

Nevada

Facing “Insurmountable Opportunities” Through Hunter Surveys, Outreach and Evaluation

Summary

From 2003 to 2004, Nevada received \$50,000 to develop a well-rounded recruitment and retention program for hunters, incorporating needs assessment, four stages of hunting adoption, research and evaluation.

The project started with research to understand the needs of hunters and impediments to hunting. It also helped the agency pilot test several of 23 strategies developed from research results, especially focusing on mentoring families through the Family Hunt Opportunity.

Finally, Nevada undertook major efforts to evaluate strategies fashioned to meet the information, education and mentoring needs of hunters.

KEY AGENCY	Nevada Division of Wildlife
EXTERNAL PARTNERS	Hunter education instructors who helped conduct public surveys and used their hunt leases to help Nevada conduct family hunts. Also, Hafen Ranch, a private hunt club, charged reduced fees to the agency to cover Family Hunts participants.
INTERNAL PARTNERS	Regional hunter education section staff members, Chris Vasey, John McKay and Joe Doucette, were invaluable to coordinate surveys for the research efforts.
PROJECT DATES	May 2003-March 2005
CONTACT	Les Smith, outdoor education coordinator, Nevada Department of Wildlife, (775) 688-1553, lcsmith@ndow.org
RESOURCES	Final reports of projects are available through Les Smith.

BACKGROUND: Why this effort?

“Nevada hunters tell us three things consistently,” says Les Smith, outdoor education coordinator for Nevada Department of Wildlife. “They don’t have time to travel a long way to hunt. They don’t believe there are good places to hunt. And they don’t think there is enough game.” That paints a pretty bleak picture. But hunters have a point.

Most hunters live in metropolitan Las Vegas and Reno, yet urban sprawl in the last 20 years has gobbled most of Nevada’s close, convenient hunting habitat. Sportsmen often are forced to drive three to four hours to find reasonably good hunting grounds. With competition for existing spots, plus little knowledge of where to go, numbers of adult and youth hunters have stagnated, while the state’s population has soared. But Smith is an earnest, yet realistic optimist, often paraphrasing Walt Kelly’s “Pogo,” “We are faced with insurmountable opportunities.” Nevada realized that they needed to mine its hunters—digging deep to learn their wants and needs—and develop ways to cater to these constituents.

What was delivered?

Research assessment: In 2003, HHP funded in-depth research of Nevada hunter's activities and attitudes. Armed with information about their wants and needs, Smith and his team outlined 23 strategies to improve hunter recruitment and retention (see "Research" below).

Nevada learned surprising facts: Hunters want more hunting opportunities, particularly with family and friends. "In my view, the focus should be on mentoring families, not simply youth. Without the family involved, it's almost impossible to reach youth successfully. Research points to the family for creating social bonds surrounding hunting. Most of the time, kids and women are introduced to hunting through dads and husbands. So we need to focus on ways to get and keep families hunting, and understand their different motivations for getting involved."

They also need information about how and where to hunt. "We never would have imagined that hunters are so starved for information," Smith says. Thirteen of Nevada's outreach strategies focus on meeting information needs.

Family Hunts: Nevada developed the Family Hunt Opportunity program, offering clinics on hunter safety and responsibility, landowner relations, finding game and honing shooting skills. Coupled with an agency-sponsored hunt for hunter education graduates and their parents, the Family Hunt Opportunity program provides trial hunting experiences and social support for new hunters. Other strategies focused on meeting the large informational needs of hunters.

Two Family Hunts were held on January 31, 2004, in the southern and western regions. After participating in a shotgun clinic one evening before the hunt, hunters met at the ranch for a prehunt run-through of the hunt. The hunters were divided into two groups, with two guides and two dogs for each group. The fields were planted with a mixture of chukar and pheasants, and hunters took tree trips out to hunt the birds. Hunters had high success rates and gave the Family Hunts high marks.

"Three key principles of recruitment and retention were touched on as a result of the hunts," Smith notes. First, trial is essential to recruitment. By being able to sample a new kind of hunting experience, hunters see that it's worth the investment of time, energy and money to get involved. Second, introducing sportsmen to new types of hunting gives them alternatives that keep them active as hunters. Finally, success is essential to getting and keeping both experienced and new hunters coming back for more."

Lands access: Nevada pursued hunt opportunities on wildlife management areas and private properties closer to where hunters live.

Information: The 2003 hunter survey showed that hunters need specific types of information and education. Nevada sought to meet some of those needs during the past two years:

- Materials to promote existing hunt opportunities, through direct mail, Nevada's Web site, information sheets and strategic positioning of hunting information at outlets for new and lapsed hunters.
- Seminars for turkey, mule deer, antelope and bighorn sheep hunters held in each region. In Las Vegas these were part of the 2004 Hunting and Fishing Expo.

SUCSESSES AND OUTCOMES

Research: Nevada hired DJ Case and Associates to help conduct initial research of hunters in 2003. Hunters identified the following needs:

1. Regular newsletters with hunting information, forecasts and updates.
2. Hunting information sheets with forecasts and information.
3. More deer tags.
4. Stand alone website about hunters and hunting in Nevada.
5. Family hunting licenses at a discount.
6. Articles about how to and where to hunt on the Nevada division website.
7. Regional workshops on how to and where to hunt big game, upland game and waterfowl.
8. Hunting articles in Nevada and regional newspapers and magazines.
9. Workshops to get new hunters started.
10. Annual Hunting and Fishing Expo.
11. New regulated upland game hunts for youths.
12. One-time family hunt opportunities with guides and dogs.
13. Limited entry hunts (first-come-first-served) for families.
14. TV and radio segments about hunting.
15. Step-by-step guides to hunting different kinds of game.
16. Hunting seminars within boat sports and travel shows.
17. Regulations which are easier to understand, with more useful information.
18. Laser Shot simulators.
19. Advertisements on radio and television.
20. Publications to help family members get started.
21. Family mentoring programs.
22. Short-term resident hunting licenses.
23. Hunter Education course work that is easier and more convenient.

