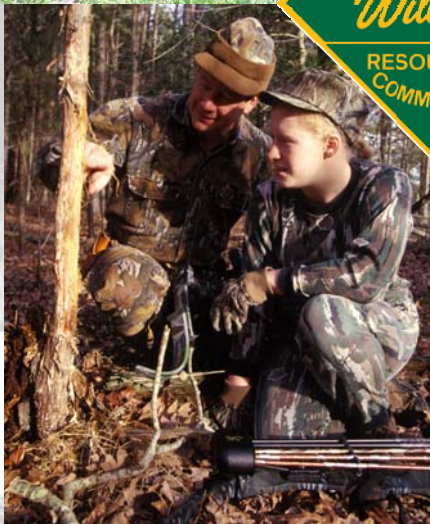


Hunting Heritage Program Strategic Plan



A Report to the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

**Submitted by the Division of Wildlife Management
March 7, 2007**

Executive Summary

Hunting is a journey of interaction with nature from the first spark of interest until a hunter can look back on a lifetime of great experiences afield with family and friends. The mission of the Hunting Heritage Program is to help kindle that spark and to increase the opportunities for all North Carolinians to experience the journey. Hunting is one of those great avocations in life where the journey is the destination!

The Hunting Heritage Program includes elements pertaining to hunter recruitment and retention. But, hunter recruitment and retention are complex issues for which there are no simple solutions. Wildlife agencies, including the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC), have done an excellent job of learning to manage wildlife using science-based decision making. Yet, in many ways, we understand wildlife far better than we do hunters. To effectively address hunter recruitment and retention issues it is critical to better understand and evaluate what we know about hunters and hunting and, in some instances, question current assumptions. For example, a “problem” that is frequently brought up as a factor limiting hunting participation is single-parent households. Yet no data support the assertion, at least as far as hunting is concerned, that single-parent households are any different from two-parent households. That doesn’t mean that there aren’t significant challenges facing single-parent households but, perhaps, that factors affecting hunter recruitment and retention may affect all households regardless of the number of parents. Or, it may be that single-parents work that much harder to insure that their children don’t miss out on opportunities because there is only one parent. As a result, wildlife agencies should approach hunter recruitment and retention by developing many of the same tools that they did for wildlife conservation by increasing scientific knowledge in this area.

The WRC should continue to develop its marketing and human dimension capabilities as part of the hunter recruitment and retention efforts. After all, much effort has been spent on understanding biological processes but comparably little has been done to understand how people think and feel in regards to hunting or what develops a hunter. Hunting has played a vital role the conservation of wildlife in North Carolina. It has funded research, management, restoration, and protection of wild places and wild things. Without hunting, one could argue, wildlife as we know and cherish it today would not exist. For many hunters the time spent afield being close to nature with family and friends or a favorite canine contributes to a lifetime of precious memories.

The WRC can serve as a leader and a catalyst to effect positive change for hunting and work to provide additional opportunities to facilitate hunting but, ultimately, the future of hunting depends on the individual hunter. The critical role of the hunter-conservationist in the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation has been well-established. However, for the hunter and hunting to persist throughout the 21st century the hunter must become a hunter-mentor, a hunter-coach and a hunting-advocate as well as a hunter-conservationist.

The Hunting Heritage Program plan outlined herein details a strategy the WRC can take to addressing hunter recruitment and retention. This strategy will focus on four major issues or problems that have been identified as impacting hunter recruitment and retention: lack of access to places to hunt; regulation complexity; competing interests; and marketing and education. In addition, there are two areas that warrant additional attention all on their own: an apprentice license (i.e., Hunting Heritage License) and shooting ranges. Each topic is broken down into Action Items or their subunits. Action Items are further identified as to whether they should be attempted in Phase I or Phase II of the program. Phase I should last from the present through June 30, 2009. This will allow the program to get the initial projects in place to build a solid foundation for the future. Phase II actions tend to be larger in scope and cost or dependent on the results of Phase I actions. Also, some Phase I actions may carry over into Phase II if they are successful or need additional time to complete or evaluate. Each Action Item identifies an approach to addressing the problem and may further outline different projects to support that approach. Action Item results will be evaluated to see if they meet the objectives for that individual approach. For example, attempts will be made to track the number Hunting Heritage License holders that later buy a regular license and new license buyers will be surveyed to determine what influenced their purchase.

The intent of this strategic plan is to provide focus for one or more of the WRC divisions to utilize in addressing hunter recruitment and retention issues. Agency staff will prepare annual Hunting Heritage Program work plans that will detail Action Items, budgets and objectives to be addressed in the upcoming fiscal year. This approach is intended to facilitate program implementation by integrating these activities into existing work plans and budgets though additional funding may be requested as needed. It will also allow for maximum flexibility in taking advantage of program successes, additional funding and other opportunities as they develop. The strategy described herein is based on the premise that it takes a hunter to make a hunter and that the primary measurement of success is to increase opportunities for hunters by reducing barriers to participation.

