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# findings

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## Teacher Interest in Teaching about Hunting, Fishing, and Trapping: A Summary of In-depth Discussions

By Susan Cantrell Gilchrist

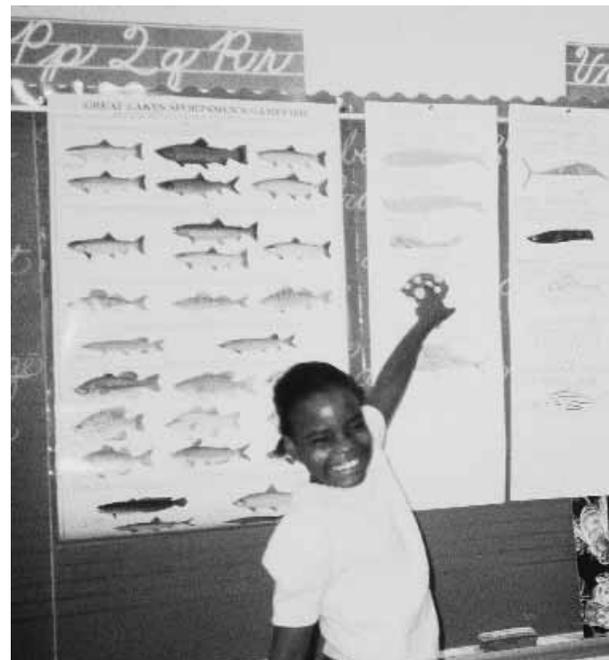
### Introduction

Nationally, participation rates in recreational hunting and fishing declined 11.4% and 3%, respectively, between 1982 and 1995 (Cordell et al. 1995). Cordell et al. (1995) suggested that these declines represent a “natural trend in popularity of activities as society’s tastes change, new opportunities emerge, and fads come and go.” While similar trends have not yet been observed in Wisconsin and participation rates appear to be relatively stable in the state (unpubl. data, Hemken 1998), the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) launched a number of initiatives to ensure the future of hunting, fishing, and trapping. I conducted a series of structured, in-depth discussions with Wisconsin teachers in 1996 to help provide direction for some of these initiatives. The objective was to determine what teachers are willing to do related to hunting, fishing, and trapping, and what teachers would like to see the DNR doing related to these topics in the schools.

### Methods

I conducted structured, in-depth discussions with 10 groups of teachers: six in metropolitan counties and four in non-metropolitan counties. Two discussion groups were held in each county, one with teachers who considered themselves supportive of hunting and one with teachers who considered themselves relatively opposed to hunting. Prior to the discussion groups, an area teacher surveyed educators regarding their attitudes towards hunting and selected discussion participants.

Each group included 4-12 participants. In all, 39 teachers (23 male, 16 female) participated in the 5 groups considered supportive of hunting. In the groups opposed to hunting, 23 teachers (8 males, 15 females)



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participated. Although recruitment efforts focused on grades 4-8, participants taught a variety of grade levels from elementary through middle and high school. Participating teachers taught in self-contained classrooms, as well as in a range of subject areas, including science, social studies, physical education, consumer education, technical education, computers, mathematics, music, and special education. Most participants were classroom teachers, but one was a teaching principal, one a learning coordinator, one a support teacher, one a student teacher, and one a substitute teacher.

Participants discussed 6 questions:

1. In your role as a teacher, what do you already do related to the topics of hunting, fishing, and trapping?
2. What kinds of interest in these topics have you seen among your students?
3. In your role as a teacher, what are you willing to do related to hunting, fishing, or trapping?
4. What do you think would be appropriate for the DNR to do related to hunting, fishing, and trapping in the schools?
5. From your experience as a teacher, how would you expect the principal, other teachers, and parents to react to these activities in your school?
6. What else would you like to tell me on this topic?

## Results and Discussion

Some teachers claimed to be more neutral than supportive or opposed to hunting. Many more supported fishing than either hunting or trapping, and many more opposed trapping than opposed either hunting or fishing. It was easier to recruit participants that were supportive of hunting than it was to recruit teachers opposed to hunting.

**What Teachers Already Do.** Many of the activities teachers in both groups (supportive and opposed to hunting) mentioned that they already do are only remotely related to hunting, fishing, and trapping. Field trips and other outdoor skills were frequently mentioned. Some specific programs, such as *Project WILD* and *Project Learning Tree*, and guest speakers, including a number of DNR staff, were also mentioned. Computerized games like “Oh Deer” and “Oregon Trail” appear to be quite popular. Some teachers participating in the discussion groups already do a lot related to hunting (e.g., teaching hunter safety after school), but these activities occur on an individual basis rather than as part of the school’s curriculum.

Participants were more likely to cover hunting as a controversy than as a skill. Hunting tends to come up in the classroom when the students bring up the topic or when a book they are reading or a controversial issue they are studying relates to it. Generally, teachers may be more comfortable discussing hunting, fishing, and trapping when students initiate the subject, but some will bring up the topic themselves. Trapping, in particular, tends to be discussed as it pertains to history. Discussion of hunting is not limited to science and physical education classes. A music teacher discusses hunting as it relates to animal hides on drums and hunting songs; a consumer education teacher covers cooking wild game.

**What Students are Interested in.** Participants in both groups (supportive of and opposed to hunting) saw student interest in hunting and fishing as a motivator, a reward for students to earn. Teachers generally saw more interest in fishing than hunting, with less interest in trapping. Interest levels in hunting and fishing varied somewhat from place to place, and individual teachers within a group sometimes perceived the level of interest differently from one another. Teachers from metropolitan counties mentioned an expectation that the interests of their students would probably differ from those of the more rural areas, where hunting is more a way of life. Similarly, teachers from the non-metropolitan counties mentioned that student interest in hunting would probably be different in urban areas (i.e. there would be less interest), where violence seems to be more evident.

