

A Survey of Deer Hunters in North Carolina



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Executive Summary¹

Introduction

We conducted this study to examine the views of North Carolina deer hunters about deer hunting and deer management.

Methods

Survey instrument design

In order to explore some topics related to deer hunting and management in-depth and to aid in the design of the survey instrument, in June 2006, we conducted focus groups with deer hunters in Marion (Mountains), Greensboro (Piedmont), and Kinston (Coast) North Carolina.

We designed a survey instrument with input from the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC) Deer Committee. The survey instrument contained items on deer hunting experience and methods, background and demographic information, and views on: current season structures, deer population trends, Quality Deer Management, deer harvest reporting, and hunting techniques (For a copy of the survey questions, please contact Dain Palmer).

Survey implementation

We mailed 9,600 surveys to a random selection of hunters who had a valid Big Game Harvest Report Card during Fiscal Year 2006. We sent participants up to four mailings. All survey respondents were entered into a lottery drawing for a Conquest fixed blade

knife, donated by Remington-Stren, valued at approximately \$50. The first full survey mailing (survey instrument and Business Reply return envelope) was mailed on October 16, 2006, and a reminder postcard was mailed to all survey recipients on October 23. Any nonrespondents were sent follow up mailings on November 13 and, if necessary, December 18.

Data analysis

For the 2 survey items that asked about number of antlered bucks (question 30) and antlerless deer (question 31) harvested, there was no response option for “0.” Therefore, we weighted the data to correct for this. Because there were differences between the age of respondents and nonrespondents, except for questions 30-31, all statewide survey data were weighted based on the age distribution of the original sample. All comparisons by deer season zone hunted, except those involving questions 30-31, used unweighted data.

SELECTED RESULTS

Deer hunting participation

During the three hunting seasons prior to the survey:

- 66% of deer hunters only hunted on private lands,
- 76% of deer hunters only still hunted,
- 66% of deer hunters statewide hunted deer over bait,
- 63% of deer hunters in the Western Season zone hunted deer without the use of bait, while $\leq 34\%$ of hunters in other season zones hunted deer without the use of bait,
- 34% of hunters in the Western Season zone hunted only on private lands, while $\geq 69\%$ of hunters in other deer season zones hunted only on private lands, and
- 58% of hunters in the Eastern Season zone only still hunted for deer, while $\geq 85\%$ of hunters in other deer season zones only still hunted for deer.

During the 2005-06 deer season, the most recent season prior to the survey:

- 59% of hunters statewide harvested no antlered deer and
- 58% of hunters statewide harvested no antlerless deer.

Barriers to deer hunting

The most important barriers to deer hunting and the percentage of deer hunters indicating that these barriers impacted them were:

- not enough older age class or mature deer – 82%,
- too much illegal behavior by others – 79%,
- deer populations are too low – 70%,
- the cost of leasing land for hunting deer is too expensive – 66%,
- not having enough time to hunt deer – 58%, and
- not having access to land for hunting – 53%.

- Eighty-six percent of Western Season hunters indicated that deer populations are too low was important as a barrier to deer hunting, while ≤69% of hunters in other season zones indicated that deer populations are too low was important as a barrier.

The percentage of deer hunters who indicated the following were important as barriers to their deer hunting were:

- too much interference from hunters using dogs to hunt deer – 39%,
- hunting regulations being too confusing – 35%,
- too much interference from still hunters hunting deer – 16%,
- and too much interference from hunters hunting species other than deer – 16%.

Satisfaction with WRC deer management

- Sixty-four percent of deer hunters were satisfied with how the WRC manages deer in North Carolina.

