Investigating the Decline of Hunting License Sales in Alabama

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Abstract

Sale of hunting licenses in Alabama has been declining since the mid-1980s. This decline in license sales has deep ramifications for the management of Alabama’s wildlife. In order to investigate the causes behind this decline and other hunting-related issues, we used mail survey methodology to develop a two-phase study. The first phase was designed to develop a sample of active, former and non-hunters. The second phase involved administering a survey of those active, former and non-hunter samples developed in Stage 1. The survey indicated that active hunters were satisfied with their hunting experience and most were willing to pay higher license fees if certain conditions were improved. Former hunters, however, appeared to be insensitive to various policy measures—including reduction in hunting license fees and hunting lease fees, increase in population of game animals, and increase in the bag limit. Majority of the non-hunters did not have any interest in hunting and considered it cruel to animals. The results indicated that while active hunters derived a high degree of satisfaction from hunting, it may be difficult to attract former hunters or non-hunters into hunting.

Keywords: Fee hunting, game management, mail survey.

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Introduction

Hunting is an integral part of the culture and lifestyle in Alabama. It is one of the most favorite pastimes in the state and indeed in the entire South. However, viewing hunting just as a sport or a pastime ignores an important fact—hunting is also big business. Hunting creates economic chain-reactions within local economies providing valuable jobs and creating revenues for numerous businesses. For this reason, maintaining a sustained level of hunting activities is crucial. However, sales form hunting license fees have been steadily declining since the mid 1980’s, giving rise to various concerns. Some of these concerns are possible loss of constituent and public support for hunting, out migration of active hunters from the state, and loss of revenue for the Alabama Division of Wildlife & Freshwater Fisheries. The operating budget for Alabama’s wildlife management agency is generated through the sale of licenses; raising concerns about the agencies ability to manage the state’s wildlife effectively if the budget declines. Furthermore, a loss of hunters implies a declining a constituent base and a resultant decline in public support for hunting. Finally, hunting serves as a population management tool for many game species and a decline in hunters means a decline in the agencies’ ability to manage those species.

The objective of this study is to investigate the causes of declining hunting license sales in Alabama. Information gathered from this study could provide useful information to policy makers to design appropriate policy aimed at retaining current hunters and attracting new participants.

Literature review

Duda et al. (1993-98) found that even though 81 percent of Americans agreed that hunting should continue to be legal, participation in hunting related activity was on the decline. Duda’s study, however, did not include samples from Alabama. Past studies on hunting participation found 8.6% (1995) and 7.6% (1997) Alabama residents actively participated in hunting (Coggins 1995). In these studies, active hunters were defined as 18 years or older individual who hunted in the past one year. Rossi and Armstrong (1999) defined an active hunter as someone who hunted at least once in any of the three previous years and found the participation rate to be 22.8%. In order to explore possible reasons for declining hunting participation, Duda et al. (1998) focused on the factors that comprised hunter’s satisfaction from hunting related activities. Bissell and Duda (1994a, 1994b) investigated the previous 15 years and found that hunting for sports and recreation (43%) remained stable, while hunting for meat (21%) decreased and hunting to be close to nature (25%) increased. Hendee (1974) suggested while number of games bagged and days spent in the trip were important, quality of hunting experience was the major motivational force for hunting participation. The reason for hunter’s dissatisfaction were not enough access, not enough places to hunt, crowding, poor safety conditions, and the breakdown of social support system among hunters. Duda et al (1998), on the other hand, found that the hunters derive the greatest satisfaction from family activities while hunting. Both Duda et al (1998) and Applegate (1984) concluded that to increase hunting participation it was more cost effective to focus on the retention of active hunters than recruitment.
Methodology

Due to the absence of a mailing list of active, former, and non-hunters a two-stage mail survey was designed. The objective of the first stage was to develop a sample of active, former and non-hunters. Then the second stage involved administering a survey of the active, former and non-hunters in the sample. We defined an active hunter as someone who had hunted at least once within the three previous years.

The survey was conducted in the spring of 2001. In the first phase, a short questionnaire was sent to 14,814 Alabama residents. The recipients were asked to classify themselves as active, former, or non-hunters based on clearly defined definitions. There were a total of 1,981 responses, a response rate of 13.4%. A total of 621 of the respondents were active hunters, 607 were former hunters, and 753 were non-hunters. In the second stage separate questionnaires designed for active, former, and non-hunters were then sent to the people in respective groups. Response rate among active hunters was 46%, while those for former and non-hunters were 50% and 34% respectively.