Introduction

Hunting matters! Hunting has been an integral part of human existence on the landscape of North Carolina. From the earliest Native American to the 21st century hunter North Carolina's wild places and wild things have provided sustenance, income and recreation. Hunting has evolved from providing food and shelter essential to survival, through market-hunting that fed a growing state and nation, to what is now primarily an avocational activity though, for many, the providing of food is still an important reason to hunt. Along the way, realization grew that wildlife was not an inexhaustible resource but one that must be managed with care and with science. Unregulated market-hunting coupled with large-scale habitat loss led to drastic declines in wildlife numbers, particularly among game species. Among the first to call the alarm at these losses were the hunters themselves. In what became a uniquely North American model of wildlife conservation, hunters and members of the hunting equipment industries lobbied for special federal excise taxes; the proceeds of which were to go to wildlife restoration and management.

The passage of the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937, also known as the Pittman-Robertson Act, coupled with a growing outcry from hunters and others that cared deeply about wildlife heralded the growth and development of state fish and wildlife agencies. Finally, there were dedicated funds available to pay for wildlife restoration and management. In particular, these funds were protected by federal law and carried the additional weight of being generated by hunters themselves, making it difficult to divert these funds for other uses. Early state wildlife agencies were focused primarily on protection of game species with an emphasis on the development and enforcement of regulations.

However, it was soon realized that there was a need for the scientific management of wildlife, coupled with protection, in order to insure the long-term future of wildlife populations. This led to the hiring of professionally-trained wildlife biologists and technicians to scientifically manage and restore wildlife and compliment the efforts of wildlife protectors. During the mid to latter parts of the twentieth century a number of successes occurred including the restoration of the white-tailed deer, the wild turkey, beaver and other species. Also there was a growing realization that wildlife management principles should be applied to all wildlife regardless of whether it was a game or nongame species and that conservation and management of wildlife should be looked at in a broader context than just game species. As a result, constituencies broadened to include wildlife enthusiasts as well as hunters and anglers. However, hunters remain a core constituency of wildlife agencies and retain a critical role in the future of wildlife management.

The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC) followed the general development of state wildlife agencies as outlined above. The following excerpt from the WRC employee handbook summarizes the beginnings well:

“Prior to 1947, the wildlife conservation program in North Carolina was part of the Department of Conservation and Development. Hunters, anglers, and conservationists across the state were dissatisfied with the low emphasis given wildlife programs under the Department of Conservation and Development and wanted their license dollars spent in a productive and accountable manner on fish and wildlife management and enforcement activities. The result of their coordinated effort was unanimous enactment of the Wildlife Resources Law of 1947 that established the agency known as the Wildlife Resources Commission that continues today.”

There continues to be a tremendous regard for wildlife in North Carolina even as the percentage of hunters in the population drops. Yet the bulk of the monetary support for wildlife comes from the hunter and angler in the form of license fees and state and federal taxes on hunting and fishing related equipment. During 2001 North Carolina hunters had a huge impact on the state’s economy with \$458 million in direct retail sales of equipment, supplies, lodging, etc. to hunters and a multiplier or “ripple” effect of over \$896 million. This impact generated over \$223 million in salaries and wages and accounted for 9,485 jobs in North Carolina.

North Carolina is a rapidly-growing state with a population of over 8 million people and it is projected to exceed 12 million by 2029. Yet hunter numbers are relatively flat overall and represent a dwindling percentage of North Carolina’s population as the state becomes more urbanized. As aging baby-boomers are falling out of the hunter ranks they aren’t being replaced at the same rate. Hunters have been core supporters of the agency and, perhaps even more importantly, core supporters of the scientific conservation and management of wildlife in North Carolina. The value of this support cannot be overstated and contributes to the agency’s interest and commitment to maintaining hunters and hunting as a viable and vital part of North Carolina’s heritage. It is unlikely that wildlife conservation and management would exist in its present form without the key role that hunting and hunters play. Wildlife matters in North Carolina and, because wildlife matters, so does hunting.

During the winter of 2004-05 the WRC decided to pursue a coordinated effort to develop a hunter recruitment and retention program. Prior to this divisions incorporated hunter recruitment and retention values into their various programs (e.g., youth hunts, making hunter education more accessible, etc.) but no coordination occurred on an agency-wide scale. The Division of Wildlife Management (DWM) was selected to lead this effort and to house the program.

