

Hunter Recruitment in Pennsylvania

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IF YOU are a sportsman, you understand the need to share your knowledge of hunting and conservation stewardship with others. A hunter begets a hunter, and like many sportsmen, I learned to hunt from my father and him from his. Hunting is a Pennsylvania tradition passed on from generation to generation and this recruitment method has allowed us to maintain and perpetuate our hunting heritage to the participation levels present in the state today.

Recruitment is a general term used to describe the new crop of hunters who pursue the sport each year. About 20 years ago many states recognized a downward trend in hunting license sales and in turn a decrease in new hunter recruitment rates. With a smaller pool of hunters able to recruit others into the sport, agencies also recognized a need to focus on hunter recruitment and retention, and so began many programs designed to promote participation in the hunting and shooting sports. The Game Commission conducts programs, such as the Junior Pheasant Hunts and the National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP), and then also works with sportsmen organizations on Youth Field Days and programs for women to help increase recruitment rates each year. These programs are a perfect way to recruit new audiences and expose potential new hunters to the sport.

If you have taught a person to hunt, you probably understand some of the challenges faced in recruiting new hunters. Hundreds of studies conducted across the nation with a focus on hunter recruitment and retention have demonstrated that competing activities, such as sports, limited time and budgets are just a few of the constraints that limit hunting participation today. The Game Commission spends a considerable amount of time evaluating our programs and has adopted many best management practices to improve our own programs to increase hunter recruitment success. Evaluating these programs is a constant process and while we are nowhere near perfecting any of them, we have learned quite a few things.

For instance, a few years back, we adopted the NASP to work with schools to teach students archery as part of their physical education classes. Because time is a critical factor that limits participation in hunting, especially in younger audiences, we recognized this as an opportunity to connect students with a sport that they might not otherwise learn during a time that is convenient to their schedules. The Game Commission began coordinating NASP in 2010 and has since enrolled more than 125 schools in the program. More than 15,000 students were reported to participate in the program in the 2010-11 school year and we expect to nearly double that number this school year. NASP successfully places bows in students' hands and teaches them the basic lessons of archery. The agency is continually working to provide further opportunities for these students to shoot more and learn about hunting and hopefully guide them to become a Pennsylvania hunter.

Studies have also indicated that lack of opportunities and lack of mentors further restrict hunting participation. As a resolution to these scenarios, the agency coordinates the Junior Pheasant Hunt Program. This program provides pheasants to sportsmen's clubs or groups to conduct the hunts across the state. Unlike NASP, these hunts are designed specifically for youngsters who have already successfully completed a Hunter-Trapper Education course. The program was developed to offer more opportunities to pursue game in a safe, educational and

controlled environment alongside a mentor. At these events, participants usually head afield one-on-one with a mentor and dog to pursue one of Pennsylvania's traditional game birds. Participant surveys of past events indicate that youth generally pursue other game and increase their interest in the sport after these hunts, which is a small successful step toward maintaining their interest in the sport.

The Junior Pheasant Hunt Program is ideal because it offers an opportunity to connect current and experienced hunters with new hunters and enables them to share their knowledge of the sport. Recall the statement that hunters beget hunters. Studies have shown that while there is no best method to make a hunter, the most successful recruitment pathway for a person to become a hunter is with the guidance of another hunter. Hunters develop over a period of time and exposure to the sport. New recruits go through stages of development at their own speed, and eventually they have a good chance of becoming a hunter.

While we as an agency coordinate these programs, we depend on sportsmen such as yourself to reach out to the people who participate in programs such as NASP, the Junior Pheasant Hunts and Youth Field Days, and offer them an opportunity to join you on the range or in the field. We realize that we can't recruit new hunters with only our efforts and need to work with our constituents to successfully accomplish this goal together. To start the process, we have created an online registration program and pages on our website to share information on upcoming events for other programs. These tools are available for most recruitment or retention events, so if you are interested in using any of these tools for a youth hunt, a Youth Field Day or another program, please email Recruitakid@pa.gov for more information.

Hunter recruitment and retention will continue to be a focused initiative for our agency. NASP and the Junior Pheasant Hunts are just two of the programs that we offer to get new hunters in the field, and we hope to improve and expand upon these programs in the coming years. By working with sportsmen's groups and other hunters on these programs, I'm sure that we will continue to share knowledge of hunting and conservation stewardship and recruit new hunters to our cherished tradition.