The questionnaire for the active hunter group had 28 questions, covering recent hunting experiences and factors affecting (dis)satisfaction with the hunting experience, hunting license fees and other expenses, and demographics. The questionnaire for the former hunter group had 18 questions, including previous hunting experiences, reasons for quitting hunting, possible avenues to bring them back to hunting, and basic demographics. The questionnaire for the non-hunter group had 12 questions, ranging from outdoor recreation interests, possible reasons they chase not to hunt, and demographics.

Survey results

Active hunters

Active hunters were asked to rate several predetermined sources of hunting satisfaction on a scale ranging from "not at all important" to "very important." The respondents indicated that their major sources of satisfaction were being close to nature (93%), relaxing (94%), being close to other family members (78%), hunting for recreation (81%), developing skills (70%), and planning and remembering the hunt (77%). Although Bissell et al (1993) found hunting for meat to be decreasing, about 61 percent of active hunters rated hunting for meat as either "somewhat important" or "very important." The respondents were also asked to rate several possible sources of dissatisfaction on the same scale. Among those listed poor behavior of other hunters (78%), crowded hunting conditions (73%), and poor safety conditions (61%) were the most important sources of dissatisfaction.

The survey contained several questions regarding a hunter's choice of a location to hunt. Active hunters did not place great emphasis on facilities available to hunters such as hunting lodge, campground facilities, availability of cooler or meat preparation area, or outdoor recreation facilities. However, other factors that directly affected the quality of hunting were deemed important by the hunters. Such factors included size of the hunting area (89%), amount of habitat (94%), density of wildlife (91%), density of hunters at the site (86%), and access and degree of
human development (61%). In choosing a location for a hunting trip, factors such as type of game (95%), travel distance (77%), rate of success (76%), out of pocket expenses (71%), and accessibility (73%) were identified as important.

An overwhelming majority of the active hunters hunted on private lands (83%), which is not surprising given the minuscule proportion of public land in Alabama. Hunters did not appear to travel great distances for a hunting trip either. About 64 percent of the trips were within 50 miles of their residence. Also, most hunting trips did not last more than a day. Although a majority of the hunters were successful in their last hunting trip, it is interesting to note that a significant proportion (37%) were not. However, when asked if the trip was worth the time and money they invested, 94 percent responded affirmatively. Among the type of game hunted were deer (64%), turkey (15%), squirrel (11%), and dove (16%). About half of the respondents indicated that they spent less than $50 in out of pocket money in their last hunting trip.

Several questions in the survey were aimed at measuring the respondents’ willingness to pay for higher license fees. Alabama hunters can choose to buy one of six different types of hunting licenses: state license ($15), hunt/fish combo ($23.50), county ($7.50), sportsman’s license ($39.50), lifetime hunting ($300), and lifetime combo ($450). Maintaining the current level and quality of hunting, 33 percent of the active hunters indicated that they were willing to pay 20 percent more for a state license. About 12 percent of the hunters were willing to pay 50 percent more, while 6 percent were willing to pay double the current fees. Responses regarding other types of license fees were very similar. These responses mean that a modest raise in hunting license fees would not deter active hunters.

The survey also asked the same questions under several hypothetical scenarios, which were essentially hypothetical improvements to current hunting situations. The responses also showed a similar pattern. Particularly, about 52 percent of the hunters would be willing to withstand an increase in license fees of 20 percent or more if there were half as many hunters; about 55 percent if there were twice as many game animals, and about 53 percent if the hunting season were extended.

**Former hunters**

The questionnaire for former hunters focused primarily on the respondents’ reason(s) for not hunting, and if anything could be done to get them interested to hunt again. About 32 percent of the former hunters stopped purchasing hunting licenses between 1986 and 1996, another 25 percent between 1971 and 1985. The majority (57%) of former hunters had taken 1-5 hunting trips in the last year of their purchase of a license. It is interesting to note that compared to active hunters, former hunters took fewer hunting trips before deciding to stop hunting altogether. Also, there appeared to be a lack of long term commitment to hunting among former hunters. A larger number of former hunters purchased the one-year state license compared to active hunters and fewer purchased combination fishing and hunting or lifetime licenses.

