

Responsive Management



PUBLIC OPINION ON WILDLIFE SPECIES MANAGEMENT IN VERMONT

Conducted for the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department

by Responsive Management

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Mark Damian Duda, Executive Director
Martin Jones, Research Associate
Andrea Criscione, Research Associate
Chad Craun, Research Associate
Tom Beppler, Research Associate
Tim Winegord, Survey Center Manager
Alison Lanier, Business Manager
Steven J. Bissell, Ph.D., Qualitative Research Associate
James B. Herrick, Ph.D., Research Associate

130 Franklin Street
Harrisonburg, VA 22801
Phone: 540/432-1888 Fax: 540/432-1892
E-mail: mark@responsivemanagement.com
www.responsivemanagement.com

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted for the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department (VFWD or “the Department”) to determine public opinion on wildlife species management, on funding for the Department, and on hunting regulations. The study entailed a telephone survey of Vermont residents 18 years of age and older.

For the survey, telephones were selected as the preferred sampling medium because of the universality of telephone ownership. The telephone survey questionnaire was developed cooperatively by Responsive Management and the Department. Responsive Management conducted a pre-test of the questionnaire, and revisions were made to the questionnaire based on the pre-test. Interviews were conducted Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., Saturday noon to 5:00 p.m., and Sunday from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., local time. The survey was conducted in March-April 2007. Responsive Management obtained a total of 1,029 completed interviews.

The software used for data collection was Questionnaire Programming Language 4.1. The analysis of data was performed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software as well as proprietary software developed by Responsive Management. Throughout this report, findings of the telephone survey are reported at a 95% confidence interval. For the entire sample of Vermont residents, the sampling error is at most plus or minus 3.05 percentage points.

SUPPORT FOR OR OPPOSITION TO VARIOUS FUNDING MECHANISMS FOR THE VERMONT FISH AND WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

- The survey asked about four funding options for the Department: three of the four have a large majority in support (ranging from 79% to 81%): the Department receiving money from the state’s general fund for programs and activities in which the Department participates but does not currently receive money (42% *strongly* support, and 81% strongly or moderately support); redistributing a portion of the current sales tax so that the Department receives 1/8th of 1% of the tax (49% *strongly* support, and 79% strongly or moderately support); and the Department receiving a portion of the Rooms and Meals Tax (45% *strongly* support, and

79% strongly or moderately support). This least support is for a 1/8th of 1% *increase* in the state general sales tax for programs in which the Department participates but does not currently receive money (only 26% *strongly* support, and only 57% strongly or moderately support).

SUPPORT FOR OR OPPOSITION TO WILDLIFE HABITAT MANAGEMENT EFFORTS OF THE VERMONT FISH AND WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

- The survey asked about five habitat protection/conservation efforts and found a large majority in support of each, ranging from 74% to 92% in support. Also, for each effort, most support is *strong* support. The greatest support is for having the Department work with town or regional planning commissions to design plans that work around and conserve important habitat (92% support), closely followed by support for protecting important wildlife habitat by providing financial incentives to property owners who conserve habitat (87% support).

OPINIONS ON MANAGEMENT OF VARIOUS WILDLIFE POPULATIONS

- While most commonly Vermont residents want to see the deer population in their county remain the same (48%), about a third want to see it increased (32%); very few want to see it decreased (5%).
 - Common reasons for wanting the deer population increased include improving hunter success rates and/or improving the chance of seeing a deer.
 - Common reasons for wanting the deer population decreased are to reduce human-wildlife conflicts, particularly reducing vehicle collisions, to reduce agricultural and timber losses, and simply because the ecosystem needs fewer deer.
- A majority of Vermonters (66%) agree that the 2005 law making it illegal for the public to feed wild deer is important in helping to prevent the spread of deer diseases.
- The majority of Vermonters (54%) want to see the moose population in their county remain the same; nonetheless, 19% want to see it increased, and 10% want to see it decreased.
 - The most common reason for wanting the moose population to be increased is to improve the chances of seeing a moose.

