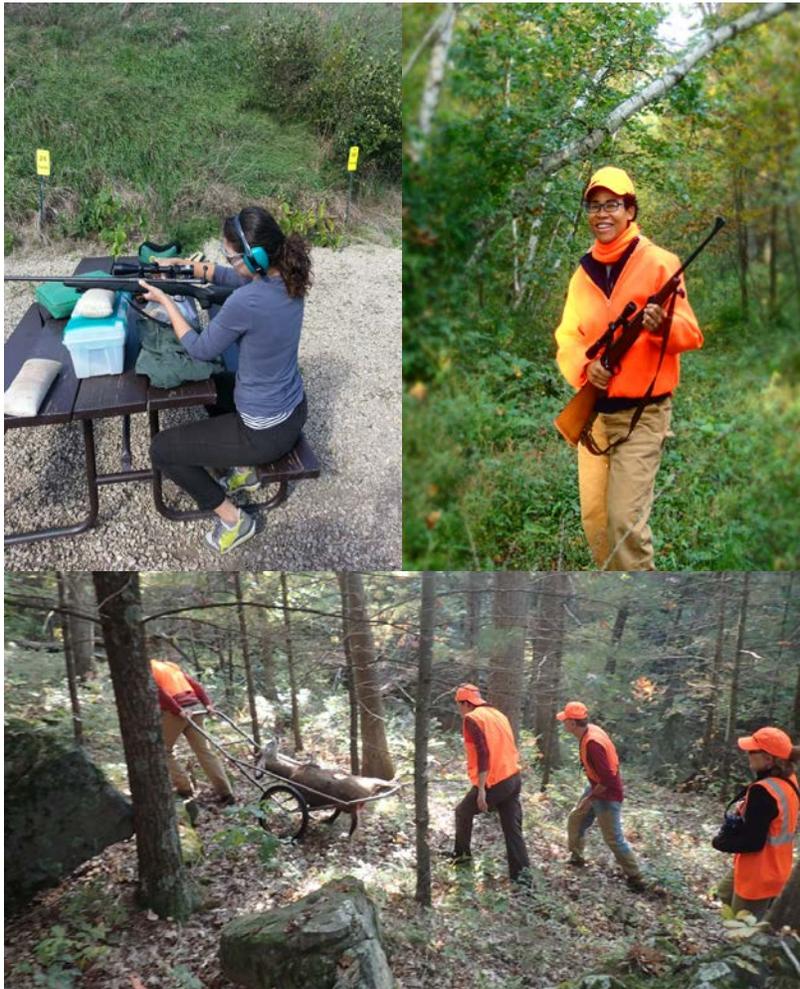


Alumni Reflections on Wisconsin's "Hunting for Sustainability" Course, 2012 & 2013



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Summary: The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources developed and initiated a course called “Hunting for Sustainability” in the fall of 2012 as an innovative strategy to produce a higher return on the investment for developing and recruiting new hunters in the state. Hunting for Sustainability departs from traditional hunter recruitment programs in that it targets true novice adults and provides training through multiple episodes over a longer time period. We conducted semi-structured, telephone interviews with 15 of the 25 individuals who participated in the program’s first two years to assess their perceptions of the Hunting for Sustainability experience and to gain insights into their ongoing development in the process of hunting adoption following their program experience. This report summarizes the themes and program feedback that emerged during the interviews.

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**Alumni Reflections on Wisconsin's
"Hunting for Sustainability"
Course, 2012 and 2013**

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“My preconceived notion was that hunters went out with a group of friends and partied. But the majority of hunters take it more seriously.”

— Interview Participants

Introduction: An Innovative Approach

The vast majority of government and non-governmental organization hunter recruitment programs throughout the United States share two features: 1) they serve youth, and 2) are of short duration (e.g., one- or two-day events). The limitations of these features for facilitating the complex socialization process of becoming a hunter are beginning to be recognized by the community concerned with maintaining hunting as a common cultural activity. In addition, many of these introductory programs have been populated by children of existing hunters whom likely would have been introduced to hunting without intervention, which raises important questions about the impacts of such approaches.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (Wisconsin DNR) developed and initiated a course called "Hunting for Sustainability" in the fall of 2012 as an innovative strategy to produce a higher return on the investment for developing and recruiting new hunters in the state. Hunting for Sustainability is a departure from traditional hunter recruitment programs in that it targets true novice adults and provides training through multiple episodes over a longer time period. Hunting for Sustainability was offered by Wisconsin DNR staff and volunteers at the Madison Area Technical College in the fall of 2012 and 2013. The course curriculum featured discussions about the role of hunting in wildlife conservation, deer biology, primers on equipment, hunting regulations, firearm handling and safety, marksmanship practice at a shooting range, and hands-on demonstration of deer butchering. The course culminated in a weekend, mentored, firearm deer hunt in October (one month prior to the regular firearm deer season in Wisconsin).