A significant first step was to host a workshop involving potential stakeholders in hunter recruitment and retention efforts and to gather their opinions in a formalized manner. During October, 2005 a workshop was held in New Bern. DWM staff obtained a \$15,000 grant from the National Shooting Sports Foundation to underwrite this effort and contracted with Responsive Management, Inc. to facilitate the workshop. Responsive Management's report was submitted to staff and commissioners during the winter of 2005-06 and provides a good foundation for initial development of a program.

The workshop reflects one relatively small subset of North Carolinians' thoughts and insights into this issue and it may not represent the broad spectrum of North Carolina stakeholders. The report was made available to interested parties on the WRC website (www.ncwildlife.org) and participants and commissioners received a hard copy.

One measure of hunter recruitment and retention is the Hunter Replacement Ratio. Essentially this is an index of hunter loss versus hunter recruitment, measured as a ratio. For example: North Carolina's ratio is reported in a Families Afield publication to be 0.76 (i.e., for every 100 hunters lost we gain 76 hunters). This puts North Carolina above the national average (0.69) but still leaves room for improvement as we would ideally like to have a ratio of over 1.0 (i.e., the number of hunters would be increasing). Many different variables are factored into this analysis and, therefore, too much scrutiny shouldn't be paid to relatively minor differences in the numbers. In general, the take home message is that in North Carolina we are doing better than most states but we are still losing hunters faster than we are gaining them.

Perhaps one reason that North Carolina is above the national average is that the agency has historically done good things that might help ameliorate a decline in hunting. In particular, the agency has an aggressive game lands acquisition program and a progressive special hunts permit program, both of which may help address hunter concerns about lack of places to hunt and/or hunt quality. Also, North Carolina's hunter education laws are viewed as among some of the least restrictive in the country and may contribute to lowering of barriers, perceived or real, to hunting participation.

In addition to the aforementioned activities that may help with hunter recruitment and retention, the DWM has implemented or is implementing recruitment and retention actions as opportunities arose as opposed to waiting for development of a formal program. Some of these include: online viewing of permit hunt draw results to give hunters more advance notice that they were successful rather than waiting for their permits to arrive in the mail; development of an online Big Game Harvest Certificate that allows hunters to print out a copy of their reporting details as well as enter in a description of the hunt; enhanced disabled sportsman opportunities; DWM GIS staff efforts to create a highly interactive website that will provide WRC constituents with a broad range of accessible information including where to hunt, how to get there, aerial photos, etc.; and compilation of a list of public and private shooting ranges to make this information more readily available to hunters and shooters. In addition, the Youth Turkey Hunting day stands out as an outstanding example of how to get youth afield. Over 300 turkeys were reported harvested on the one-day hunt during the 2006 season, which undoubtedly means that hundreds, if not thousands, of North Carolina youth benefited from being afield with an adult mentor.

The Hunting Heritage Program will coordinate these efforts together with new initiatives to provide a highly focused recruitment and retention program. Development and implementation of this program focusing on hunter recruitment and retention program is a strategic approach to addressing this need. Herein, we outline a strategy to implement the WRC's Hunting Heritage Program.

Strategy

In evaluating possible approaches to developing this program, it became apparent that the potential existed to address hunter recruitment and retention with many projects. Rather than dealing with the issue of finding a needle in a haystack it was more like dealing with a haystack of needles! This presented the challenging task of developing a strategy that would focus the agency's resources in such a way as to be effective without getting completely bogged down in all the possibilities. Initially, we envision a Phase I period that would integrate with existing programs, lay the foundation for long-term actions and implement lower-cost and relatively easy to initiate actions. This approach will allow the overall hunter recruitment and retention effort to retain the flexibility to build on itself and to change as new knowledge, capabilities and opportunities present themselves. This underscores the need to evaluate what is accomplished through the program. Human dimensions work will be a strong component of this effort. Phase I should last from the present through June 30, 2009 though it should be noted that successful Phase I projects will carry on into Phase II. This will allow the program to get the initial projects in place to build a solid foundation for the future. Phase II actions tend to be larger in scope and cost or dependent on the results of Phase I actions.

Some actions will focus primarily on recruitment and others on retention. In most cases, however, actions impact both recruitment and retention. Because it takes a hunter to make a hunter, the loss of existing hunters from the hunter ranks is of particular concern. In general, these are individuals that, for various reasons, no longer actively hunt but, presumably, are already well aware of the factors that contribute to people becoming hunters in the first place. Essentially, they have already been "sold" on the idea that hunting is a desirable recreational activity but something now keeps them from participating. Our goal in this area is to identify barriers that may contribute to hunter loss and lapsed hunter return and work to remove them. We will also work to provide additional opportunities for hunters that may lessen the chances that they become lapsed hunters. One of the principal challenges in this area is the question: "If the WRC addresses some of the barriers to hunting that are typically cited as reasons hunters lapse will it actually return them to active hunter status?" Essentially, this means that some effort must be expended by the WRC throughout to evaluate and to re-evaluate the human dimensions of hunting and hunters in North Carolina.