- The most common reasons for wanting the moose population to be decreased are to reduce vehicle collisions with moose and to reduce human-moose conflicts.
- The majority of Vermonters (57%) want to see the black bear population in their county remain the same; nonetheless, 16% want to see it increased, and 7% want to see it decreased.
 - Common reasons for wanting the black bear population increased are to improve the chance of seeing a black bear, because the ecosystem needs more black bear, and because black bear are aesthetically pleasing.
 - The most common reason, by far, for wanting the black bear population decreased is to reduce human-bear conflicts.
- The large majority of Vermonters (60%) want to see the wild turkey population in their county remain the same; nonetheless, 15% want to see it increased, and 10% want to see it decreased.
 - The most common reasons for wanting the wild turkey population increased are to improve the chance of seeing a wild turkey, because wild turkeys are aesthetically pleasing, and to improve hunter success rates.
 - The most common reason for wanting the wild turkey population decreased is because the ecosystem needs fewer wild turkeys.
- The majority of Vermont's wild turkey hunters (68%) support the current turkey management strategy to limit fall turkey hunting for the purpose of maximizing spring turkey harvests.
- Most commonly, Vermont residents think the beaver population in their county should remain the same (50% gave this answer), far exceeding those who want to see it increased (9%) or decreased (12%).

HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICTS

- A substantial percentage of Vermont residents (14%) have had vehicle damage from wildlife in Vermont in the past 5 years, overwhelmingly caused by deer. Even more (21%) have had

damage to other personal property from wildlife in Vermont in the past 5 years, mostly caused by deer, but also with substantial damage from black bear. Most damage was to landscaping/gardens, but a substantial amount of damage was structural or to agriculture. Most commonly, the cost of fixing the damage was minimal (indeed, 38% said they spent nothing to fix the damage—the conjecture is that either the damage could be repaired at no cost or they chose not to repair the damage); however, 9% reported costs of \$2,000 or more to fix vehicle/property damage caused by wildlife. The median cost was \$50. The survey also asked how much respondents spent to *prevent* wildlife damage. While the overwhelming majority (85%) spent nothing, 11% indicated spending something, usually less than \$150. The mean amount was \$63.44.

- A substantial percentage of Vermonters (10%) said that they personally or someone in their household had a vehicle collision with a deer in Vermont in the past 2 years (note that this timeframe—2 years—differs from that considered above—5 years). In a follow-up question, 52% of those who indicated personal or household involvement in a collision said it was another household member involved, and 44% indicated that they were driving during a collision.
- The large majority of Vermont residents (70%) are tolerant of bears on or near their property, with most of them being *very* tolerant. Only 18% are not tolerant.

CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE

- Among deer hunters, Chronic Wasting Disease in Vermont's deer population is not seen as a great risk: 50% think the risk is low to none at all. However, a substantial percentage think the risk is high (6%) or medium (24%). The risk that Chronic Wasting Disease poses to Vermont's deer hunters is perceived as less than the risk it poses to deer: 66% rate the risk to hunters as low or none at all, while only 3% rate it high and 11% rate it medium.

PARTICIPATION IN HUNTING, INCLUDING SPECIES HUNTED AND LOCATION

- About 2 in 5 Vermonters (41%) have hunted at some time, 23% have hunted within the past 5 years, and 18% have hunted in the past 12 months. Rifles and shotguns were the most

common types of sporting equipment used (97% used one or both of these in their hunting), but muzzleloaders (54%) and archery equipment (42%) were also often used. White-tailed deer was the most hunted species (55% hunted deer), followed by wild turkey (23%), black bear (17%), and ruffed grouse (16%).

- Approximately 2 in 5 hunters (42%) have applied for a Vermont moose hunting permit within the past 5 years.
- Among deer hunters, the rifle season is the most popular (88% hunted deer during the rifle season), distantly followed by the muzzleloader season (43%) and archery season (33%).
- The majority of deer hunters (54%) travel less than 15 miles to hunt (one-way, by vehicle, not counting the distance the hunter may walk into the forest or field once his/her vehicle is parked). The mean distance is 21.3 miles; the median distance is 10 miles.
- Among wild turkey hunters, spring is the most preferred season: 57% hunt wild turkey mostly in the spring, another 24% hunt spring and fall equally, and only 16% hunt wild turkey in the fall mostly.
- Most typically, ruffed grouse hunters hunted grouse for 5 to 9 days in 2006 (38% gave an answer within this range), and a majority (56%) hunted grouse for less than 10 days. Nonetheless, nearly 1 in 5 (19%) hunted for 15 days or more. The median was 6 days. The most common month for hunting ruffed grouse was October.
- Those who have ever hunted were asked about the importance of public lands to their hunting experiences: the majority (56%) rate public lands as *very* important, and 73% rate public lands as *very* or *somewhat* important.

