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# American hunter is a vanishing breed

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By **Oren Dorell, USA TODAY**



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Enlarge By Joey McLeister, The Star Tribune

Nicholas Flesland and Christy Hurley watch for geese from their blind near Lino Lakes, Minn. Fewer recreational hunters in the U.S. could mean a drain on the millions of dollars the sport fetches for U.S. conservation efforts.

States that rely on tens of millions of dollars in hunting license fees annually to pay for environmental conservation are trying to boost a population they had never thought of protecting: the endangered American hunter.

The number of hunters has slid from a peak of 19.1 million in 1975 to 12.5 million last year, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

With that drop has come worries that states won't be able to pay for the rising costs of conservation efforts and acquisition of open space.

States generated \$724 million last year through hunting licenses and fees for wildlife management and conservation; taxes on guns and ammunition added another \$267 million, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"Sportsmen pay the bills, especially east of the Mississippi," says Rob Sexton, vice president for government affairs at the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance, a hunters advocacy group in Columbus, Ohio. "A vast majority of the public land where people go for walks, wildlife viewing or mountain biking, the vast majority is bought by sportsmen."

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To stem the loss, states have been altering hunting laws to get people into the woods.

Since 2004, 18 states have changed their laws to loosen restrictions on when children can hunt with parents, and to allow novice adult hunters to try hunting without a license, Sexton says. The effort has shown signs of working, Sexton says: The states have seen an additional 35,000 people apply for hunting licenses since 2004.

The decrease in hunters appears to be a result of modern living, says Nicholas Throckmorton, Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman. He says fewer Americans hunt because they are spending more time on work and organized sports for their children. Most Americans now live farther from wildlife areas than in the past, says Throckmorton, whose agency conducts a national survey of Americans' outdoor activities every five years.

Officials are changing state laws because they are "trying to tear down the barrier for recruitment of new hunters," Throckmorton says.

Mark Damian Duda, executive director of Responsive Management, a research firm focusing on outdoor recreation, says the modest increase in the hunter population has been good news. He says the vanishing hunters are "a long-term concern."

"At some point, there's going to be less dollars if current trends continue," Duda says. "Is it a good thing for fewer and fewer people to be funding all wildlife conservation ... protecting national resources enjoyed by 97% of the people?"

Among steps being taken:

•**Kentucky** allows new hunters to hunt for a year with a legal hunter before taking a hunter-safety course. Since July, 1,159 new permits have been issued.

•**Oregon** has a Mentored Youth Hunter Program that allows unlicensed children ages 9 to 13 to receive one-on-one hunting experience and training.

•**Arizona** implemented an online hunter-safety course that can be completed in three hours, instead of the standard 16. Big game, such as deer, are reserved for hunters 10 and up.

Thad Musser, 33, who bought a deer-hunting bow at B&B Archery Pro Shop in Manassas, Va., last week,

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says changing the hunting age in Virginia, now 12, would not lure more hunters; they'd merely start younger. His 4-year-old nephew wants to hunt now and will still want to in seven years, he says.

Larry Ralph, 16, of Gainesville, Va., who started hunting at 13, says it was the rite of passage — his father "passed on the 30-30 (rifle) to me" — that spurred his interest. "I guess the younger the better."

More hunters also help states save money on certain expenditures, such as those linked to damage by foragers that are too plentiful, such as the Canada goose and whitetail deer.

"Rather than paying professional hunters to cull the herd, sportsmen would be happy to pay a fee to do it themselves," Sexton says.

Some say the focus on hunter retention is not the way to go.

"The number of people who hunt has declined in recent decades, and the number of people who enjoy wildlife in other ways, like wildlife watching or bird-watching, continues to expand," says Michael Markarian, executive vice president of the Humane Society of the United States. "Efforts to reverse these trends are futile."

Rachel Brittin, spokeswoman for the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies, says hunters are a great source of revenue, but they can't do it alone.

U.S. wildlife is threatened by more issues than ever: increasing urbanization, invasive species, climate change and new diseases. States receive \$1.5 billion a year but need an additional \$1 billion annually to accomplish goals, Brittin says.

Efforts to raise enough elsewhere have failed, says Dave Chadwick of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

Lawmakers came up with a plan to buy land with \$350 million a year in offshore oil and gas revenue, he says. Environmental groups squawked about taking money from the oil and gas industry, and property rights advocates balked at the land acquisitions, Chadwick says. The effort died in 2000.

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**jcjlbm** wrote: 12m ago

I live and hunt in south east Texas and I can tell you what is stopping a lot of fixed income people from hunting, It is the cost of a lease. The Timber companies that own and lease most of the land in south east Texas have priced us out of hunting there land. The land that is open to the public, is not safe to hunt , to crowded. you take your life in your own hands if you do. so why buy a licence?