Views on numbers of deer hunters and deer population levels

- Forty-five percent of deer hunters statewide wanted the deer population to increase in the region where they spent the most time hunting.
- Seventy-seven percent of deer hunters in the Western Season zone, 44% in the Northwestern Season zone, 38% in the Central Season zone, and 38% in the Eastern Season zone wanted the deer population to increase.
- Seventy-nine percent of deer hunters statewide believed that the current number of mature bucks in the deer population was too low.
- Sixty-six percent of hunters statewide believed that the current season bag limit for bucks was about right.
- If there were no bag limits, 59% of deer hunters indicated they would harvest 1 or 2 bucks.
- Fifty-five percent of deer hunters believed that the current number of does was too many.
- Fifty-three percent of deer hunters thought the current season bag limit for does was about right, but 40% believed the current season bag limit for does was too low.
- If there were no bag limits, 57% of deer hunters reported they would harvest at least 3 does.

Views on deer season timing and length

The percentage of deer hunters who believed the timing of the following weapon seasons was about right were:

- Bow and Arrow season – 55%,
- Muzzleloader season – 61%,
- Gun season – 67%, and

- Gun Either-Sex season – 73%.

The percentage of deer hunters who believed the length of the following weapon seasons was about right were:

- Bow and Arrow season – 52%,
 - Muzzleloader season – 41%,
 - Gun season – 43%, and
 - Gun Either-Sex season – 58%.
- Sixty-five percent of deer hunters in the Central Season zone and Eastern Season zone, 52% in the Northwestern Season zone, and 32% in the Western Season zone believed that the Gun Either-Sex season was about right.

Views on Quality Deer Management (QDM)

- Seventy-six percent of deer hunters voluntarily practiced QDM strategies where they hunted deer.
- Thirty-six percent of deer hunters were neutral or had no opinion about a mandatory QDM program, although 34% indicated support for a mandatory QDM program.

Changing bag limits/season lengths

The percentage of deer hunters who supported the following regulations changes to meet QDM objectives were:

- decreasing the season bag limit for bucks – 52%,
- increasing the season bag limit for does – 62%, and
- shortening the Gun season – 18%.

“Earn-a-Buck” program

The percentage of deer hunters who supported the following regulations changes to meet QDM objectives were:

- requiring a doe harvest before each buck harvest – 38%,
- no restrictions on the first buck harvested and requiring a doe harvest before each additional buck harvest – 51%,
- no restrictions on the first 2 bucks harvested and requiring a doe harvest before each additional buck harvest – 34%, and
- no restrictions on the first 3 bucks harvested and requiring a doe harvest before a fourth buck harvest – 23%.

Antler restriction program

The percentage of deer hunters who supported the following regulations changes to meet QDM objectives were:

- requiring a harvested buck to have 3 points on 1 side – 49%,

- requiring a harvested buck to have 4 points on 1 side – 32%,
- requiring a harvested buck to have a 15 inch minimum inside spread – 27%,
- requiring a harvested buck to have at least 4 points on 1 side or a 15 inch minimum spread – 27%, and
- no restrictions on the first buck harvested and requiring each additional buck harvested to meet an antler restriction – 48%.

Scale of QDM implementation

The percentage of deer hunters who supported the following scales of mandatory QDM implementation were:

- implementation of a statewide, uniform QDM strategy – 41%,
- implementation of varying QDM strategies by deer hunting season – 51%,
- implementation of varying QDM strategies by county – 43%, and
- implementation of QDM on select Game Lands – 41%.

Views on deer harvest reporting

- Seventy-six percent of deer hunters were satisfied with the current tagging and reporting system.
- Forty-nine percent of deer hunters agreed that deer hunters should be required to physically tag deer harvests in the field.

Views on illegal behavior

The percentage of deer hunters who agreed with the following statements about illegal behavior were:

- failure to report deer harvests is common in North Carolina – 67%,
- illegal deer hunting is common in North Carolina – 70%, and
- penalties for wildlife violations should be increased – 55%.

Views on hunting techniques

The percentage of deer hunters who agreed that the following hunting techniques should be legal were:

- hunting over bait – 73%,
 - hunting deer with dogs – 36%,
 - hunting deer with crossbows during muzzleloader and gun season – 46%,
 - hunting deer with crossbows during archery season – 53%,
 - hunting deer with a bow during muzzleloader season – 59%, and
 - hunting deer with a muzzleloader during the week of archery season that currently occurs before the existing muzzleloader season – 40%.
- Fifty-three percent of deer hunters in the Western Season zone, 76% in the Northwestern Season zone, 77% in the Central Season zone, and 74% in the Eastern Season zone agree that hunting over bait should be legal.

