

Recruiting and Retaining Hunters and Anglers

Sporting Heritage Council

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Thank you to Paul Heinen and the Council for inviting me to come and discuss ideas related to recruitment and retention of Hunters and Anglers. I have been involved in recruitment and retention issues at the local, state and national levels for nearly 25 years. This issue has been “hot” at the national level for most of that time. There have been several “Governor’s Symposia on Hunting Heritage” including one here in Wisconsin. I was on the planning committee for that. The National Shooting Sports Foundation has had a series of Shooting Sports Summits over the years and recruitment and retention has been a focus of those. I was a speaker at three of them. The angling community got organized about 15 years ago and created the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation that uses federal money to help states figure out how to recruit and retain anglers and boaters. I was on Task Force three that helped get that started and your Mark LaBarbera was on their board of directors. Steve Miller is currently on their board of directors.

In 2006, the Secretary of Interior, Gale Norton appointed a federal advisory committee called the Sporting Conservation Council. That group helped plan a White House Conference on Wildlife Policy in North America. It was on the 100th anniversary of a similar conference that Teddy Roosevelt sponsored when he was president in 1908. So it had sort of a neat historic significance. Out of that conference came 58 recommendations related to the future of hunting in North America.....some of them focused on recruitment and retention

Anyway, the 58 points of light as I refer to them were shopped around the Hill to all the major players on both sides of the aisle and the result was bi-partisan support. Everyone involved was hoping that the plan would outlive the change in administration no matter who won. So when the Obama administration took office they morphed the SCC into what is now the Wildlife Hunting Heritage Conservation Council (WHHCC). This group is a formal federal advisory committee that advises the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture on issues related to hunting on public federal lands. I am the vice chair of that council.

My point in all this is that a lot has happened in 25 years and I have been fortunate to have been involved in some of it. I hope I have made some difference. I have learned some things along the way. Presumably, that is why I have been asked to attend today.

I think the most exciting thing about the Sporting Heritage Council (SHC) is that you actually could accomplish something if you want to. Most of the dozens of conferences that I attended in the past quarter century generated a lot of good ideas that would have helped with recruitment and retention. When those conferences were over, folks did the things they would have done anyway, whether the conference had happened or not. Good ideas that had not had ownership sat on the table. There was not any coordinated effort.

The SHC is in a unique position. You represent a state, which is a whole lot more manageable concept than a whole country. Wildlife is largely managed at the state level, as is education, which makes a statewide body a more logical level to operate at. You have representatives of the NGOs, the management agency, the legislature and the governor sitting at one table. Presumably if someone had a good idea that you could agree on...it could be made to happen. This is an amazing opportunity. You are in a position to actually get something done. When I told that to Paul Heinen, he asked me, "What is the one thing they should do?" I did not know what to say.

So, I sent out an email to the folks that I think know that most about this. These are people that I have known and worked with for most of the 25 years I have been involved. They ranged from folks who ran recruitment efforts at the state level, to folks who have studied them, to those who run national programs. I asked them what five things they would do if they were in charge. This is what they had to say. I am going to share the things that came up repeatedly and sprinkle in items that may have come from one person...but have intriguing possibilities.

1. **Almost everyone said the most important thing is to get folks to renew their licenses....**because retention is as good as recruitment. I am sure that you have all, by now, heard of the concept of churn....the idea that not everyone buys a license every year. This is a concept that is incredible to me. I cannot imagine not buying a deer license and not going out for the gun deer season no matter what. I had an uncle who had a stroke and was bed ridden for years. Each season, he sent his wife to the sport shop to buy the license appropriate to the season. He had her hang his gear for that season up where he could see it from his bed and he read stories about that activity during the season. Trust me....Uncle Harry and I are anomalies. Your public is fickle and they need to be courted. My experts agree on this. So what **actions** can this group take?
 - a. Enable the WDNR to collect their email addresses when they buy a license.
 - b. Have the WDNR send them a thank you by email after they purchase.
 - c. As each season comes around, the WDNR should send them a link to the appropriate information on their website and links to the WDNR Facebook page.
 - d. We need to have one click ordering of licenses on the web. The ability for the Department to store credit card information and to make buying easy, with license combinations that make sense is very important.
 - e. Think about the Badger Forever concept. This one would take legislation. This idea came from two of our staffers. I think it is really good. The details of this I leave to you...but the idea would be that if you grow up and have to move away for a spouse or a job that you

could always come back to hunt as a resident. This would keep family hunting camps together....one of the most important things we can do if we want to keep the tradition alive.

2. Recruiting and Mentoring....Almost everyone said in one way or another that “one and done” is not effective. The “trot the little kids out with fishing poles for the TV camera’s approach” may even be cruel. It might peak interest...but there is no infrastructure in the child’s life to facilitate the activity in the future. Hunting and fishing are time, place, and equipment intensive activities that generally happen within family groups. To successfully create generations of hunters and anglers who will stick with these activities, you need to duplicate that socialization process. The easiest way to duplicate that socialization process is to use the framework that already exists...families and hunting/fishing groups...and I mean this last one in the context of people who do these activities together in friend groups. They have the passion, the equipment and a place to go. So, what actions can this group take?

a. **Develop a simple message that encourages everyone to take someone new along and to support them as long as it takes to be independent in their sport.** NSSF called their campaign Step Outside. RBFF called it Take Me Fishing. These had a national focus. I think you can actually be more successful with this at the state level. You have an army of folks who go out and talk to clubs all the time. This message needs to be top of mind for everyone involved.

b. **We need more focus on outreach to adult men and women.** We have spent decades doing wonderful kid programs, but adults have the money, the transportation and the decision-making authority to plan a hunt or a fishing trip right now. If they become part of our community, they will recruit their children for us. This could be done a number of ways...including the suggestion below in c, or we could work on programming that happens through corporate retreats. We could start with our own staff. Some years ago, we tried to get the WDNR to do a BOW style workshop for employees. We would have done it gratis. It was nixed because the newspaper might find out. Our employees serve major customers who fund our operations and management of our lands. I think that at a minimum understanding what these folks do and why it is fun, is important professional development.

c. **We need programming that legitimizes hunting and recruits non-traditional audiences.** There is a great program in Michigan called Gourmets Gone Wild that introduces young adult professionals to wild game at country clubs with professional chefs serving locally grown, organic veggies, wild game, and local wines. This is taking advantage of the locovore movement to get non-traditional folks interested in and approving of hunting. After you have savored rabbit spring rolls, with a nice glass of Wollersheim wine and a tasty slice of Sarvecchio....it would be hard to criticize hunting. We are thinking of trying this here in the Becoming an Outdoors-woman program. This could also be an entrée into the minority populations.

Retaining, recruiting and mentoring are the highest priority things. We have just covered them, with some suggestions for actions under each one. Then there are the general concepts that I think you need to keep in mind. Some of these are also reinforced by my advisors:

- You don't need to spend money hiring someone to write curriculum. Mostly it exists.
- You need to spend enough time to know if you are making progress...we need the attention span of polar bears...not butterflies.
- You need to evaluate to know what is working.
- You need to use best practices and get the best people involved.
- Access to lands and waters where a quality experience can be had is central to success.

I think this covers the highest priority areas and the general concepts that we need to guide us forward. There are lots of ideas out there for specific programs that we could do. I will be happy to send you all the suggestions that I have received. There are some intriguing ideas.

I am pleased to have been asked to come out and share with you. Now, I think we should move to the discussion phase of this. Thanks again for having me.