Methods: Program Evaluation

We conducted semi-structured, telephone interviews with 15 of the 25 individuals who participated in the program's first two years to assess their perceptions of the Hunting for Sustainability experience and to gain insights into their ongoing development in the process of hunting adoption following their program experience. We twice sent invitations via e-mail to participate in interviews. Interview times were scheduled with those who responded affirmatively to the e-mail requests. We used a prepared script of open-ended questions, but explored unique topics that emerged in individual responses.

Conversations were recorded digitally with permission. Researchers divided up responsibility for conducting the interviews but both reviewed the recordings of all interviews and developed notes on dominant themes before meeting to compare observations. This report summarizes the themes and program feedback that emerged in this process. We present quotes from interviewees to illustrate or illuminate the themes presented. Interview data, especially with a small sample, are inherently qualitative; its generalizability is limited to the perspective of those who participated in the Hunting for Sustainability course.

Interview Findings

Program Exceeds Expectations

The first impression we had upon reviewing the interviews is that the Hunting for Sustainability course has found a willing and grateful audience. Interviews were laced with compliments about the quality of the program, the experience provided, and the enthusiasm and effort of the volunteers and program organizers. Appreciation was widespread regardless of the subject's current participation in hunting or intention to continue. In more than one case, participant comments would suggest complete conversion to hunting as a lifestyle.

- "I think the time and effort that Keith and Mike Watt and Jim Wipperfurth put in was clear. I am sure they gave up their personal time. Reading the ad in the paper made it seem like just a classroom thing, but getting the chance to go the LE shooting range and actual hunting opportunities were beyond what I expected."
- "I feel more confident. It enhanced what I knew about the culture of hunting."
- "This course for me was a Godsend."
- "I have nothing but praise for the whole thing. I think everything was covered theoretically and practically."
- "It far exceeded my expectations. It is the most benefit for the dollar purchase I have ever made in my life."
- "I had no idea how knowledgeable and hands-on the course was... I had no appreciation for the activities they had planned for us [when I signed up]."
- "Combination of biology and societal blend was perfect."
- "I think they did a really good job the way they went about it."
- "There were a bunch of people working really hard to get us our deer and it was fun just talking to them in terms of where their heads were at and what they were thinking about and how they were thinking about moving the deer, what you have to do, and where to look. You just got a lot of practical advice how a deer hunter thinks."
- "I thought it was a course designed for someone like me."

Attractions to Hunting: Food and Beyond

The name of the course "Hunting for Sustainability" was chosen to appeal to growing segment of urban and exurban adults interested in local foods, sometimes referred to as the "locavore" movement. Even within a common food-centric lens, this audience is multifaceted in their interests and motivations for wanting to try hunting as evident from our interview data. Some seem focused on reducing the ecological footprint associated with meat consumption. Others may be looking for the health benefits of obtaining "organic"

protein or specifically as an alternative to an expressed distrust of industrially-raised and processed meat.

- "I lived in Wisconsin for 13 years and deer hunting was big part of the culture and also curious about it from the foodie perspective."
- "That is what I need to do, because I want to eat more sustainably and meat is the most expensive thing to get organically."
- "Seeing a big shift in knowing where food comes from... there's less home cooked meals, and more of an engineered element... people are wanting more natural food."
- "Draw [to the course] is local, knowing where your food comes from and a little bit of distrust of the ability of government to safeguard the health of Americans."

We also heard about the motivation for self-sufficiency that was often interwoven with the desire to obtain locally grown meat for its health or culinary attributes. Where present, the interest in hunting was an extension of other lifestyle choices like gardening, raising backyard chickens, or making one's own beer.

