

The Mentor Advantage

Written by Walter "Deet" James
Photographed by Russell Graves

Research shows that there is no better way to preserve hunting's future than for experienced hunters to mentor interested newcomers.



Thirty or forty years ago, finding a hunting mentor was like finding sweet tea, hushpuppies and banana pudding at the local barbecue restaurant—the hunting mentor was a staple on the cultural menu of life. Young children watched their older relatives go hunting; when they were deemed ready, the child joined the family hunting party. There was no need to search for a hunting mentor during a time when hunting represented a large part of the fabric of society. Hunting and the outdoors were a youth's rites of passage.

MENTORING AND THE MODERN DISCONNECT

Today we view a different picture. As Hunting Heritage Biologist with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, I have attended youth conservation field days, youth hunts, Becoming an Outdoors-Woman courses and Boy Scouts of America Trailblazer events. I met a great many dedicated and compassionate individuals who sacrifice time and money so our youth can experience nature. Most were hunters. For those who were not, I asked them why. I discovered a few common themes in their answers:

- I never hunted, but have been interested in hunting.
- No one ever hunted in my family.
- None of my friends ever hunted.
- I didn't know anyone who hunted so I never had the chance to start.

Research has indicated that starting hunting at an early age, whether through family members or friends, increases the chance of developing a personal and cultural identity as a hunter. It can also mean the difference between premature desertion or developing a lifelong commitment to hunting.

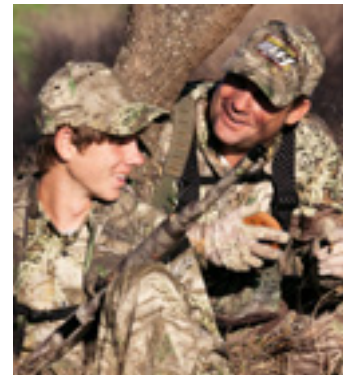
A project by The National Shooting Sports Foundation and The International Hunter Education Association in 2000 provided some insight relative to hunter participation and continuation. Facilitators used a think tank type of approach to develop recommendations for increasing hunting and shooting participation, as well as to understand issues related to hunter recruitment and retention. Part of the project included developing a classification system to comprehend the various stages of hunter adoption or involvement. Although there were eight individual stages discussed, four are important for this discussion. They include 1) awareness, 2) interest, 3) trial and 4) continuation/adoption.

The awareness stage represents a person who knows that hunting exists. Once aware, there is a possibility that the person might become interested in hunting (i.e., interest stage). If that interest goes a step further, a person might move to the next stage and give hunting a try. Finally, once they have experienced hunting, a new hunter can continue the activity (continuation/adoption), desert the activity altogether or fall somewhere in between.

The social support of a hunting mentor can impact all stages of involvement, but it is most critical for the continuation/adoption stage. New hunters who lose the social support of mentors and other hunting companions have a greater chance of deserting than those who retain support. For many people, hunting contains a valued social component that can be as important as the actual hunting itself.

THE VALUE OF THE HUNTING MENTOR

If the social aspect of hunting is so important, can a person become a hunter without the support of other hunters? Nowadays, the Internet provides endless information about hunting. If that's not enough, there are hunting video games



and an array of hunting shows on TV and DVD. Information about hunting can also be found through federal and state wildlife agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private shooting clubs and a variety of electronic social media including blogs, tweets, message boards and chat rooms.

For the independent, self-reliant, do-it-yourselfer, it is indeed possible to become a hunter without the assistance of an experienced mentor. According to research, however, sheer will alone might not suffice.

Responsive Management is an internationally recognized public opinion and attitude survey research firm specializing in natural resource and outdoor recreation issues. In a recent survey of more than 5,000 people — hunters and nonhunters alike — active hunters were asked, “Who first took you hunting?” The majority of active hunters were introduced to hunting by fathers (68 percent), friends (8), grandfathers (7), spouses (6) and uncles (6). Only 2 percent of active hunters first went hunting alone. This research supports the value of the hunting mentor. Once a person becomes an experienced hunter, they sometimes might choose to hunt alone. However, individuals rarely begin hunting on their own.

There are additional advantages for those recruited into hunting by a mentor. For example, my hunting mentor provided me with some of the basics needed to get started. Although my parents purchased my firearm, my uncle provided my license, clothing, ammo, food, transportation and the most important aspect — hands-on experience. For a young person who wants to hunt but comes from a nonhunting family, there is no equipment to borrow and no experience available. Even for the working adult, hunting start-up costs can be a deterrent. Some hunting mentors might be willing to share their equipment with a newcomer. Then, if the new hunter decides to make equipment purchases, the mentor can provide suggestions and recommendations. This way allows a social and material “try before you buy” advantage not afforded to the do-it-yourselfer.

FINDING A HUNTING MENTOR

Electronic information resources can benefit both the hunting mentor and interested nonhunter in locating each other. Many

NGOs have websites advertising their own mentoring programs, while still others promote various youth and family outdoor events and hunting opportunities. Initiation into these events often can be accomplished through a simple registration form and/or the cost of membership in some cases.

