



Access to public resources on private property: Resident hunter perceptions of the commercialization of wildlife in Montana



Stephen L. Eliason

Professor of Sociology, Department of Social Sciences and Cultural Studies 1500 University Drive Montana State University Billings, Billings, MT 59101, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Access
Hunters
Perceptions
Private property
Public trust
Wildlife

ABSTRACT

The management of public wildlife resources on private property presents unique challenges for state wildlife agencies. Some private landowners in Montana have attempted to capitalize on the public wildlife found on their land by leasing the property to outfitters for the exclusive use of their paying clientele. This practice has created a rift between landowners and outfitters versus public hunters. This exploratory study examines hunter perceptions of the commercialization of wildlife in a western state, and the impact they believe it is having on the hunting experience. Qualitative data were obtained from a mail survey of Montana resident elk hunters. Analysis revealed that hunters are concerned about a perceived decline in hunting opportunities on private land that is occurring, at least in part, as a result of the commercialization of wildlife in the state. The findings enhance our understanding of hunting issues on private property in modern society.

Management implications::

- The study indicates that hunting is an important recreational activity for resident hunters in Montana.
- Wildlife is a public trust resource in the United States that is found on both public and private land.
- Hunters are concerned about the commercialization of wildlife in Montana and believe it contributes to less access to private land for hunting.
- Access to public wildlife resources on inaccessible state land is an important issue to hunters.

1. Introduction

Given social change associated with changing land ownership patterns and land management practices in Montana, there is a need to develop an understanding of hunter attitudes and concerns regarding access to public wildlife resources on private property. This issue is important because declining public access to hunting opportunities on private land could contribute to hunter desertion. Gude, Cunningham, Herbert, and Baumeister (2012, p. 472) stated “Declining hunter participation in Montana could have cultural, political, economic, and wildlife management and conservation implications.” The objective of the present study was to identify and describe perceptions of resident hunters toward hunting and the commercialization of wildlife in Montana, and to generate an understanding of how the loss of public access to private property may impact the hunting experience.

1.1. Hunting in contemporary society

Despite the fact that the number of hunters has been on the decline for some time (Heberlein, 1991; Kendall, Guynn, Straka, & Yarow, 2013; Larson, Stedman, Decker, Siemer, & Baumer, 2014;

Montgomery & Blalock, 2010; Robison & Ridenour, 2012; Ryan & Shaw, 2011; Schulz, Millspaugh, Zekor, & Washburn, 2003; Stedman, Bhandari, Luloff, Diefenbach, & Finley, 2008; Winkler & Warnke, 2013), millions of individuals continue to participate in hunting in rural areas of the United States (Boglioli, 2009; Bronner, 2008; Dizard, 2003; Stedman & Heberlein, 2001; U.S. Department of the Interior, 2006a).

Indeed, recreational hunting is a long-standing cultural tradition that persists in modern society as a popular pastime and form of outdoor recreation (Arnett & Southwick, 2015; Boglioli, 2009; Dizard, 2003; Eliason, 2008). Given the diversity and abundance of wildlife resources that exist across the nation's geographical areas and landscapes, a variety of hunting opportunities can be found on private property and public land in the U.S.

Over the course of U.S. history, hunters have demonstrated that they are flexible and able to adapt to changing conditions. While the hunting heritage has been resilient and persisted over time, many areas of the U.S. are experiencing dramatic change with respect to land use that is affecting individual hunters and the hunting experience, and which has the potential to contribute to serious declines in the hunting population. One of the formidable obstacles hunters are encountering

E-mail address: seliason@msubillings.edu.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2016.09.003>

Received 12 January 2016; Received in revised form 29 August 2016; Accepted 9 September 2016
2213-0780/ © 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

at the present time is that of diminishing places to carry out their hunting activities. A couple of factors are contributing to this trend.

First, a growing population and increasing urbanization in society has resulted in land being developed at a rapid rate (Schulz et al., 2003). In addition to the loss of wildlife habitat, development results in fewer places for individuals to hunt, and with increasing urbanization many municipalities are prohibiting hunting altogether or placing weapon restrictions on hunting within city limits.

Second, much of the privately owned land in the U.S. provides valuable habitat for wildlife species (Freyfogle & Goble, 2009), but these places are becoming inaccessible to the majority of hunters as landowners increasingly restrict access to their property and as state governments create laws that make it difficult for hunters to access these lands (Sigmon, 2004). Because of the volume of land in private ownership, the loss of public access to private property is a significant issue for the viability of recreational hunting in the U.S. The loss of access to these areas is occurring as landowners exclude the public for a variety of reasons including damage/vandalism, safety concerns for people and livestock, and the commercialization of hunting opportunities on private land (Eliason, 2000, 2012a; Posewitz, 1999, Posewitz, 2004; Swenson, 1983; Swenson & Knight, 1998; Swenson & Knight, 2001).