- "When I first moved to Wisconsin I had zero interest [in hunting] and I thought it was silly. I think it was getting venison handed to me and wanting to have more of a hand in getting my own meat. I realized I had to bite the bullet and learn about shooting a gun, learn more about deer biology."
- "My interest started here meeting people in Wisconsin (grew up outside of U.S.), people from work would bring venison in. My main interest is the appeal... sense of pride... in hunting your own food."
- "Always interested in [hunting] an animal... it's a survival skill that we might need at the end of the world."
- "I had been thinking for a long time about starting to hunt to put food on the table for my family. Not having to rely on my hunting neighbors to provide venison for my table, or goose or duck or whatever so I took advantage of it."

Creating a Favorable Hunter Identity

Regardless of the flavor or variation of food-based motivations, it seems as though most of these people (11 cases) have developed their interest in hunting in adulthood (some quite recently). Adoption of any activity like hunting that is steeped with a cultural identity requires that subjects can identify as fitting in or belonging to that group. When targeting adults with a sustainability focus who are coming from an urban background, it is especially critical that hunting and hunters are shown in a thoughtful and respectful manner. The Hunting for Sustainability program has succeeded in creating an inclusive environment. In fact, many interview subjects appear to have held somewhat suspicious attitudes or negative attitudes toward hunters. While these attitudes began shifting prior to program enrollment, we also heard evidence that exposure to the positive philosophy of volunteers and mentors solidified those shifts.

- "My preconceived notion was that hunters went out with a group of friends and partied. But the majority of hunters take it more seriously. I see hunters now as being more respectful of animals."
- "A lot of my preconceived notions about hunting were false: that guys go in the woods, drink a lot of beer, tell stories, and shoot things and not do anything with it. What I learned is that there is a huge community of people going out there and hunting for food that are actually using that deer as a staple of their diet. My notions of this culture were stereotypical instead of based in reality."
- "Used to have an aversion to guns. My family is anti-gun. So it changed my opinion about guns especially for hunting purpose. Most hunters are respectful."
- "Began to realize all sorts of hunters out there... began to find more subsistence hunters, more grounded, more spiritual...down to Earth ... more for the meat, more for the experience."
- "Hunting seems very "club-y" from the outside, and [the course] did a good job of breaking through that."
- "I am more open minded about it now. I learned hunters are more respectful and they don't just kill animals for sport."

There was a second type of profile among interviewees comprised of adults who were exposed to hunting as adolescents but did not have sufficient opportunity or interest to try it. These participants often had more direct ties to friends and or family that hunt, and may be better positioned from a social habitat perspective to more quickly assimilate the technical and social competencies of being a hunter. Like tinder on the forest floor, these people were ready to ignite their participation in hunting and the Hunting for Sustainability class served as the spark that set them ablaze.

- "I had accompanied my close friend and his father (who was and still is one of my greatest role models) as a teenager... I'd been meaning to go hunting with them but because of school I hadn't really been able to schedule it, and didn't have access to a gun... I took [hunter safety] when I was between 12 and 14... I took it because some of my friends were taking it."
- "I did grow up around hunting and fishing... I was really into it in my childhood until I became a teenager, and then I started doing other things... it just seemed like something to get back into."

A third type of Hunting for Sustainability alums is a group that can be described as curiosity or novelty seekers. This segment includes people who are apt to try new and exciting adventures or learning opportunities as a means as opposed to an end. In other words, there is evidence that some people participated in the Hunting for Sustainability course because "it sounded interesting" without necessarily entering the program with intentions to become a hunter. People with this mindset may be less likely to adopt hunting into their lifestyle than the previous two types, yet may emerge as stronger supporters of hunting as a result of their direct exposure.

- "It just sounded interesting to me because I've never hunted before and my family is not hunters either, but I'm interested in local food and sustainability. That's kind of why it interested me."
- "I was interested in that class because the sustainability issue is something that I'm interested in... I'm a person who has never been against [hunting] but I don't have a huge profound interest in it either."
- "I wasn't interested in the course so much for the hunting specifically. Was more interested in it as a sustainable food source, and that was more of the focus, not necessarily to learn the skill of hunting."

The last type of Hunting for Sustainability participant apparent among the interviewees pursued the program because they saw hunting as a vehicle for spending more time outdoors. Those expressing this motivation seemed particularly interested in getting away from urban settings and wanting another reason to get outdoors to enjoy the fall.