Our strategy will focus on four major issues or problems that have been identified as impacting hunter recruitment and retention. These are: lack of access to places to hunt; regulation complexity; competing interests; and marketing and education. In addition, there are two specific areas that warrant additional attention: an apprentice license and shooting ranges. Each topic is broken down into Action Items that identify approaches to addressing the problem and may further outline different projects to support that approach. The intent is to provide focus in addressing hunter recruitment and retention issues.

Problem – Lack of Access to Places to Hunt

Herein, we address a number of reasons often cited in various surveys including: lack of public hunting lands; lack of access to private lands; difficulty in finding out about places to hunt; physical access for older and/or disabled hunters; etc.

Publicly-owned hunting lands: WRC Game Lands - The WRC currently has 2,021,745 acres in the Game Lands Program. These are lands that we own, lease or on which we have a cooperative agreement with the landowner. In particular, the WRC has been aggressively adding to the Game Lands Program during recent years with thousands of new acres made available to the hunting public. Lands owned by the WRC have been purchased with a number of compatible objectives in mind including hunting, fishing, trapping, water quality and wildlife conservation. Yet, buying more public land for hunting is frequently recommended as a key solution to hunter retention and recruitment issues even with the aggressive approach the WRC has been pursuing for years. This poses the question of how well are hunters informed about new and existing hunting opportunities on Game Lands? This question underscores the need to inform hunters about opportunities to hunt as well as provide lands on which to hunt.

Action Items: A. Evaluate and implement mechanisms for informing hunters about Game Lands hunting opportunities.

1. Create and maintain interactive website (e.g., enter zip code and find nearest game land, overlay maps and aerial photos, see rules for individual game lands, etc.; Phase I).
2. Prepare news releases or articles highlighting opportunities on various game lands (e.g., turkey hunting on Caswell Game Land.; Phase I).
3. Develop list of popular outdoor magazines and work to get articles in them (Phase I).
4. Develop video/DVD of game land opportunities. We are currently evaluating the use of video as a tool for this and other agency efforts (Phase II).

B. Evaluate and implement mechanisms for informing hunters about new additions to the Game Lands Program.

1. Continue to issue news releases on new additions to the program (Phase I).
2. Highlight new parcels in the map book and on the website (Phase I).
3. Report annually on the acquisition totals in map book and on website (Phase I).
4. Look for additional opportunities to inform hunters about new game land opportunities (e.g., flyer inserts in mailings, magazines, etc.; Phase I).

- C. Evaluate mechanisms to increase public land under WRC ownership or management and implement where feasible.
1. Continue to aggressively pursue additions to the Game Lands where opportunities exist with funding, willing sellers and conservation values (Phase I).
 2. Explore long-term lease or easement opportunities (Phase I).
 3. Work with the legislature to create a fund to acquire upland habitats for future generations similar to the Clean Water Management Trust Fund (Phase II).
 4. Explore an estate planning component to land acquisition (Phase II).
 5. Evaluate the public and political support for a stamp or permit that would allow public hunting access to private lands and use the funds to pay for leases, etc. (Phase II).
- D. Use the Special Opportunity Hunts Program on Game Lands to increase hunter recruitment and retention.

1. Use the program to increase opportunity and manage over-crowding (Phase I).
2. Make sure the program increases opportunity as opposed to limiting it (e.g., if a hunt is historically under-utilized then evaluate changing to point-of-sale or opening area up to general use)(Phase I).
3. Emphasize dove hunting opportunity as both a recruitment and retention tool, especially for youth (Phase I).

Publicly-owned hunting lands: Other than WRC Game Lands - A number of opportunities exist for public hunting on publicly-owned lands other than those in the Game Lands Program. Contact information for some of these, for example, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service refuges and U.S. Military bases, are already listed in the WRC Regulations Digest.

Action Items: A. Identify existing and potential hunting opportunities on other publicly-owned lands not in the game lands system (Phase I).

1. National Wildlife Refuges
2. State Forests
3. State Parks
4. University lands
5. National Forests and Wilderness Areas
6. State research farms and forests
7. Other state lands
8. County and municipal lands

- B.** Inform hunters about these hunting opportunities (Phase I).
- C.** Publicly recognize, if they so desire, these partners in providing hunting opportunity (Phase I).
- D.** Work with landowners identified in A to implement new or expanded hunting opportunities (Phase II).