Given the extent of wildlife that is found on private land, the loss of public access to these lands for hunting is a management concern in modern society both nationally and internationally (Barclay & Donnermeyer, 2012; Brown & Messmer, 2009; Öian & Skogen, 2016). While public land can be found throughout much of the country, especially in the western U. S., uneven hunter distribution on private versus public land can lead to undesirable consequences for hunters and wildlife alike. If hunters cannot access private land, they will often focus their efforts on public land which then becomes crowded and overhunted, thus contributing to a lower quality hunting experience. Agencies that manage wildlife often find it difficult to manage wildlife on private lands that have little or no public hunting access, and wildlife populations can become excessive in this type of situation.

1.2. The public trust doctrine and private land ownership

In the U.S. wildlife is not a privately owned resource; instead, it is held in a public trust and managed by the state for the benefit of citizens (Blumm & Paulsen, 2013; Blumm & Wood, 2013; Decker et al., 2014, 2015; Freyfogle & Goble, 2009; Jacobson, Organ, Decker, Batcheller, & Carpenter, 2010; Posewitz, 1999, 2004; Smith, 2011). The guiding principles upon which wildlife is managed are collectively known as the North American Model of Wildlife Management (Heffelfinger, Geist, & Wishart, 2013; Mahoney & Jackson, 2013; Mahoney, Vahldiek, & Soulliere, 2015; Organ, Mahoney, & Geist, 2010). This conservation model has allowed wildlife to flourish in the U.S. (Posewitz, 1999, 2004). Inspired by democratic ideals, a fundamental part of this model is that anyone can participate in hunting regardless of social class (Posewitz, 1999, 2004). This model promotes equality with respect to access to wildlife resources.

It has been noted that in the U.S., one of the problems that has emerged with respect to conservation is that wildlife is managed in a socialist tradition, while the private sector of U.S. society operates under the principles of market capitalism (Condy, 2008). This conflict is especially pronounced on private land, where public access to wildlife resources is regulated and controlled by landowners.

1.3. Wildlife and hunting in Montana

Nowhere are the challenges of wildlife management of public wildlife resources on private land more evident than in Montana, a western state that contains a vast amount of wildlife and where over one-half of the property (59%) is privately owned (Montana's Official State Website, 2010). Big game hunting is a popular recreational

activity in the state (Gude et al., 2012; Schorr, Lukacs, & Gude, 2014; U.S. Department of the Interior, 2006b) and wildlife management is important politically and culturally (Bidwell, 2010; Brownell, 1987; Eliason, 2008; Kelley, 2001; Nesheim, 2012; Scarce, 1998, 2005; Shanahan, McBeth, Tigert, & Hathaway, 2010).

Montana has witnessed an influx of newcomers and changes in land ownership that have contributed to extensive social and cultural change in the state (Hines, 2007; Robbins, Meehan, Gosnell, & Gilbertz, 2009). These social and cultural changes have affected access to and use of wildlife resources in the state.

In recent decades there has been a clash between landowners, outfitters, and sportspersons over access to wildlife on privately owned land (Eliason, 2012a; Robbins & Luginbuhl, 2005; Swenson, 1983; Swenson & Knight, 1998, 2001). The forces of capitalism have fostered a climate in which publicly owned wildlife resources have been transformed into valuable economic commodities, and access to these resources is sold on the open market (Eliason, 2012b; Posewitz, 1999, 2004).

2. Theoretical perspective

This article was guided by the symbolic interaction theoretical perspective (Blumer, 1969; Colton, 1987; Samdahl, 1988). Symbolic interaction theory focuses on the meanings of things and experiences for individuals (Blumer, 1969). In particular, this approach focuses on the perceptions of individuals including how they experience the world and how they interpret the various situations they encounter in their everyday lives (Blumer, 1969; Macionis, 2015). In a description of this perspective, Colton (1987, pp. 346, 351) stated:

Symbolic interactionism emphasizes that human society uses symbols and meanings, and behavior is based on these meanings. Meanings are derived through social interaction but can be handled and modified by an individual in dealing with things encountered. ... Meanings form bases for action in leisure, recreation, and tourism. Wide ranges of meanings can exist for activities and roles. Meanings can also be placed on situations (*sic*) where action takes place.

According to Samdahl (1988, p. 29), "an individual's reality is based upon personal perception and interpretation of actions and events." W. I. Thomas (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572) stated "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." Because of its emphasis on meanings, interpretations, and perceptions, symbolic interaction is a useful theoretical framework when the goal of research is to facilitate an understanding of the viewpoints of the individuals who are studied.

3. Methods

A qualitative approach to data collection was employed in this exploratory study. Data were obtained from a mail survey that was comprised of mostly open-ended questions (Fowler, 1993; Neuman, 2011). The sample consisted of the names of 1,000 randomly selected Montana resident elk hunters in 2004 that were obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the state agency responsible for managing fish and wildlife in the state. Surveys were sent to these individuals in 2005. Two-hundred and fifty-five surveys were completed, which resulted in a response rate of 26%.

Neuman (2011, pp.324-325) described the value of using open-ended questions for obtaining the perceptions of individuals and stated "To learn how a respondent thinks and discover what is important to him or her...open questions are best. ...Open-ended questions are especially valuable in early or exploratory stages of research." In addition, when the objective of research is to gain an understanding of the perspective of those who are studied and how they view the world, it is important to obtain data from individuals in their own

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4759910>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4759910>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)