“Historically, hunting and fishing recruitment and retention tools were developed based on agencies’ instincts about what was needed by the target audiences,” Smith notes. “With increasing budgetary limitations, we needed to focus our efforts to ensure return on investment.”

Family Hunts: Family Hunts, while ranked lower on the needs list, have high potential for hunter recruitment. Family Hunts are a key part of the trial period so essential to recruitment. There are two approaches to accomplish this:

1. Certified hunter education instructors can actively involve new hunting families in a year-long mentoring program, as part of STEP OUTSIDE program. Part of this program is an adopt-a-habitat activity that has families developing their own hunting spots on public land in nearby draws and canyons.
2. Opportunities for families to hunt on productive and easily accessible hunting spots, close to home, need to be developed. One proposal is that hunt areas be developed in cooperation with private-land owners so they function as a “private hunt club,” on private property and managed by private groups. That way hunting families could be allowed to

hunt without having to obtain a license. These programs provide opportunities for hunting organizations to develop hunts inviting hunter education graduates to participate and allowing the agency to relinquish direct management roles.

Private lands access: Family Hunts encouraged landowners to allow hunts on private lands, setting the stage for private lands access to grow. "People are more likely to allow hunting on private lands when they know that kids are involved," Smith says. "It's much harder to say no when we are trying to teach hunting traditions to our young people. Once landowners see the success of these efforts, it can plant a seed in their minds and among other landowners that private lands access for hunting can be a good experience."

Public lands access: Follow up research showed that hunters are interested in Nevada establishing Quality Hunt Units (QHUs) on wildlife management areas (WMAs) to provide limited entry for hunters on a first come, first served reservation basis. These units would not only provide better hunting within the unit, but "spill" birds into other units in the WMAs as well. This will provide public hunting opportunities close to home where they can have a good chance of success. Nevada holds Family Hunt Opportunities (youth-only hunt) in these QHUs the weekend before the upland game opener.

Information: Based on survey results, several resources were developed and made available to the hunting and fishing community to provide additional information related to these recreational activities. These include the Nevada Outdoor Journal, the agency's website, hunting information sheets, and big game hunting clinics.

EVALUATION

Smith believes it is critical to evaluate the tools once they have been received by the hunting and fishing communities. Nevada employed evaluation techniques for Family Hunts and information and education tools to:

- Improve and modify resource content to meet needs and expectations.
- Efficiently deliver the resources to ensure maximum exposure and use.
- Identify additional information needs and delivery methods.
- Identify demographic groups currently reached by extension efforts and develop tactics to engage under-represented segments of the general population.
- More efficiently utilize budgetary resources.

To assess the effectiveness of the informational resources developed based on the 2003 survey, the Nevada designed and mailed a follow-up survey in 2004. A total of 730 surveys were mailed, with a 15.8 percent response rate.

Data indicates preferences and values of hunters who responded," Smith says. "This was not a random sample, and it reflects only the viewpoints of those who responded. However, it provides valuable insight into the needs and desires of Nevada hunters."

Evaluating the results of strategies through surveys and other mechanisms helps Nevada determine the most cost-effective and productive strategies to emphasize in coming years. It also allows them to make improvements and corrections.

LESSONS LEARNED

Discover wants and needs: “If you’re going to kick start getting families hunting together, you first have to learn what your hunters want and need,” Smith notes. To learn more about hunters it’s important to identify what motivates hunters, what slows them down, and what it takes to get them hunting again.

Sharp learning curve: “There are surprises good and bad; it’s a sharp learning curve. Some strategies work well in state agency framework, and some work better through external partners,” Smith says. “Some strategies will take years to develop. It’s certainly not an overnight process, and that’s important for all to keep in mind.”

Look outside the agency: “We’ve got to stop looking solely to state agencies to solve recruitment and retention problems; we must involve other partners,” Smith adds. “Agencies have problems of their own; at times their flexibility and resources are limited. There are things that agencies can do well, especially research, because they have all the resources and access to data. But state agencies need to include outside partners. We need them to take the data - the work we can do well — and make things happen. Future efforts in Nevada will involve outside partnerships more heavily.”

Involve families: “Everyone talks about getting kids out from behind the TV or computer, but most older adults don’t really understand how technology driven the younger generation is,” Smith note. “Parents want their kids to turn off the computer too. We need to find ways to take advantage of that, but we need to get kids started and up to speed early. If we wait until they’re into their teens, we’ve waited too long. So we have to get families out and give them repeat opportunities to be involved in hunting, fishing and outdoors activities. Agencies and their partners need to work together to provide effective mentoring and incentives.”

CURRENT STATUS

Smith notes, “Hunting is very limited in Nevada, but we can take better advantage of the opportunities that now exist. With appropriate partnerships, both within the agency and with outside groups, we can create new opportunities for generations of Nevada hunters. We’re pursuing opportunities to involve partners at every step in our recruitment and retention programs.”