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Outdoors...

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Fewer and fewer Texas families have the outdoor tradition

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Opinion

How will today's children learn about the outdoors?

For decades wildlife and conservation organizations have struggled with the simple challenge - how do we get the kids back outdoors?

A landmark study, "The Future of Hunting in Texas," by Clark E. Adams and Linda A. Causey of Texas A&M University's Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences Department, zeroed in on factors that keep young people from taking up hunting:

- 1) New hunters always come from a hunting family;
- 2) Kids keep hunting because of support from friends and family;
- 3) Most women learn to hunt in their 20s, usually from their fathers or husbands; and
- 4) Boys learn to hunt from their fathers, uncles or male mentors, usually by age 14.

Sadly, fewer and fewer Texas families have the outdoor tradition.

There's no shortage of well-intentioned programs that try to hook kids on fishing and hunting. But those who work daily on youth outdoor programs agree that one-shot programs are not making a difference. The shorter the program and the farther from the family, the less likely its participants will develop outdoor habits.

"It's impossible to set one standard to measure how successful a program is with kids," said Tamara Trail, education director for the Texas



Lee Seschper

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Reader Photo: Dr. Dean Beddow of Amarillo shot this big 7x6 bull elk in New Mexico's Lincoln National Forest this fall. Beddow shot the bull, which scores 357 B&C, at 368 yards. It is reported to be the second-largest elk to come from the

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Wildlife Association. "There are different levels of success. Lincoln National Forest in 20 years.

Courtesy Photo

"I don't think there is anything better than the 4-H model, partly because it's a recipe for success. It's a long-term, community-based, mentoring program. That's what makes it successful."

"We have got to find the lowest common denominator that connects each person to the land. They will not change their behavior until we give them an experience that they become passionate about."

With state budget cutbacks in the future, volunteers will have to pick the slack, she said.

One of the largest "take 'em hunting programs," the Texas Youth Hunting Program, is a partnership between the Texas Wildlife Association and Texas Parks and Wildlife and takes hundreds of youngsters on their first hunt each fall.

Kids must have a parent accompany them for the entire weekend.

"It's not just drop the kid off for the weekend," Panhandle huntmaster Lynn McClure said.

In partnership with Safari Club International, the legendary Y.O. Ranch holds a number of Apprentice Hunter Camps each summer, giving teenagers an intense weeklong introduction to big game hunting.

The camp, now in its second decade, has introduced almost 2,000 young people 12 to 17 to big game hunting, camping, conservation, wildlife identification and shooting.

Dr. Dale Rollins, an extension wildlife specialist with the Texas Agriculture Extension Service, launched the Bobwhite Brigade concept in Texas a decade ago. Today it is the model for youth programs nationwide and has expanded to five camps, including a hugely popular Buckskin Brigade.

The Brigades cram a semester-load of wildlife biology and leadership development in five intense days. More than 600 Texas teenagers have attended the camps, with a charge to go forth and hold their own educational program in their communities.

Rollins says the total immersion experience is more effective in teaching lessons that kids retain.

Helen Holdsworth, executive director of the Texas Brigades, agrees.

"Our real intent is to make them aware of the issues, and to have them be active in their local community. When they get to voting age, they'll be ones that make policy and vote legislators in or out of office."

In Texas high schools, Wildlife and Recreation Management 381 is the second most popular Ag course, with 12,000 to 14,000 students taking the course each year.

Childress teacher Russell Graves, an accomplished outdoor photographer and author, has been teaching the course for seven years. His students have won three national championships in Ag Science, with world-class wildlife projects.

Graves agrees that education is more important than creating new hunters.

"I expose them to both sides of the hunting issue - why people are opposed, and what they say, why other people favor hunting and what they say.

"Now, whether they hunt or not, they understand why hunting is a viable tool for wildlife management. If they can take that message away, that's not such a bad deal.

"Ultimately my goal is for them to get out of the course is an appreciation for all of the tools for wildlife management and conservation, with hunting and fishing being one of them to manage populations.

"If they have that concept, I've done a good job."



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