Even if someone is not seeking a hunting mentor initially, the opportunity to meet and talk with people who hunt can help provide knowledge and insight about becoming a hunter. The main advantage to these organizations and events is that they provide the social camaraderie and club atmosphere by offering places to go, a support base of mentors, and topics of mutual interest to discuss.

Federal and state agencies are different in that they are primarily resource-based entities with the ability to connect people to resources. However, they do not have the capacity to provide the social component that shooting clubs and NGOs offer. The one exception is through hunter education. Hunter education is not only a mandatory prerequisite to hunting, it provides an opportunity to network with existing hunters. Many dedicated hunters volunteer as hunter education instructors, and all have the ability to offer a wealth of information and guidance to the beginner. Signing up for a free hunter education course is a great way to get started.

Another option for individuals seeking hunting information is to participate in some of the various annual outdoor conservation events mentioned earlier. These are great ways to network with hunters, and it doesn't necessarily cost anything to get involved.

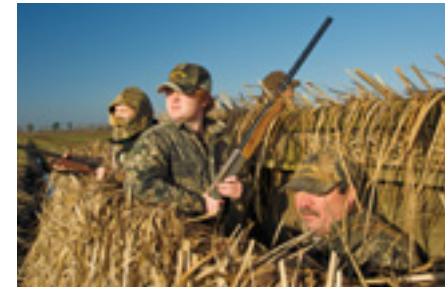
BECOMING A HUNTING MENTOR

For those interested in becoming a mentor, sharing the hunting tradition with someone new can be a rewarding experience. Mentoring provides an opportunity to preserve the legacy for future generations. Moreover, hunting provides so many unique memories worthy of sharing that not doing so seems selfish by comparison. Finding out what motivates hunters to become mentors is critical if we are going to address the slow demise of newcomers into hunting.

Try to imagine a day when hunting would cease to exist, when hunter numbers became so small that society decided that hunting doesn't matter anymore. Funding for wildlife



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People of all backgrounds, ages and abilities are potential hunters. The common thread that runs through the activities pictured here is experienced hunters spending time with newcomers, whether in the field, on the shooting range, in a hunter education class, at a hunt club, or becoming familiar with hunting gear such as decoys.

management and conservation would diminish, and hunters would no longer have a vote because we allowed our numbers to dwindle. The hunter's voice would be silenced by attrition. The question becomes, What really motivates an individual to become a hunting mentor?

In 2008, Responsive Management asked active hunters, "Why did you take someone hunting?" Answers were as follows:

- (44%) Showed interest in learning the sport / asked me to take him or her.
- (16%) Wanted to share my experience and /or enjoyment of the sport.
- (11%) For fun, enjoyment and/or recreation.
- (11%) To introduce the sport /to encourage interest in the sport.
- (9%) Family tradition/want to continue hunting heritage.
- (5%) It is important to learn gun safety, self defense, and/or how to shoot.
- (4%) Companionship.

Based on this survey, the greatest motivation for mentoring was the fact that someone showed an interest in the activity. Many lifelong hunters often emphasize "preserving the heritage" for future generations as a motivating factor for getting involved as a mentor. However, it also requires the interest and request by the newcomer to complete the process. For someone interested in hunting for the first time, this research is welcoming and suggests that a valuable resource is there for the asking.

Mentoring has become much more of a challenge in our modern world of nature disconnection. Outdoor interest in young people has been all but phased out in a world of computers, iPods and video games. If our next generation of hunters is truly disconnected from nature, and therefore hunting, perhaps we need to reconnect them. In his book "The Hunter: Developmental Stages and Ethics," Bob Norton provides some interesting insight into this challenge: "Before we put kids in the duck marsh or the tree stand, we need to get them into the woods, teach them about nature, let them explore and use their own imaginations," and further,

"We need to spend more time with them in the outdoors, one on one, answer their questions, and teach them to respect wild animals and their habitats."

Although the excitement and enjoyment of the hunt itself may be the ultimate goal for some, we may be lacking in teaching the prerequisites necessary for developing a lifelong hunter. This way, the interest, respect and appreciation for the outdoors develops first.

TRY TO IMAGINE A DAY WHEN HUNTING WOULD CEASE TO EXIST, WHEN HUNTER NUMBERS BECAME SO SMALL THAT SOCIETY DECIDED THAT HUNTING DOESN'T MATTER ANY MORE. FUNDING FOR WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION WOULD DIMINISH, AND HUNTERS WOULD NO LONGER HAVE A VOTE BECAUSE WE ALLOWED OUR NUMBERS TO DWINDLE. THE HUNTER'S VOICE WOULD BE SILENCED BY ATTRITION.

MENTORING IS A LEARNING PROCESS

Going hunting yourself is one thing — teaching someone new about hunting is another. Looking back, I don't remember a great deal of instruction from my hunting mentor. That's not to say it didn't happen. I do vaguely remember my first gun-deer hunt, though. My Uncle Bill and I walked into the predawn darkness on a late November morning in 1972. I was carrying Bill's 12 gauge pump shotgun. I was on stand well before first light. Uncle Bill placed me next to a tree, told me to be quiet, not to move, and said he would be close by "just in case." He then moved about 20 yards away from me, stood next to a tree, and became silent.