Privately-owned lands: Individual landowners, corporate, NGOs, etc. – There is little information available regarding what factors contribute to whether or not North Carolina landowners allow hunting on their property. However, anecdotal information suggests that issues regarding landowner liability may be important. Also, it may be that some landowners aren't sure of where to begin when it comes to making contact with hunters, lease or agreement arrangements, etc. Corporate landowners may offer more formalized opportunities for WRC interaction and/or partnerships. Some of these lands are already incorporated into the WRC Game Lands Program through leases or agreements

- Action Items:**
- A.** Encourage landowners to increase hunting opportunities on private lands (e.g., FAQs on leasing, liability, benefits, etc. that can be combined into information packets similar to media kits.; Phase I).
 - B.** Increase participation in the Special Opportunity Hunt Program (Phase I).
 - C.** Increase networking between landowners and hunters (e.g., website classifieds, county NRCS offices, etc.; Phase I).
 - D.** Emphasize dove hunting opportunity as both a recruitment and retention tool and test development of contracting with private landowners to host public dove hunts (Phase I pilot).
 - E.** Publicly recognize, if they so desire, these partners in providing hunting opportunity (Phase I).
 - F.** Identify factors relating to hunter access on these lands based on what is learned during Phase I (Phase II).
 - G.** Evaluate the opportunity for a “public access to private lands program” and develop if feasible (e.g., special permit fee program, etc.; Phase II).

Problem: Complexity of Regulations

A number of studies have indicated that regulation complexity is a barrier to participating or staying active in hunting. The general statutes and administrative codes regulating hunting are very complex and not readily available to the public. The average person does not know how to look up an actual law or where to obtain it. Due to these difficulties the North Carolina Regulations Digest is published. Over time the digest itself has become very complex and confusing and warrants examination to see if it still fulfills its mission (i.e., conveys information on fish and wildlife regulations to the hunting, trapping and angling public in an easily understood manner).

- Action Items:**
- A.** Simplify the digest (e.g., research what other states do, survey hunters and anglers to get input, etc.; Phase I)
 - B.** Produce supplemental outlets for regulations such as FAQs, ask the officer, this week's regulation tips, websites, etc., that the public can reference for assistance with questions (Phase I).
 - D.** Include in every rule proposal an evaluation of its impact on hunter recruitment and retention (Phase I).
 - E.** Examine agency rules and general statutes for relevance and impact on hunter recruitment and retention and initiate change where needed (Phase II – this would involve a comprehensive review of rules and statutes).
 - F.** Make the improved regulations readily available, in plain text, through as many media as possible (Phase II).

Problem: Competing Interests

Hunters have cited competing interests as a reason they no longer hunt. The situations that take up time are numerous and often difficult to predict. It is difficult to determine if competing interests is the real problem or if other factors (lack of interest, exposure to hunting culture, etc) also contribute. Instead of getting bogged down in identifying components of all the potential competing interests and comparing them to hunting it is recommended that hunting and outdoor activities need to be promoted just as other products and activities are. In other words, the WRC should work to increase the desirability of hunting as a avocational choice. Emphasis should be placed on getting close to and enjoying nature, quality time with family and friends, continuing old traditions and starting new ones, etc.

- Action Items:**
- A.** Employ marketing strategies to promote hunting and other related outdoor activities just as other products are advertised (e.g., family, tradition, interaction with nature, camaraderie, just plain fun, etc.; Phase I).
 - B.** Produce and distribute promotional products (Phase I).
 - C.** Determine if the marketing is reaching target audiences and producing results (Phase I).
 - D.** Promote adaptive equipment that will allow people with any disadvantages to stay in the field (Phase I).
 - E.** Identify and remove barriers to hunting opportunities to meet the desires of a 21st century public. Is participation limited by weapon, season-length, etc. to the point that it is a barrier? Are crowded dove hunts, with due consideration to safety issues, more or less acceptable to today's hunters and does it affect participation? Essentially, does the agency provide the types of hunting opportunities that the public wants (Phase II – this area will need in depth work and public input)?

Problem: Marketing and Education

North Carolinians have very little knowledge of who the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission is or what it does. A 2005 survey of North Carolinians conducted by Responsive Management, Inc. provided some insight into this issue.

“The majority of North Carolina residents could not name the state government agency that is most responsible for managing and conserving fish and wildlife in North Carolina: 75% either said, “Don’t know,” or gave an incorrect answer. In follow-up, after being informed that the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission is responsible for conserving and managing fish and wildlife, 78% said that they know a little or nothing about the agency. Only 9% knew the correct name of the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, and another 16% gave a close derivative of the correct name.”