The respondents were asked about the reasons for not hunting, and the grinds of day-to-day life seemed to be the principal cause. About 41 percent of the former hunters indicated that there was no particular reason, they just could not find the time to hunt. Others, however, did indicate
specific reasons for not hunting anymore. An excess of 14 percent complained about the lack of public hunting grounds, 10 percent said that they were too old to hunt, and some 9 percent had changed their mind about hunting and now believed it to be cruel to animals. The respondents were also asked about sources of hunting satisfaction and dissatisfaction, factors affecting the choice of a location, and important factors for a hunting trip. The responses were similar to those of active hunters. An overwhelming majority of former hunters also hunted primarily on private lands. Most (61%) traveled less than 50 miles to hunt. When selecting a place for a hunting trip, they also looked for easy access, short travel distance, high success rate, and less out of pocket expenses.

When asked what could be done to bring them back to hunting, former hunters appeared to be neutral to a variety of policy measures—including reduction in hunting license fees and hunting lease fees, increase in population of game animals, and increase in the bag limit. This result suggests that it may be hard to bring former hunters back once they have lost their interests in hunting.

Non-hunters

The questionnaire for non-hunters included several questions about their recreation behavior, reason(s) for not hunting, and if anything could be done to attract them to hunt. In contrast to active and former hunters, a larger proportion of non-hunters (52%) indicated that their last outdoor recreation was on public lands (state or federal) rather than private. Although about 45 percent had traveled less than 50 miles from their home on their last recreation trip, some 10% indicated that they traveled more than 250 miles. Non-hunters appeared to be rather inactive on their recreational trips, only a small percentage thought activities such as backpacking, hiking, biking, fishing, and bird watching were important on their trip.

When asked about the reasons for not hunting, about 63 percent of the respondents indicated that they had no interest. An equal percentage also indicated that not wanting to kill animals was important in their decision not to hunt. This suggests the presence of an anti-hunting attitude among non-hunters. This renders the possibility of getting “new recruits” from non-hunters difficult. This argument is strengthened by their responses to the questions designed to see if non-hunters would be interested in hunting if certain policy measures were taken. Non-hunters appeared to be rather insensitive to measures such as decreasing hunting license fees and hunting lease fees, increasing the population of game animals and bag limits. Nearly 59% of non-hunters did not have any family members or close friend who is a hunter.

Demographics

The questionnaires for each of the three groups contained an identical set of demographic questions. Not surprisingly, sex of respondents was heavily skewed in case of active and former hunters. About 92 and 87 percent of respondents were males in the cases of active and former hunters respectively. Non-hunters, on the other hand, became close to mimic the general population in that about 53 percent of the respondents were male. It was interesting to note that age distribution among active and former hunters were significantly different. About 60 percent of the active hunters were under the age of 50, as opposed to only about 32 percent among
former hunters. This confirms that aging is an important factor in a person’s decision to hunt. There was little or no variability across the three groups of respondents in terms of race, employment status, income, number of adults and children in the household, and years of schooling.

Discussion and conclusions

Based on the responses to the survey, we can make the following observations. Active hunters view hunting as a recreational activity to be enjoyed by family and friends. Active hunters’ level of satisfaction with recent hunting experiences is generally high. They are willing to pay for a modest increase in hunting fees given current hunting conditions, or even more if conditions are improved. Among the important factors that active hunters consider in choosing a hunting site are size of the site, abundance of game animals, travel distance, and accessibility. Active hunters also tend to be younger than former hunters.

Former hunters, on the other hand, have cited a variety of reasons for not hunting. Most important of these reasons were, lack of time, age of the person, lack of public hunting grounds, and loss of interest in hunting. Although some former hunters have expressed interest in hunting again if fees are reduced and certain improvements are made, the group generally seems to lack the enthusiasm about hunting. It is therefore unlikely that any policy measures will bring former hunters back to hunting in substantially large numbers.

Non-hunters do not seem to be interested in hunting. They even lack any significant level of support for hunting related issues. Many non-hunters consider hunting as cruel and are opposed to killing animals. Possibility of getting new recruits from this group is minuscule at best.

Therefore, declines in state hunting license sales can be contributed to competing interests in modern hectic life, natural aging of hunters, and a gradual change in social attitude. It is difficult, if not impossible, to tackle these reasons with any policy measures. Therefore, consistent with Duda et al (1998) and Applegate (1984), the results of this study suggest that the agency would gain the most from efforts to retain hunters as opposed to recruiting new hunters. In addition, promotion of hunting as an effective means for wildlife management may have some impact on the social attitude against hunting.

Literature cited