SATISFACTION WITH HUNTING

- For each species hunted, most hunters were satisfied with their hunting experiences for that species in the past 5 years (ranging from 52% satisfied to 92% satisfied). Satisfaction was

quite high for wild turkey and moose (but only a small number of hunters hunted moose). The most dissatisfaction was for white-tailed deer hunting.

OPINIONS ON HUNTING REGULATIONS

- Most commonly, deer hunters think the annual bag limit for deer should be 2 deer (40% gave this answer); note that this is the current bag limit. A small percentage (9%) want the bag limit to be 3 deer.
- The survey asked deer hunters about when hunters should be able to harvest antlerless deer: the majority (57%) say during archery season, while 38% say during muzzleloader season, and 22% say during rifle season. Note that 20% say that harvesting antlerless deer should not be allowed.
- Deer hunters are overwhelmingly aware (97% aware, with 87% who are *very* aware) of the regulation making it illegal to hunt or take any wild animal, including deer, during the deer hunting season using bait.
- The majority of deer hunters agree (69% agree, with 53% who *strongly* agree) that youth deer hunting season should be open to all qualified youth under the age of 16, regardless of whether they have harvested a deer in a previous year. Nonetheless, 25% disagree, mostly *strong* disagreement.
- Regarding the muzzleloader season, deer hunters most commonly want the muzzleloader season to be after the November rifle season (48% gave this answer), but a substantial percentage (30%) want the muzzleloader season prior to the November rifle season.
- There is much more opposition than support for creating a separate hunting license for black bear in Vermont: 61% oppose, and only 29% support. Support is slightly higher (but not more than opposition) if the condition is put on the separate black bear license that it only be required for hunting black bears prior to the November deer season: 52% oppose, and 37%

support. Among those who support creating a separate bear hunting license, nearly half (47%) think that a reasonable charge would be \$12.

- There is more opposition than support for establishing an archery-only season for moose in Vermont (in addition to the regular moose hunting season): while 39% support, 50% oppose (with 39% *strongly* opposing).

ADDITIONAL CROSTABULATIONS TO EXAMINE CURRENT VERSUS LAPSED HUNTERS

- This analysis suggests that about 1 out of 5 hunters does not hunt in any given year.
- The crosstabulations, which examined only those respondents who had hunted within the past 5 years, found differences between current hunters (those who had hunted within the previous year) and lapsed hunters (those who had not hunted within the previous year—but had hunted within the previous 5 years). The crosstabulations suggest:
 - Males are much more likely to be current hunters, when compared to females.
 - Older hunters (hunted in past 5 years) have a higher rate of current hunter, compared to younger hunters, but the difference is small.
 - Residential location makes a difference in rate of current hunters among those who hunted in the past 5 years: residents of rural areas are more likely to be current hunters, compared to those hunters who live in urban areas or small towns.
 - There appears to be a relationship between education and whether a respondent is a current or lapsed hunter. The higher the education level, the lower the rate of current hunting.
 - In looking at the rate of current hunters out of all hunters who hunted within the past 5 years in each region, we find some differences. The Greater Chittenden Region has a markedly lower rate of current hunters when compared to the other three regions of the state. Expressing this another way, churning is higher in the Greater Chittenden Region.
 - White-tailed deer hunters were asked how far they typically travel by vehicle or other conveyance to hunt deer (exclusive of walking in the forest or field to get to their hunting spot). Relative to lapsed deer hunters, current deer hunters appear to travel a shorter mean distance: the mean one-way travel distance for current hunters is 19.1 miles; the travel distance for lapsed hunters is 32.5 miles.