off-road vehicle (ATV, 4x4, dirt bikes)
- Non-motorized boating (canoeing/kayaking, sailing)
- Motorized boating (including jet skiing)
- Hunting
- Fishing
- Target shooting (archery or firearm)
- Camping
- Wildlife viewing or birdwatching
- Hiking, trail running, or walking for fitness
- Backpacking or rock climbing
- None of the above

[Disqualify if hunting was not one of the selected responses or None of above]

How many total years of hunting experience do you have?

- Less than 1
- 1-3
- 4-6
- More than 6

[Disqualify if More than 6 is selected]

To make sure the questions are clear, here is how we define different types of online resources:

**Social media resources** - Places where people share and post photos or videos with wide audiences. Examples: Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X.

**Online community resources** - Discussion boards or forums where people post questions and replies in topic threads. Examples: Reddit, Quora, Lemmy, blogs, or other message boards.

**Messaging apps** - Tools for direct, private, or group conversations. Examples: Messenger, WhatsApp, GroupMe, Slack, or built-in phone messaging apps.

Have you ever used social media, online community resources, or messaging apps (such as YouTube, Facebook, Reddit, GroupMe, or websites) to learn about hunting or get hunting information?

- Yes
- No

[Disqualify if No is selected]

What type of game did you start hunting first?

- Big game (such as, deer, elk, bear)
- Upland game birds (such as, grouse, quail, pheasant)
- Small game (such as, rabbit, squirrel)
- Turkey
- Waterfowl (such as, duck, geese)
- Predators (such as, coyote, fox, bobcat)
- Other - please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

As you were preparing for your very first hunt, where did you go to get information about hunting? *Please select all that apply.*

- Family/friends/coworkers
- Classes and organized programs
- Social media (such as YouTube, Facebook)
- Local club or organization (such as church group, Rotary)

- Websites/Online community resources
- Print magazines
- Television/streaming services (such as Netflix, Hulu)
- Messaging apps
- Other - please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

Before your first hunt, did you know that your state fish and wildlife agency, which is responsible for managing hunting and fishing in your State, provided hunting information on its website?

- Yes
- No

Currently, do you look online for hunting information?

- Yes
- No

[Skip to Trustworthy questions if No is selected]

What types of hunting information do you look for online? *Please select all that apply.*

- Safety training
- Rules, regulations, or seasons
- How to scout for game and track game (before and after a shot)
- Places to hunt
- Hunting techniques (such as calling)
- Groups, outfitters and guides, or a contact for questions and help
- Hunting etiquette
- Whether to use a dog for a particular hunt
- How to field dress game
- What firearm, gear, or ammunition to buy
- Resources to get children involved in hunting
- How to process and cook harvested game

- Hunting ethics/shot placement
- Other - please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

Which online resources do you use to get information about hunting? *Please select up to 3 that you find most useful.*

- Google or other search engines
- Artificial intelligence tools (such as ChatGPT)
- Messaging apps (such as Messenger, WhatsApp, GroupMe)
- Blogs or online forums
- State fish and wildlife agency websites
- Hunting organizations' websites (not a state agency)
- Online articles
- Social media resources (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X/Twitter)
- Online discussion communities (such as Reddit)
- Online newsletters
- Marketplace or websites that specialize in hunting trips (e.g., BookYourHunt.com)
- Podcasts
- Other - please describe: \_\_\_\_\_
- I do not use any online resources for hunting information

[Skip to Frequency questions if I do not use online resources for hunting information is selected]

[Show if Social media resources is selected]

Which social media resources do you use for hunting information? *Please select all that apply.*

- Facebook
- Instagram
- YouTube

- TikTok
- X/Twitter
- Other - please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

[Show if Facebook is selected]

If you use Facebook for hunting information, how do you usually use it?

- To read or write posts only
- To join or participate in hunting groups only
- Both posts and groups

[Show for all online resources selected except for Social media resources]

How frequently do you use [insert online resource] for hunting information?

- Rarely (Once per hunting season)
- Sometimes (2-5 times per hunting season)
- Often (6-10 times per hunting season)
- Always (More than 10 times per hunting season)

[Show for all social media resources selected]

How frequently do you use [insert social media resource] for hunting information?

- Rarely (Once per hunting season)
- Sometimes (2-5 times per hunting season)
- Often (6-10 times per hunting season)
- Always (More than 10 times per hunting season)

We would like to know how you prefer to receive hunting information.