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**A\_Mach74** wrote: 10h 34m ago

There are many reasons that the hunter is "endangered" ... The states are making it harder and more expensive to get permits, (they run lotteries for the ability to hunt in some areas) which means fewer hunters are willing to take the effort. But this is more than a revenue problem for the states.

As many of you point out, the deer populations are exploding in many areas in the east. Their natural predators (wolves) have been eliminated so their populations are expanding way beyond natural levels. That explosion is actually contributing to deforestation. The deer are eating the young trees faster than they come up. The best thing we can do to maintain the ecosystem is to allow, and encourage, hunting to continue.

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**BernerInd** wrote: 10h 40m ago

There is another problem.

Not all convicted felons are bad &/or dangerous people. I for one, catch & release. I hunted for years to help thin out the herds. I raised my sons the if they kill it they eat it! I love animals, I love nature. I get high looking at a sun rise, a sun set, a deer running across a field, not with drugs.

I made a mistake, I had to put food on my table for my children, I need shoes for their feet so they could to school.

I lost my 2nd amendment rights, so I can no longer hunt. I am not the only one that is not a BAD person, nor am I a violent man. I have never hurt any one person. I served my country to defend our rights. It has been 26 years & I have not even received a parking ticket. This might be another reason that the numbers have declined, because there are more convicted felons tha ever before in our history, but we are all not bad guys!

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**usedgms** wrote: 10h 52m ago

We could raise driver's license fees. And use the cars and trucks to kill kill kill more annoying deer. Everyone else is stealing from the transportation fund. Send some back to the DNR

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**Treyplus20** wrote: 13h 24m ago

Hunting is an American tradition and, contrary to what the 'environmentalist' say most (99.9%) of hunters are out to enjoy the thrill of the hunt but are also careful to follow the rules and not abuse the environment. It's stupid to say that hunters kill everything that they see because if we did, there wouldn't be anything to hunt after a few years. The environmental movement stems from people who don't truly understand nature...death is a part of nature. If I don't kill that deer, another animal will...stop humanizing wildlife.

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**david.farrell** wrote: 14h 24m ago

Because the current main source of funding for environmental work in the U.S., is hunters, we are dependent on them. It has been this way since the Pittman-Robertson act in the 1930's (instituted by hunter conservation groups such as Ducks Unlimited and by Firearms manufactures Remington, Winchester) which set an 11% tax on all things hunting for the purpose of conservation. A second coalition of conservation groups was formed in the 1990's and lobbied congress to expand the tax to include camping equipment, bird-watchers binoculars, canoes and other outdoor gear. However, it didn't make it through Congress, and so with a conservation system relying on a dwindling population. As a result, hunters like myself feel the pressure of rising license costs and wildlife watchers complain that most federal funding is spent on hunters. Hunters aren't the only ones who enjoy the outdoors, but thanks to congress, they are the few who pay for it.

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**Duane** wrote: 15h 45m ago

mylynn1377, well put. I couldn't have said it better myself.

MissLibrarian, increasing park fees would only help with part of the problem. Overpopulation of deer eat natural vegetation and flowers even to the point of no recovery of some species. In addition, they eat crops and cause traffic accidents and even sometimes death to drivers from those accidents. And then you have death by starvation for many of the deer while they are causing all the other problems.

I am sorry to disappoint you, but 'kill kill kill' is the only 'answer answer answer' that works. Every other method that has been tried has 'failed failed failed'.

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**truckman** wrote: 16h 13m ago

Urban sprawl has taken many good area's, now it takes about an hour to drive to a decent place to hunt.

You won't find more people concerned about the environment than the people who actually touch the dirt or water.

We pay plenty of extra taxes and license fee's.

Going hunting doesn't mean shooting everything that moves or even killing the game your after. Sometimes the thrill of the chase is enough and I call it a day without shooting.

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**irockOK** wrote: 17h 19m ago

MissLibrarian wrote: 2h 7m ago

If they want to raise more money they should raise park entry fees, not encourage people to go out and kill, kill, kill.

Raise the price of park passes? Gee's lady , You have not been to one lately apparently. The price allready keeps me away! Allthough the zoo would be an awesome hunt.....

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**irockOK** wrote: 17h 26m ago

Along with the new tax's on gun's and ammunition comes the price of gas. Hunting is not a cheap sport and every pound of meat I have collected I could have bought from the store cheaper. But because of my 14 yr old son who just traded his PS3 for a new compound bow this is the best time of the year. SO, ahunting we will go. I hope it fairs him well.

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