



Attitudes towards recreational hunting: A quantitative survey of the general public in Denmark



Christian Gamborg^{a,*}, Frank Søndergaard Jensen^b

^a Department of Food and Resource Economics, University of Copenhagen, Rolighedsvej 25, 1958 Frederiksberg C, Denmark

^b Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Distanced
Europe
Hunting attitudes
Urbanized
Wildlife values

ABSTRACT

What is the attitude of the general public towards hunting? As a recreational activity, hunting stands apart from other forms of outdoor recreation like birdwatching in that it involves the pursuit and killing of wild animals. Today, it is in a tight spot. It has been criticized from animal ethics points of view, but it has also been commended as an activity which allows us to take responsibility for procuring our own food. The paper reports a national survey of the general public using an Internet-based questionnaire sent to a representative sample of the Danish public in 2012 ($n=1001$). Attitudes towards recreational hunting among the adult general public were examined in relation to gender, age, education, income and residence, association with hunters, hunting conditions, and wildlife value orientations. 43% of the general public had a positive attitude, 31% were indifferent, and 26% had a negative attitude to recreational hunting. Older respondents and rural residents had more positive attitudes towards hunting than younger and urban residents. Some of the conditions under which hunting occurs affected attitudes negatively, especially the hunting of farm-reared and released game birds, hunting organized as a group hunt, and single day leases of hunting grounds. Respondents with a “mutualist” wildlife value orientation had the most negative attitude towards hunting (39%), “distanced” respondents were the most indifferent (44%), and “utilitarians” were the most positive (61%). Assessing levels of public support for recreational hunting is important if we are to gauge whether hunting as a recreational and socio-cultural activity can be sustained. A rethink of hunting as part of the leisure industry should be considered, because the least positive attitudes were found in relation to the commercial aspect of hunting and this could result in tighter regulation with further effects on management practices.

Management Implications: The public opinions and public preferences concerning recreational hunting are complex. However, this study revealed some factors relevant for regulatory and managerial development in relation to outdoor recreation: age (younger respondents were least supportive of hunting), urbanisation (living in an urban environment enhanced negative attitudes), compatibility of recreational hunting with other outdoor leisure activities.

1. Introduction

Outdoor recreation is popular, varied, and generally encouraged for the benefits it seems to bring to its participants (e.g. Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991; Pigram & Jenkins, 2006; Pröbstl, Elands, & Wirth, 2009; Russell et al., 2013). But, to paraphrase George Orwell's allegorical and dystopian novel *Animal Farm*, all outdoor recreational activities are equal, but some are more equal than others. Clearly, some open-air recreational activities attract more participants than others, and some enjoy higher levels of approval among non-participants than others. In many activities there is a real potential for conflict with other users of the outdoors, and this conflict may have a significant negative

impact – for example, in discouraging or preventing participation (Schneider & Wynveen, 2015). Examples of the more loathed outdoor recreational activities – depending on region – include in the US snowmobiling, and horseback riding (Cordell, 2012), or mountain biking, or simply walking the dog without a leash in a European setting (Lupp et al., 2016). However, some outdoor recreational activities seem to attract disapproval for reasons other than the fact (or alleged fact) that they prevent other recreational activities from being pursued in the same location. A prominent example is hunting for sport, also known as recreational hunting. Hunting stands apart from other outdoor recreational activities, such as birdwatching and mushroom picking, in that it involves the pursuit, and often the killing,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: chg@ifro.ku.dk (C. Gamborg).

of wild animals. Moreover, while hunting used once to be a local activity, undertaken largely for subsistence purposes, it has increasingly become integrated into the leisure industry (Øian & Skogen, 2016).

Recreational hunting is widespread on most continents, and in particular in North America, Africa, Australia and Europe (Sharp & Wollscheid, 2009). There are more than 7 million registered hunters in Europe, but European hunting participation rates are quite variable (FACE, 2010). They range through 0.15% in the Netherlands, 0.4% in Germany, 1.3% in the UK, 2.4% in Spain and about 3% of the population in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, to 8.5% in Ireland. In other regions of the world, participation is relatively higher, with about 5% in Canada and the USA – including variation between 2% in the Pacific States and 12% in West North Central States of the USA – and approximately the same rate, 5%, in Australia and New Zealand (Finch, Murray, Hoy, & Baxter, 2014; Woods & Kerr, 2010). The extent of participation in recreational hunting is important because it helps us to gauge its economic contribution (e.g. PACEC, 2014), as recreational hunting, especially in Europe and North America, is believed to be a substantial source of funding for conservation (Hansen, Peterson, & Jensen, 2012) (although this has been questioned (Hall, 2012)), and because it tells something about the culture and sociology of hunting, adding perspective to shifting practices and perceptions (Grandy, Stallman, & Macdonald, 2003). Altogether the statistics present a picture of a recreational activity in reasonably high demand.