**What Teachers are Willing to Do.** Teachers are generally willing to use materials that represent a balanced view. Teachers who are opposed to hunting are not willing to do anything that would promote hunting in the schools. Teachers are willing to tell students about hunter safety classes, at least if students ask (such classes are announced over the public address systems in some schools), but many of them do not think hunting, fishing, and trapping skills should be taught in school. Teaching about controversy in school seems acceptable, but these teachers think skills activities should be relegated to after school.

In one metropolitan county group, a participant felt that gun safety should be required for hunters, but that safety courses will not stop intentional shootings. Some teachers will not put a poster on the wall if it depicts a gun. Rather than promoting hunting, these teachers see a need for materials promoting respect for life, responsibility, and ethics.

Generally, teachers admitted some interest in using the usual types of curriculum support materials (e.g., guest speakers, posters, videos). Although no teacher initiated the notion of a children’s magazine, when asked if they would use one, teachers said they would if a teacher activity guide accompanied it, if it was not just propaganda for hunting but addressed broader topics, and if it were free. Participants indicated that they already have access to some magazines, and one teacher said he did not think a magazine would teach kids much.

Teachers generally liked the idea of an Internet-based magazine. Although few had ready access to the World Wide Web, most participants expected access to be available in the near future. Several teachers suggested that the DNR provide projects with data students can work with on the computer. They also felt a



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need for education materials (e.g., a leaflet, a magazine, or the Internet) that explain regulations in readable language that kids can understand.

**What the DNR Should Do.** Participants in half the discussion groups engaged in debate about a curriculum unit. For example, someone suggested an activity guide similar to *Project*

*WILD*, only more directly related to hunting. Mostly, teachers were concerned that there is not enough time to teach one more thing in what they characterized as an already overloaded curriculum. Teachers in both groups (supportive and opposed to hunting) thought it might work if hunting was integrated into other subjects already included in the curriculum, and if both sides of the issues were represented. A number of times teachers in different groups mentioned that any unit should be based on an agenda of respect (caring for the earth and each other). Several teachers mentioned that activities to follow conservation wardens' classroom visits would be helpful. Teacher input should be included in the creation of any curriculum. One overriding problem that was expressed in all groups is an anti-DNR sentiment, the feeling that anything the DNR presents will be biased.

Participants frequently mentioned field trip support as a need. Specifically, they identified funding as a problem for taking field trips. Some suggested the DNR could help by sponsoring field trips and providing guides or by maintaining wildlife areas in population centers to reduce the need for buses.

Another popular suggestion was teacher in-service workshops. The DNR could provide motivational speakers to in-services. Teachers would like the novelty of going outside during an in-service workshop. There was one debate about what kind of credit would be most desirable. Someone suggested offering monthly courses on how to teach about a controversy, such as spearfishing, through the Cooperative Educational Services Agency (CESA) districts. The DNR should be visible with a booth at teachers' convention. It was also suggested that in-service training for DNR staff might help some staff members learn how to talk to children more effectively.

Presentations on careers were mentioned as an appropriate approach for the DNR in at least four discussion

groups. Appearances at middle and high school career days would be a positive thing for the DNR to do in the community. When DNR speakers visit the classroom, they can say what they do and why they do it. Teaching about careers could introduce management tools and outdoor skills in a less controversial manner. At one point, an in-service workshop on careers that would introduce hunting, fishing, and trapping concepts was suggested.

Hunting, fishing, and trapping might be represented as lifelong sports activities. Teachers said that lifelong activities are gaining favor over team sports in physical education. This could be a window for infusing the topic in schools.

Many times participants indicated that teachers need information about what the DNR can offer. Sometimes the things teachers said displayed a lack of awareness about what the DNR is already doing. They asked for resource lists of speakers; field trip sites and guides; parks and maps; kits, tools, and materials available on loan; leaflets on hunter safety classes and regulations; and a bibliography of books depicting hunting in a favorable way. Someone suggested librarians could take responsibility for having a variety of perspectives available to students. Other suggestions came up, including these two: DNR staff could help students with habitat restoration projects or create an interpretive history of hunting, fishing, and trapping in Wisconsin, through story and song.

**The Reactions of Others.** Participating teachers generally thought principals would react favorably to anything they wanted to do educationally, as long as a balanced picture was presented. The main resistance from administrators was likely to be budgetary, if additional expenses were involved.

There was some discussion about requiring parent permission for students to hear a speaker or engage in anything controversial. There was concern that students who are not exposed to hunting through their families may lack understanding about where their food comes from and how we can use much of the animals we kill. This discussion raised debate between teachers who wanted to show students graphic depictions of hunting and trapping and those that feared parental reprisals and opposed such ideas. The support available from parents would probably vary from place to place. Clearly, trapping would garner less support and more antagonism than fishing or hunting would. One participant suggested that the DNR host a family day on hunting and fishing.

## Recommendations

The DNR should be more visible through career education, in-service training, and field trips. The DNR should be more visible with a booth at teachers' conventions and should find ways to make teachers aware of things the agency is already doing.

Materials prepared for schools should:

- be broader based than hunting, fishing, and trapping;
- focus on respect, responsibility, and ethics;
- represent both sides of every issue; and
- include teacher input in their development.

Publications with regulations written at a student level seem to be needed.

As anti-trapping sentiment is common, trapping is best addressed in an historical context, separately from hunting and fishing.

A children's Internet magazine merits consideration; a paper magazine for this audience probably would not be the most effective use of resources. *Note:* since the in-depth discussions were completed, the DNR launched *EEKI*, its environmental education for kids web site [<http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/caer/ce/EEKI/>].

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