At times the WRC is confused with other agencies or the public believes a program the WRC implements is another agency’s program. People do not always identify the “Wildlife Commission” as the guardian and steward of the state’s wildlife resources much less the agency that deals with law enforcement, wildlife management, boating access, conservation education, vessel registration, and inland fisheries management. The WRC is a broad-based innovative agency that is responsible for many of the things North Carolinians hold dear yet most citizens are unaware of it. In order to be most effective the WRC needs to be visible to the broadest spectrum of North Carolinians. Support for and knowledge about what the agency does will likely result in a better understanding and regard for hunting and the importance of hunters to responsible wildlife management.

Action Items: A. Promote the agency and its programs (Phase I).

1. Locate sources of funding for agency promotion and program promotion and implement where feasible.
2. Identify how each division of the WRC can promote its own programs and at the same time help promote the WRC programs in general and implement where feasible.

B. Improve the effectiveness division-specific programs that may mimic each other and lead to confusion among constituents (e.g., youth hunts are currently offered in three of the agency divisions). It may be that developing a single point of access for the public for agency programs, even if housed in different divisions, would facilitate public recognition of the variety of programs that the WRC offers (Phase I).

C. Develop and enhance hunter recruitment and retention related programming at the wildlife education centers (Phase I).

- D.** Develop archery and simulated hunting and shooting technology for inclusion at education centers (Phase I).
- E.** Enhance the role of our magazine in promoting hunting (Phase I).
- F.** Define what hunting is for the media. For example, “Hunting is the legal and ethical pursuit of regulated wildlife species.” Frequently the media defines hunting to include illegal activities such as poaching, killing wildlife outside of seasons and bag limits, etc. which creates a negative image of hunting among non-hunters. Based on a 2005 survey, 84% of North Carolinians approve of legal hunting (Phase I).
- G.** Promote positive hunting images to the public (e.g., family, camaraderie, tradition, communing with nature, hunter’s roles as the first conservationists, hunter’s care about wildlife and are willing to pay for its well-being, etc.; Phase I).
- H.** In-reach as well as outreach! Enhance agency employee’s understanding of hunting and its role. Are, for example, all of the agency’s principal contacts with the public (phone handlers, help staff, educators, etc.) knowledgeable and understanding of hunting? Develop mechanisms (e.g., workshops, “learn at lunch” seminars, hunter education, materials, hunts, visits to Game Lands, etc.) to better educate all staff about the agency’s role, about hunting and hunters, etc. (Phase I).
- I.** Develop or enhance opportunities to get hunter education into schools. For example, wildlife management components may be adaptable to satisfy science credit needs (Phase I).

Shooting Ranges

Lack of places to shoot is often touted as a problem by hunters surveyed regarding barriers to hunting participation. This issue also tends to inspire the desire for a quick fix that results huge outlays of resources to build and manage ranges. Undoubtedly, in some cases, construction and management of ranges are warranted to fill a critical need for publicly accessible shooting opportunities. However, there are a number of issues to consider before embarking on a large-scale construction effort. How many publicly-accessible ranges already exist in North Carolina? How many private ones? Would hunter recruitment and retention be better served by private ranges that, in many cases, have a built-in network of mentors? Would the agency want to directly compete with these other ranges by building a state-owned range in the same vicinity or are there opportunities to partner with each other? Does the agency want to assume the long-term liability of cleaning up lead and other contaminants on these sites? These and other questions should be considered by the agency as part of its hunter recruitment and retention efforts.

- Action items:**
- A.** Determine the location of public and private shooting ranges across North Carolina to the public. This effort is already underway (Figure 1; Phase I).
 - B.** Make this information available to the hunting public to facilitate access to shooting opportunities (Phase I).
 - C.** Develop partnerships with range owners and operators to increase shooting opportunities (e.g., explore “leasing” range use for two weeks prior to hunting season.; Phase I)
 - D.** Develop other avenues to increase shooting opportunities (e.g., sponsoring high school shooting teams,; Phase I).
 - E.** Provide additional funding for the National Archery in the Schools Program to increase exposure to archery (Phase I).
 - F.** Evaluate building WRC shooting ranges and implement if a need exists (Phase II).
 - G.** Explore cooperatively building or funding ranges with other public or private entities (e.g., partner with county sheriff’s departments to construct ranges that are accessible to the public; Phase II).