- "I got interested in [hunting] over the course of the last three years... In terms of what interested me, the easiest way I can put it is I just wanted to be in the woods more... It wasn't as much about the food aspect—wild game is very attractive to me as a food option—but that was not the primary motivation... The couple times I went hunting last fall it was just great to be outside."
- "I like the outdoors and I think it was another way for me to get closer to nature."

"It Took away the Mystery about Hunting"

Research has established that adoption of hunting as a leisure pursuit is a complex process that requires participants to master a variety of technical and social competencies. While program providers and avid hunters know this to be true intuitively, it can be easy to underestimate the sense of bewilderment that even the most interested newcomer feels when it comes time to start hunting. Interview responses illuminated these feelings.

- "I saw this class, Hunting for Sustainability, and it really intrigued me because whenever I hear people talk about hunting it seems very complex... and I thought "I have no idea the first thing you would do." So that's what I liked about this class was that it taught you how to do it."
- "We had wanted to get into hunting... we didn't have any way to get into hunting. Nobody took us by the hand, being from out of state, and said "here, this is how you do it, this is the ins and outs" so we saw this... as a great opportunity and we signed up right away."
- "You can read about it and hear about it all you want, but until you actually do it you won't experience it."

In almost all interviews, respondents indicated that the instruction demystified how to go hunting. For some individuals, their confidence increased to the point where they believed they could go on their own. Of the 15 people we interviewed, eight of them bought hunting licenses and did additional hunting following their Hunting for Sustainability course. Several were successful in harvesting a deer outside of the program and a couple mentioned

pursuing other species as well (more than one mentioned wild turkey, Canada goose, ring-necked pheasants, rabbits).

- "I went into that course not at all prepared to hunt and after that class I've gone hunting, once on a guided hunt and got a deer, and then during the deer season I went out on my own, and I didn't get anything, but I was prepared. I felt like I could find a location, I could find a deer, make a good shot, clean it, get it home, and process it. Quite honestly, it prepared us for whole process."
- "There is a certain hypocrisy in not hunting and yet buying meat from the store and I feel a lot better on that front now. That I can go out and take care of the whole process instead of just writing a check to [a supermarket]. Good to know how I would be capable of doing it."
- "Definitely plan to go out this year. I was one of the students who didn't get one, so I need to look up and mark off doe season on my calendar."
- "It pretty much covered everything from bringing in dummy arms... one of the biggest things Keith did was getting deer and butchering... it was huge in getting me past the last hurdle. I have been dissecting things for 15 years but that was pretty much the last hurdle... I learned if you screw up, it's fine."

As the previous comment alludes too, the deer butchering demonstration during the Hunting for Sustainability course was clearly a critical and impactful element in the course. Nearly every interviewee referenced the activity at some point during our interviews, usually when we asked which part of the course was the most memorable. The quotes reveal that people seeking hunting as a means for obtaining food and/or self-reliance view the butchering process as both the only authentic way to deal with their harvest, and at the same time, one of most complicated/intimidating aspects of learning to hunt.

- "The thing that I really enjoyed about the course was when we got to divide and process the meat. I think that was my biggest obstacle for me, you know. I think I could have gone out and gotten a deer, but then what do you do with it? And then when my kids are interested in [hunting], they'll be looking to me for advice about what to do when the deer is down."
- "I was really happy they showed us the butchering and the processing of the meat and everything. I don't know a lot of people that do that, so in a short amount of time it's amazing how much they taught us."
- "The deer butchering class... that was really helpful. As a new hunter, you kinda ask the question "alright, even if I am successful, what do I do next?" and so that was a great opportunity."

One person did note that since their primary interest was in food preparation, he would have preferred that more time and care be taken with the demonstration in terms of particular cuts; he felt the process had been rushed.

Barriers to Adoption

We interviewed two people whose experience with the Hunting for Sustainability course led them to decide that hunting was not for them. Both of these individuals seemed to have entered the program with weaker intentions than many of the other program participants. Ultimately, they concluded that the potential benefits of hunting were less than the perceived barriers they would need to overcome.

- "Incorporating hunting into my lifestyle doesn't seem like something that is going to happen. It seems like a huge undertaking, there are a lot of obstacles to overcome. Hunting overall would be too much a time sink, too much of a leap."
- "I think I learned that even though I like local food, I'd rather have someone else do the hunting. My boyfriend is super into it now so I can just let him go out and still benefit from it."