Please rate the following:

|   | Strongly Dislike      | Dislike               | Neutral               | Like                  | Strongly Like         |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Talking with people   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Websites  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Magazines   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Newsletters   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Podcasts  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| A program on TV<br>or a streaming<br>service                        | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Social media<br>(Facebook,<br>Instagram, TikTok,<br>X/Twitter)      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| YouTube   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Discussion boards<br>(such as Reddit,<br>Discord, Quora,<br>Lemmy)  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Groups on<br>Messaging apps<br>(Messenger,<br>WhatsApp,<br>GroupMe) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Other - please<br>describe: _____                                   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

What types of hunting information would you like to see more of online? *Please select all that apply.*

- Places to hunt
- Which firearm, equipment, gear, or ammunition to buy and how to use it
- Costs involved (gear, licenses, etc.)
- How hunting impacts the environment
- In-person hunting events and opportunities
- Rules, regulations, or seasons for your local area
- Game species available to hunt nearby
- How to process and cook harvested game
- Local hunting groups or guides and outfitters
- Affordable or accessible hunting opportunities
- Safety training
- Resources to get children involved in hunting
- Where to take a class or find mentorship opportunities
- Information specific to my sex, race, age, or experience level
- How to scout for game
- Other - please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

Which features would you most like to see on social media resources used for hunting?  
*Please select up to 3 features.*

- Short videos or other bite-sized content
- Information focused on beginner hunters
- Information specific to my region or local area
- A comprehensive guide to hunting different game
- A "know before you go" checklist
- Verification of information/endorsement by a state agency
- Ability to download or print information for offline use
- Links or resources to other hunting sites or apps
- Other - please describe: \_\_\_\_\_
- I don't want any of these features

- No feature will encourage me to use social media resources for hunting

Which features would you most like to see in online community resources (such as Reddit, Quora, Lemmy, or blogs) or discussion boards used for hunting? *Please select up to 3 features.*

- Opportunities to talk with an expert hunter
- Opportunities to talk with hunters at my skill level
- Opportunities to talk with hunters by sex, race, age, or experience level
- Discussion forums with back-and-forth dialogue
- A comprehensive guide to hunting different game
- A "know before you go" checklist
- Opportunities to share photos, videos, or hunting stories
- Weekly polls or featured questions to spark conversation
- Other - please describe: \_\_\_\_\_
- I don't want any of these features
- No feature will encourage me to use online community resources for hunting

Which of the following do you consider trustworthy sources for hunting resources and information? *Please select all that apply.*

- State fish and wildlife agency staff
- National or local hunting membership groups
- Enthusiasts/Influencers
- Hunting gear and equipment companies
- Staff at hunting or outdoor retail stores
- Family or friends with hunting experience
- Local hunting clubs
- Hunting outfitters
- Other - please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

[Show if more than one source for hunting resources and information is selected]

Please rank your top 3 most trustworthy sources for hunting resources and information.

Enter 1 next to the item that you think is the most trustworthy, 2 next to the one that is second most trustworthy to you, and 3 next to the one that is third most trustworthy.

[Insert selections from previous question]

- \_\_\_\_\_ State fish and wildlife agency staff
- \_\_\_\_\_ National or local hunting membership groups
- \_\_\_\_\_ Enthusiasts/Influencers
- \_\_\_\_\_ Hunting gear and equipment companies
- \_\_\_\_\_ Staff at hunting or outdoor retail stores
- \_\_\_\_\_ Family or friends with hunting experience
- \_\_\_\_\_ Local hunting clubs
- \_\_\_\_\_ Hunting outfitters
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other - please describe:

Did you ever have a negative interaction while using online resources to learn about hunting?

- Yes
- No

[Show if Yes is selected]

Have you used that same resource again since then?

- Yes
- No

The last couple of questions on this survey ask about how you engage with other hunters through these online resources. How do you use online hunting communities (such as Reddit, Discord, Quora, or Lemmy)? *Please select all that apply.*

- I read/watch content that is posted

- I post content
- I post questions
- I make comments
- I don't use them

[Show if I don't use them is selected]

Would you be interested in using online communities (such as Reddit, Discord, Quora, or Lemmy) to connect with other hunters or share hunting tips and experiences?

- Yes, I'd be open to connecting with other hunters online
- No

[Show if I don't use them is not selected]

Which online resources do you use most often to connect with other hunters or share hunting tips and experiences? *Please select up to 3 resources.*

- Facebook groups
- Facebook (outside of groups)
- X/Twitter
- Instagram
- TikTok
- Reddit
- Discord
- Quora
- Lemmy
- YouTube
- Blogs or online forums
- Messaging apps (such as Messenger, WhatsApp, GroupMe)
- Other - please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

[Show if Messaging apps is selected]

Which messaging app do you use most often to talk with other hunters?

- Messenger
- WhatsApp
- GroupMe
- Slack
- Built-in phone messaging app
- Other - please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other [Show this response option only for Michigan residents per state request]
- Prefer not to answer [Do not show this response option for residents from Alabama, Texas, and Oklahoma per state requests]

What is your race/ethnicity? *Please select all that apply.*

- White or Caucasian
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/Latino
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

What year were you born? *Please enter all 4 digits.*

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Which of the following best describes the community where you **grew up**?

- Rural area (fewer than 2,500 people)
- Small town (2,501-10,000 people)
- Small city (10,001-50,000 people)
- Urban area (more than 50,000 people)

Which of the following best describes the community where you **currently live**?

- Rural area (fewer than 2,500 people)
- Small town (2,501-10,000 people)
- Small city (10,001-50,000 people)
- Urban area (more than 50,000 people)

# Special Thanks

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*Thank you!*