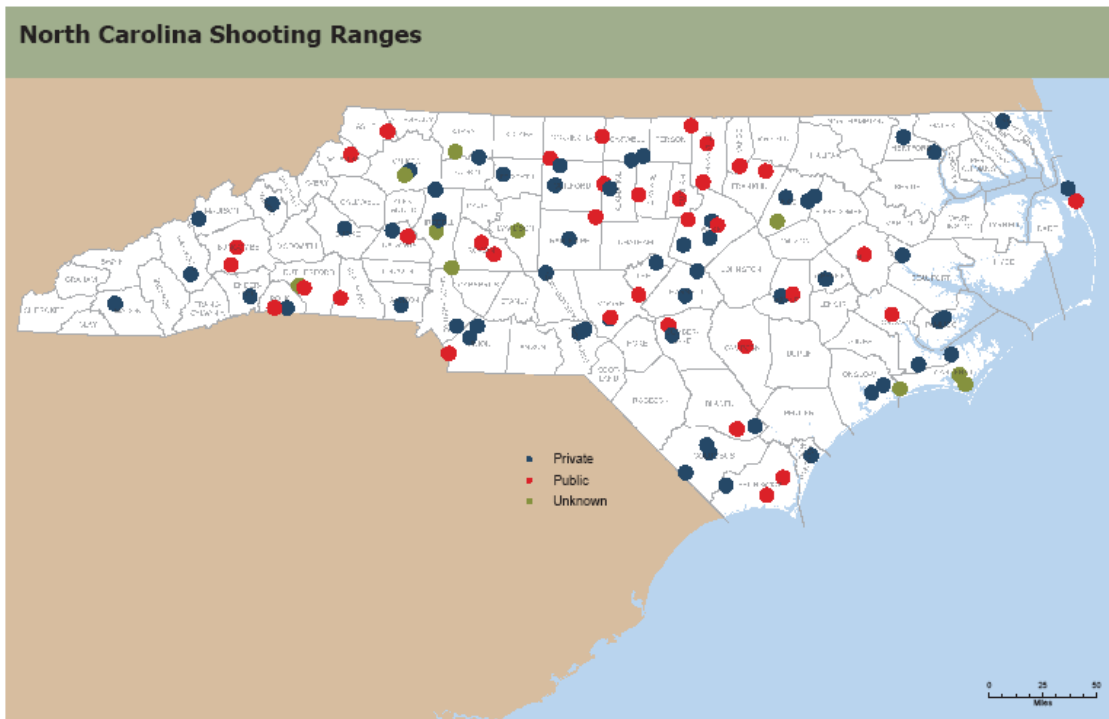


Figure 1. Preliminary Assessment of North Carolina Shooting Ranges (105 ranges identified).

Hunting Heritage License

A number of state wildlife agencies are experimenting with licenses that, essentially, allow prospective hunters to “try before you buy.” Typically this is a recruitment tool for new hunters yet opportunities exist to also make it a retention tool as well. For example, a retired grand-parent that is a lapsed hunter may be one of the best possible mentors available. However, at present that grand-parent would have to purchase all the required licenses in advance in order to introduce a grand-child to hunting who may decide that they don’t like hunting after one trip. We have evaluated this concept in conjunction with the Director’s Office and are preparing a draft bill for introduction into the General Assembly this session. Some concepts for this license include:

Purpose: To provide for an introductory license that would extend, for a limited time, hunting privileges to new hunters. In other words, this license will create a “Passport to Opportunity” for North Carolinians. A license that is only available to new hunters is the easiest to implement. The issue of whether to offer a similar opportunity to lapsed hunters needs additional evaluation because, while it would be desirable to do this as indicated above, significant obstacles exist to implementation (e.g., existing license databases are unlikely to be robust enough to handle the complex tracking needs to implement this opportunity).

Privileges: It should provide all hunting privileges that the annual comprehensive hunting license provides, except that some big game privileges, especially bear hunting, may need to be excluded due to the concern that abuse of the license might result in over harvest in some areas. Additional evaluation is warranted concerning this issue. A Big Game Harvest Report card would also have to be issued with this license to account for the associated privileges. The federal waterfowl stamp would have to be purchased separately for waterfowl hunting and HIP certification would be required for migratory birds.

Cost: \$5.00. This minimal cost should prevent those who might not actually use it from buying it “just in case” if it was offered free-of-charge. In addition, this minimal charge would qualify us for additional federal assistance through the P-R Program.

Duration: One year from the date of purchase.

Eligibility: Only those that qualify for resident licenses would be eligible. New hunters that the WRC has no record of ever holding a North Carolina hunting license would qualify for this license. Lapsed hunter eligibility would have to be determined in the future if this option becomes available.

Hunter Education: Hunters holding this license would be exempted from the Hunter Education requirement when accompanied by a properly licensed adult similar to youth in G.S. 113-276 (d) and disabled persons as outlined in G.S. 113-

270.1A (a1). Hunters that had passed Hunter Education but have not purchased a hunting license before would be able to hunt on their own. In addition, an adult who had passed Hunter Education and possessed a Hunting Heritage license could also accompany another Hunting Heritage License holder or a youth that is exempted from a license as the “properly licensed adult.”

Additional considerations: Any properly licensed adult that accompanies another hunter for the purpose of mentoring or guiding without a fee may participate in the hunt by calling or tracking even if they have already reached their daily or season bag limit. This approach should be further defined in policy or rule if needed.