We asked interview subjects what the biggest challenge(s) were for them in continuing to hunt again. Many of their responses were consistent with participation barriers that have been highlighted in past research on hunting participation. These include ability to locate a place to hunt, time constraints, and having others to go hunting with. In addition, it appears that some simply need more practice or exposure to develop confidence to go forward.

➤ How to find hunting land

- "Finding a place is another challenge. A lot of people have established camps they go to. I am not too comfortable being on public land out with other people with guns. I cannot afford to buy a piece of land to hunt. Looking for some place you can go and call your own without intruding on someone else."
- "We've hunted the Managed Forest Land (open to public hunting) in Richland County. I'll do it, but I am hesitant because of all the [hunters] out there."
- "The biggest challenge for me is figuring out where to hunt to see deer. I am not entirely comfortable with the website yet for going on seeing, you know, this is managed land and here's how I get at it, will it be a good place to hunt deer. These guys (the instructors) obviously have a ton of knowledge that you can expect to get from a class."

➤ Perceived investment of time

- "Trying to find time with two-year-old son. Trying to balance family life with this thing I want to do."
- "[My interest in hunting] is still pretty high. The biggest challenge for me is finding the time. I have a new baby at home and this year is going to be even more difficult to get out. I am definitely still interested. I am hoping to research some public lands or talk to some friends who hunt private land and seeing if I can tag along."

➤ **Shooting competency**

- "The only thing I need to do is get down to the range and practice so I can hit something that I am aiming at."
- "Time is one of them. Still not feeling comfortable. Had friends that offered to loan rifle if I really wanted to go. Would like to have a place to rent one. I have thought about going out with a camera just to see if you could see one. But I really don't have the time."

➤ **Getting a rifle**

- "I want to learn more and I feel pretty ignorant... on technical aspects [of purchasing a firearm]."

➤ **Lack of support network**

- "No [I don't have anyone to go out with]. That is one of biggest reasons... what would get me out there more if I had someone to go with."
- "I definitely would do it again if there was an opportunity but one of the things I learned is that because there isn't anyone I can do it with I would have to do all of things like dress the deer by myself and drag it to the car so I started thinking about maybe smaller things that would not require muscle... like quail"

➤ **Financial commitment**

- "I don't really perceive it as being an inexpensive hobby or sport."

Program Enhancements

One of the interview questions we asked was "What advice would you give the program organizers for helping introduce other newcomers to hunting?" Most of the top-of-mind responses to this question addressed ways to market the program to get more people to sign up (e.g., flyers, farmer's markets, food coops, etc.). We tried to redirect people to think about ways the program itself could be improved. Most interviewees were at a loss to provide suggestions, but the few that were offered are presented here.

➤ **Create more time to interact sooner with classmates to build social network**

- "It would be good to get people out there doing stuff sooner. We did some target practice the night before [the mentored hunt] and that's what gets people talking to one another-- a classroom isn't a very good place for that but once we were broken in small groups and trying out these rifles and stuff, we got to know the people in the last events of the class so [missed opportunity to create network of people you could go hunting with]."

➤ **More shooting and earlier shooting opportunities to get comfortable with gun**

- "If I had to say something negative about it, it really wasn't quite enough... maybe a couple of more times with the rifle... I had not shot before."
- "My only complaint was that we ended up shooting the night before, we meant to practice more... need more practice ahead of time to be more comfortable with the gun."

➤ **"Plant deer"**

This comment was offered facetiously by one participant, but it illustrated an important underlying need to practice a less considered hunting competency—safe, effective shot selection. Hitting a stationary target at a shooting range is one thing, but knowing when to raise the firearm and pull the trigger on a live animal in the field is another thing. Novice hunters expressed anxiousness about how to recognize a shot opportunity as being safe (e.g., proper direction and background), as well as in the mechanics of getting a shot off. While they look to mentors to guide them in when/where to shoot, those who did not see any deer during their hunts did not get the opportunity to practice or gain this competency. Clearly, not everyone is going to see deer on a single hunt, but getting a chance to raise the firearm and scope a deer (even if a shot is not taken) may be a critical experience for developing independence.

- " Maybe going hunting a couple of times, going once was not enough to make me feel comfortable for example in knowing what is safe direction to shoot.. uphill vs. downhill."
- "But even to be able to take aim and know how to position myself even if I didn't get a shot off would have been good... the rifle is heavier than it looks. I appreciate more the practice that it takes... it looks easy to shoot a rifle but it is not as easy it looks."