However, both as a subsistence activity in which food is obtained for survival and as a commercial pursuit in which animal products are procured for sale or barter, hunting is controversial (Dickson, 2009; Hutton, Adams, & Dickson, 2009; Shaw, 1973). For many years recreational hunting, as a so-called blood sport, has been subjected to increasingly loud accusations of animal cruelty. Its critics complain that animals are wounded during hunting, or, more fundamentally, that hunting violates what some see as a fundamental animal right: the right to live (Gibson, 2014; Morris, 2014). Hunting has created continuing controversies, polarising people in specific geographic locations (as has happened with the spring bear hunt in Colorado), in regions, and even countrywide (as happened in the UK over foxhunting) (Van de Pitte, 2003). However, a new trend may be “coming to the rescue” of recreational hunting. This trend promotes the idea of taking responsibility for procuring your own food – facing the animal which ends up on your plate – or at least considering the ethical issues raised by livestock production (McEachern & Schröder, 2002). Here, recreational hunting, when it involves hunting for meat, is claimed to be preferable to intensive livestock production (Thulin, Malmsten, & Ericsson, 2015). In these circumstances it will come as no surprise that members of the general public who do not hunt are confused, and ask: Is recreational hunting a “good” or a “bad” thing?

Studies of attitudes towards hunting fall into two categories: philosophical accounts and data-based research. Early examples of the more philosophical treatments are Klein (1973) and Peterle (1977), and more recently McLeod (2007) and Cohen (2014) have also published work of this sort. The first empirical analyses also appeared in the 1970s (Applegate, 1973; Kellert, 1978; Linder, Wagner, Dimit, & Dahlgren, 1974; Shaw, 1975), persisted through the 1980s (Applegate, 1984; Kellert & Berry, 1987; Kellert, 1980, 1988) and 1990s (e.g. Donnelly & Vaske, 1995; Heberlein & Willebrand, 1998), and proliferated further in the 2000s (Campbell & Mackay, 2003; Daigle, Hrubes, & Ajzen, 2002; Ericsson & Heberlein, 2002; Heberlein & Ericsson, 2005; Ljung, Riley, Heberlein, & Ericsson, 2012; Whittaker et al., 2001). The studies typically focus on a species (e.g. duck hunting) and/or a region (e.g. deer hunting in New Jersey), and they are mainly quantitative. Several of the North American studies have examined factors which are thought to influence, predict, or at least correlate with attitudes towards hunting. Commonly used variables are socio-demographic ones, such as age, gender and area of residence, but factors such as the purpose of hunting feature in several

studies as well. Interestingly, as far as we can determine few European studies of this kind have been undertaken (Ljung et al., 2012). Some of those which have been published (focusing, for example, on attitudes in the UK) were conducted in response to public concerns about specific kinds of hunting, such as mounted foxhunting (Grandy et al., 2003).

The assessment of public support is important if we are to understand whether hunting as a recreational and socio-cultural activity can be sustained, and at what level (Minnis, 1998). In the present study of attitudes among the Danish public, besides gauging overall attitudes towards hunting, we include a number of socio-demographic variables in order to get an idea of how changes in socio-demographic composition, e.g. age composition of the population or in changes in residence – such as more urbanites, could affect attitudes towards hunting. Attitudes which in turn might have ramifications for policy and further effects on management of this particular type of outdoor recreation which is special in that it e.g. often provides the land owner with an additional income, and can limit the access for other user groups. Following studies such as Ljung et al. (2012), we also include the effect of closeness of association with hunters as (positive) personal relationships could lead to more positive attitudes towards hunting. However, to ensure that we make a genuine contribution to the growing literature on these factors, we specifically investigate the relationship between attitudes and the way the hunting is carried out. Moreover, we use the wildlife value orientation framework developed by Fulton, Manfredo, and Lipscomb (1996) in the version of Teel, Dayer, Manfredo, and Bright (2005) to explore further attitudinal correlations. Denmark is of topical interest, since, with the number of recreational hunters rising over the last ten years, it has experienced a surge in hunter participation. At the same time, it is a highly urbanized society in Northern Europe in which there are public concerns about animal welfare, land use and livestock production methods – all in relation to food provenance. On the other hand, Danes are keen on outdoor recreation; approximately 90% of the adult population participate in some form of it (Jensen & Koch, 2004; Jensen, 2014).

1.1. Research questions and hypotheses

We began with five research questions, and subsequently developed eight specific hypotheses to test in relation to attitudes towards hunting as an outdoor recreational activity. “Outdoor recreation” is a fairly broad term describing a specific type of leisure activity. Here we shall use the term to refer to voluntary participation in free-time activities in an open-air setting involving the interaction of people with the natural environment (Plumber, 2009). The label “outdoor recreation” typically indicates that people participate at their own risk and with some kind of self-reward, such as pleasure or excitement (Parnabas, Mea, Parnabas, Parnabas, & Abdullah, 2016). As such, recreational hunting is a form of outdoor recreation. “Hunting” is used in this article to refer to sports which involve the pursuit, and probably the killing, of wild animals (Sharp & Wollscheid, 2009). Where we refer simply to “hunting” we mean recreational hunting.

The five questions we asked were as follows. (1) *What is the attitude of the public to recreational hunting?* (2) *How does this attitude vary with the socio-demographic factors of age, gender, education, income, area of residence?* In connection with these questions we introduced five hypotheses based on previous literature, as summarized in, and used by Ljung, Riley, and Ericsson (2015), to get information on how attitudes towards hunting might be affected by (changes in) socio-demographics, such as gender (cf. Kellert & Berry, 1987). It should be noted that although income and level of education often would be correlated there are instances where this is not the case, and hence the separate effects of each is measured:

H1 Age: Older age groups will have a more positive attitude towards hunting than younger age groups.

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