Action items: **A.** Seek authority from the General Assembly to implement a Hunting Heritage License (Phase I – would happen in the 2007 session).
B. Evaluate effectiveness of this license in hunter recruitment and retention (Phase II).

Partners and Stakeholders

Involvement of partners and stakeholders are critical to making a broad-spectrum effort the like the Hunting Heritage Program successful. They should be involved with and have a role in implementing many of the Action Items detailed in this document. A stakeholder group will be developed from interested parties to facilitate communication and disbursement of information regarding program activities and to look for partnering opportunities. This should not be considered an advisory committee but as a group of partners and stakeholders in hunter recruitment and retention.

Action Items: **A.** Develop list of potential partners and stakeholders (Phase I).
B. Identify which Action Items can be addressed through partnering opportunities (Phase I).
C. Develop feedback mechanisms for stakeholders and partners (Phase I).

Program Funding

Annual costs of this program can vary greatly depending on which action items are implemented in which fiscal year. Undoubtedly funds could be expended wisely at whatever level they were available. To be successful in hunter recruitment and retention the WRC must make a long-term commitment of staff and resources toward this effort. Fortunately, some of the Action Items outlined within this document can be implemented using existing staff and resources by incorporating hunter recruitment and retention considerations into existing work plans. However, there will still be a need for additional funding to fully implement this agency-wide program.

The DWM will coordinate and administer this program. Given that responsibility it is recommended that the DWM coordinate with the other WRC divisions to determine program funding needs agency-wide on an annual basis. This would involve a comprehensive annual planning effort to identify Action Items, budgets and objectives for inclusion in annual work plans. Subsequent to that the DWM would submit a comprehensive hunter recruitment and retention funding request to the Director's Office for consideration and allocation of funds. The first such submission will be no later than June 1, 2007 for funding during FY 2007-08.

Some federal funds have been already targeted by the DWM for use in the startup of this program though state dollars will be needed to match these funds and for other needs. Initial state-funded startup costs are estimated to be \$50,000 during the 2006-07 fiscal year.

- Action Items:**
- A.** Create a Hunting Heritage Fund sub-account within the Wildlife Endowment Fund to facilitate the ability to receive donations in support of the WRC's hunter recruitment and retention efforts (Phase I).
 - B.** Develop and implement marketing and outreach strategies to reach potential donors to the Hunting Heritage Fund (Phase I).

Measurements of Success

It appears logical that counting new hunters would be a sufficient measurement of success for a program such as this. Unfortunately, the issue is much too complex to be addressed in this way. For example, there is an annual fluctuation of tens of thousands in the number of licenses sold each year. An increase in hunters of 20,000 due to this program would be lost in the annual variation and it would be impossible to affirm with much reliability how much was attributable to the program. Also, program success may not result in more hunters overall. Instead it may just mean that hunters are lost at a slower rate than otherwise and would require a large expenditure of agency resources to determine if it was even measurable. These resources would be better spent on evaluating known barriers to hunting participation and working to remove them. Therefore, success will be measured by progress made toward accomplishing the Action Items laid out in this document. A report documenting this progress will be prepared annually. In addition, each Action Item that is addressed will be evaluated, where possible, to quantify impact and to measure success.

Conclusion

Hunter recruitment and retention is an extremely complex issue. Yet it is one that requires diligent work to master. This strategic plan attempts to provide a framework for addressing this issue. A number of guiding principles aided in plan development and will remain pertinent in the years ahead as the Hunting Heritage Program progresses. Among them are:

- Hunter recruitment and retention efforts should be agency-wide and impacts on hunter recruitment and retention should be considered at every decision-making level.
- Temper conventional wisdom with research because conventional wisdom can sometimes be misleading.
- Hunter recruitment and retention is a long-haul effort. Don't be tempted by the quick fix.
- The agency's role should that of a leader, facilitator and catalyst. Hunter recruitment and retention efforts should include a broad-spectrum approach that includes government agencies, conservation organizations, the individual hunter or citizen and everything in between.
- Human Dimensions work is the key to understanding and addressing this complex issue.
- Incorporate basic marketing principles into hunter recruitment and retention efforts (e.g., first, work to keep your current customer satisfied (the active hunter); next, bring back past customers (the lapsed or intermittent hunter) and lastly, recruit new customers (the new hunter)). The main point to this principle is to recognize that we do have different "customers" and we need to ensure that their needs are met.
- It takes a hunter to make a hunter!

North Carolinians care about wildlife and, undisputedly, hunters are important to the conservation and management of wildlife. Hunters were among the earliest conservationists and continue to be some of the strongest advocates for wildlife. Hunting matters!

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