➤ **More repetition for hands-on activities**

Finding a "good place" to hunt appears to be one of leading challenges for novice hunters continuing their trial and adoption of hunting. A "good place" is one where they feel comfortable to hunt safely without endangering or disrupting other hunters. Many expressed intrigue and surprise to learn about the online resources available to locate hunting property. Several mentioned that they would have preferred more time to investigate these sites during class in order to become more proficient at using them. While online resources were specifically singled out by interviewees, we would comment that standard education practice encourages the use of hands-on student activities that allow practice and repetition of the key competencies.

- "The biggest gap for me is finding land. I spent a lot of time and I think the DNR has good resources, but it takes a lot of time to understand it. Spending more time on it can help make it more accessible."
- "One of the days we had class we were going through the various DNR websites and I brought my laptop and tried to keep up but it didn't work so good. I think if they created a worksheet where people had to go through and find the various sites and then have people ask questions."

Program Considerations in the Future

We asked participants whether they have had follow-up contact with program organizers. Several mentioned getting e-mails from Keith Warnke (highlighting additional Learn to Hunts or other opportunities). This type of outreach should be continued and perhaps expanded in the future. We also asked people if they could remember the name of their mentor and only three could do so (one was mentored by Keith and another previously knew their mentor before the program). This is the only significant shortcoming of the program revealed in the interviews that we conducted. Having said that, a couple of participants took responsibility for not pursuing offers from their mentors to contact them for advice or with questions following their mentored hunts together. Still, an on-going challenge for our hunting for Sustainability program (and other hunter 3-R interventions) will be to cultivate and train volunteers willing to extend their service beyond the day (or weekend) of the mentored hunt to develop supporting relationships that may be needed to fill a void of social support among some portion of adult, novice hunters.

We would echo the suggestion of one of the course participants on the value of taking additional steps to foster interactions among participants early and often in these types of courses. Increased social interaction between the course participants could promote building new hunting groups among participants. Most are at similar levels of interest and need support systems. Encouraging time for people to bond/build social ties could increase the possibility that participants would continue to hunt together after the course. This could also lessen the responsibility placed on volunteer mentors, as it may already be difficult to find mentors willing to put in the time to take people out for a few hunts.

The need for on-going support clearly varied among the Hunting for Sustainability participants that we interviewed. Not surprisingly, those who signed up with someone else (e.g., a friend) or who had pre-existing relationships with hunters (as neighbors, co-workers, in-laws, etc.) appear more likely to have continued. This has important implications for facilitating long-term mentoring of novice hunters and also for developing realistic program outcomes relative to developing new hunters. Not all participants enter the Hunting for Sustainability course with strong intentions to "become hunters." Further they must be considered on a continuum of the likelihood of hunting adoption relative to their access to other willing mentors and hunt companions.

Content in the Hunting for Sustainability course also appears to be appropriate to the needs of the participants, though there may be additional benefits of building in repetition for some of the technical skills. This could be accomplished in several ways without lengthening the classroom portion of the course. For example, mentors could be asked to spend time reinforcing and leading sessions in scouting, shooting, or assisting with land access outside of the formal course meeting times. Perhaps, a "homework" activity could be added for participants between sessions. Lastly, existing lecture style or instructor-led demonstrations could be adapted to more self-guided learning activities or small group activities that would also facilitate social networking. Lastly, we may also want to consider offering additional training as a single unit module for those wanting more in-depth coverage of a particular subject (e.g., deer processing.). In fact, Warnke has already provided modules in wild game cooking as a way to build and entice interest in Hunting for Sustainability and Learn-to-Hunt programs. Perhaps, there is a market for single evening classes that touch upon some aspects of becoming a hunter, especially for the audience segment that is curious, but not yet committed to the whole process.

The high praise given by interview participants coupled with an impressive rate of license purchasing indicates that the Hunting for Sustainability course—even in its pilot years—has successfully found and reached a target audience with an interest in learning to hunt. The next steps are to export the program to other areas of the state where there are willing cooperators and the potential to reach an audience with a similar demographic profile and motivation orientation. The limiting factor in future success in this approach lies in recruiting and training enough dedicated mentors to service the demand. More research is needed to understand how to reach and motivate enough volunteer participation to meet the demand for programs like Hunting for Sustainability.



Photo: Keith Warnke



Photo: Erika Kachama-Nkoy

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