Not long after first light, a young spike buck walked slowly behind me. I froze. I was disappointed that I had lost an opportunity at taking a legal buck on the first day of the season. Uncle Bill never made a big deal of it. We left the woods around noon for lunch and recounted the "missed deer" story over and over that day. Uncle Bill knew there would be other chances, and deep down, so did I.

The point is that the new hunter is not only clueless as to the entire hunting experience, but also to the mix of emotions that occur at that first opportunity to take a game animal. Keeping a hunting trip relaxed, and expectations to a minimum, is important when introducing someone to hunting.

As an avid hunter, I do not consider my hunts casual. I take my hunting very seriously and do not leave my hunting area until I've harvested game or shooting light has passed. I've known many like-minded hunters. Not even severe weather, insects, lack of food and water, or the threat of repercussions from family members can remove some of us from our woodland sanctuary until it's time.

If, however, we decide to provide the gift of mentoring to some interested newcomer, it might be a good idea to tone it down a bit, at least for the first few outings. The new hunter is likely unprepared for a Jeremiah Johnson-type "mountain man" adventure and may never hunt again

if subjected to one. Focus on the new hunter's needs for the time being rather than your own. Altering personal hunting methods temporarily could mean the difference between an enjoyable outing versus a nightmarish one-time experience.

IT'S PERSONAL

All dedicated hunters, regardless of generation or age, have come to a crossroads which we cannot afford to ignore. Each year, hunters represent a smaller proportion of the population overall. Our youth will not automatically reconnect with nature, nor will our society revert back to the good old days of hunting. Times have changed.

Making connections with people takes time and effort. No silver bullet is necessary — we already have what we need. For those thinking about mentoring someone, take a moment and think back to one of your best frosty fall mornings as you watched the sun rise, the taking of a fine game animal after weeks or months of preparation, or the relaxed feeling after a hard day's hunt while you eagerly anticipated the next. Become a hunting mentor this season, because the future of hunting is personal. ↻

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ADVICE FOR MENTORS

Mentoring a new hunter can be accomplished by simply inviting someone new to hunting on your next outing. Keep the following in mind:

Focus on the new hunter's needs first: It's easy for the passionate hunter to become engrossed in the seriousness of the hunt. Relax and try to remember your first hunt and the overwhelming newness of it all. Slow down and spend time explaining and sharing rather than expecting. Stay together for the first few outings to provide on-the-spot guidance.

Be safe: Discuss and practice safe gun handling and tree stand safety prior to the hunt and routinely throughout.

Limit expectations: It is easy to take for granted the knowledge and experience accumulated over many years. Understand that the new hunter has not had that privilege of time and experience.

Easy does it: You may be able to walk for miles in rugged terrain with a backpack all day long. Trying to impose that method on a new hunter, youth or adult, may discourage them from ever going again. Instead, make the initial outings interesting, enjoyable, educational and relaxed.

Fits and starts: Be sure the new hunter has the clothing and the necessary hunting equipment to get them started. Whether in warm or cold temperatures, make sure the new hunter remains comfortable. Being considerate of the new hunter's comfort can make the outing more enjoyable and rewarding.

Full tank: Breakfast is the proper start to any day afield, and be sure the new hunter has plenty of snacks and water — especially young hunters.

ADVICE FOR THOSE BEING MENTORED

For a nonhunter interested in hunting, the best way to find a mentor is to begin meeting hunters. Ask a friend or family member who hunts, visit a local hunting or shooting club, or attend a free hunter education course. According to research, hunters tend to respond willingly to those interested in learning their passion. If you do find someone willing to mentor you, keep these things in mind:

Be prepared: Although becoming a new hunter can be somewhat overwhelming, a little research into the activity prior to the first outing is recommended. Doing your homework prior to a hunting or shooting activity displays your level of interest and may be greatly appreciated by the mentor. Much can be discovered about hunting at www.ncwildlife.org.

Be safe: A newcomer must understand basic firearm and tree stand safety, the importance of hunting regulations and the need to identify the target before shooting. Sign up for a free hunter education course at www.ncwildlife.org

Be on time: Hunting involves a distinct timeline, and although not always critical, should be adhered to. Avoid making your mentor wait for you.

Be polite: Show your hunting mentor your interest by listening, learning and remaining respectful. It could mean the difference between gaining a new hunting companion and a one-time outing.

Be appreciative: Mentoring is the ultimate outdoor gift. Showing appreciation for it is welcomed. If you can afford it, offer to buy a meal or gasoline. Doing so is a good way to say thanks to the mentor.

To access a list of shooting organizations, visit www.ncwildlife.org.

- Click on the "Hunting" link on the left side of the screen.
- Scroll down the hunting page to "Other" in the center column.
- Click on Shooting Range Opportunities in NC (Public and Private).