- Fifty percent of deer hunters in the Eastern Season zone, 15% in the Western Season zone, 22% in the Northwestern Season zone, and 32% in the Central Season zone agreed that hunting deer with dogs should be legal.

Management Implications

Deer hunting techniques/areas hunted

Even in the Eastern Season zone, most hunters only still hunted for deer. The use of dogs for hunting deer was controversial among deer hunters, as 39% of hunters indicated that too much interference from hunters using dogs to hunt deer was important as a barrier to their deer hunting, and only 36% of deer hunters agreed that hunting deer with dogs should be legal.

Most Western Season zone hunters hunted deer without the use of bait. However, most Northwestern, Central, and Eastern Season zone hunters used bait to hunt deer at least part of the time. Most deer hunters agreed that hunting over bait should be legal, so prohibiting hunting deer with the use of bait would likely be unpopular with deer hunters.

Mountain Season zone hunters were more likely than Northwestern, Central, and Eastern Season zone hunters to have hunted on Game Lands. This may indicate a high importance for public hunting areas in the Mountains. Or, this may point to a lack of opportunity for deer hunting on Game Lands in the other 3 deer season zones.

Regulations to achieve QDM objectives

Most hunters voluntarily practiced QDM strategies where they hunted deer. Also, most hunters indicated that not having enough older age class deer was important barrier to deer hunting. However, only 34% implied they favored a mandatory QDM program. Even though most deer hunters believed that the current bag limit for bucks was about right, most deer hunters supported decreasing the season bag limit for bucks in order to meet QDM objectives. Increasing the season bag limit for does was also popular. However, increasing the season bag limit for does, while increasing opportunity for hunters, may have little effect on the number of does harvested, as most hunters reported harvesting 0 antlerless deer in 2005 and most indicated that if there were no bag limits, they would harvest 4 or fewer does every year, if given the chance.

Shortening the Gun season to achieve QDM objectives was supported by a minority of deer hunters. Also, most Western, Northwestern, and Central Season zone hunters believed the Gun season was too short, while most Eastern Season zone hunters believed the Gun season was about the right length.

The most popular option for an “Earn-a-Buck” program, supported by most deer hunters, was no restrictions on the first buck harvested and requiring a doe harvest before each additional buck harvest.

The most popular option for an antler restriction program, supported by 49% of deer hunters, was requiring a harvested buck to have at least 3 points on 1 side.

The most popular option for scale of implementation of mandatory QDM strategies, supported by most hunters, was by designated deer hunting season. However, $\geq 41\%$ of deer hunters also supported implementation of QDM strategies by county or select Game Lands.

Current deer season structures

Most deer hunters believed the timing of the Bow and Arrow, Muzzleloader, Gun, and Gun Either-Sex seasons were about right. Therefore, even though 50% of deer hunters believed the Gun season was too short, lengthening the Gun season would affect the timing and/or length of other weapon seasons, and these changes to other weapon seasons could be controversial.

Because hunters were split on whether or not to allow hunting deer with a muzzleloader during the week of archery season that currently occurs before the existing muzzleloader season, implementing this change would likely be controversial.

Deer harvest reporting

Most deer hunters believed that failure to report deer harvests and illegal deer hunting are common in North Carolina. Also, even though most agreed that they were satisfied with the current tagging and reporting system, 49% of deer hunters agreed that all deer hunters should be required to physically tag their deer harvests in the field with a printed tag from the WRC.

Hunting deer with bows/ crossbows

Allowing hunting deer with a bow during muzzleloader season or hunting deer with crossbows during archery season would likely be popular with deer hunters.

¹Information in the Executive Summary is presented without reference to statistical significance. For a full explanation of the results and to see details of which results were or were not statistically significant, see the full project report.