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Hunting a sport in decline; summit helps identify why

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Now that the 2005 Summit on the Future of Hunting in Florida has concluded, is the future any brighter? Judging from the enthusiasm in the voices of some of those in attendance, the answer appears to be yes.

The three-day summit, held Aug. 11-13 at the Rosen Centre Hotel in Orlando, brought together the many faces of the hunting community, including deer hunters, duck hunters, turkey hunters, land owners, conservation groups and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

The summit, the first of its kind in Florida, drew 236 registrants. It was conceived in response to declining hunting license sales, continued loss of habitat and hunting areas, cultural changes and other issues that have combined to significantly erode the popularity of the sport.

Summit-goers identified hunting's problems and hashed out ideas to possibly solve them. Among those ideas are establishing one statewide voice to represent all hunters, a mentoring program to help enlist new hunters, expanded hunter education opportunities and a Web site dedicated to summit issues.

"All in all, I went out of there tickled pink," said Bill Marvin, president of the Florida Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation and chairman of the hunting summit steering committee. "I think the understanding that hunters have to speak as one voice was a major issue."

"While the [hunting participation] numbers have been down, I was encouraged by the number of people who came together to maybe help turn those numbers around a little bit," said Lane Stephens, executive director of the Allied Sportsmen's Associations of Florida, Inc.

Before the summit, 3,000 of the state's hunters were asked in a survey what their major concerns were. The responses formed the basis of the topics addressed at the session. A report will soon be issued that summarizes the recommendations made at the summit and outlines a game plan to maintain momentum.

One of the summit's invited speakers from Texas told attendees that a similar effort in that state had stalled because no action was taken afterward.

"They had a summit but didn't follow up by doing anything," Marvin said. "Their message to us was, 'Don't do what we did. Make this an action plan.'"

"I think the group heard that very loud and very clear."

While there was disagreement over some issues at the meetings, there was consensus on the need to form a unified coalition to represent hunters in general. At least for the time being, the Allied Sportsmen's Association of Florida volunteered to develop the coalition and see it through the early stages.

Stephens, a fulltime lobbyist in Tallahassee and a hunter, said his group's mission is to preserve and promote Florida's hunting and fishing heritage and to serve as a voice for the state's sporting organizations.

"You have to have somebody looking at the whole picture," Stephens said. "As I told my board of directors: 'We caught the bus, now what are we going to do with it?'"

"Allied realized the need for a coalition several years ago," said Nick Wiley, head of the FWC's Division of Hunting and Game Management. "They should be applauded for stepping up and being the incubator for this."

Hunters also will need to look outside their circle for help in preserving habitat, said Preston Robertson, who attended the summit as vice-president and general counsel of the Florida Wildlife Federation. The FWF membership numbers outdoor enthusiasts of all stripes, including hunters and fishermen.

"I think it's time to expand our relationships with non-consumptive users to protect our habitat," Robertson said. "Without the habitat, there's not going to be anything left for anybody."

"I think it would benefit us [as hunters] to explore our commonalities and not focus on our differences."

None of the summit's recommendations is set in stone, but several "takeaway" priorities emerged from the session. In addition to building a coalition of various hunting interests, here are some of the other key ideas.

A mentoring program would allow newcomers to experience hunting without immediately having to take a hunting ed class. The newcomers would be accompanied in the field by licensed hunters. Stephens compared it to Florida's free fishing days in which would-be anglers are allowed to fish without a license.

"You could take someone hunting who may or may not have the time or the desire to sit through a class to see if he was interested in it," Stephens said. "It would be a way to introduce people to the sport who otherwise haven't had an opportunity."

A related idea would integrate hunting programs with youth groups such as the Boy Scouts and 4-H clubs.

Allow the private business sector to offer hunting safety courses. The courses are now administered by the FWC.

"You could go to a local sporting goods store or gun shop and not have to wait for the course to come up," Marvin said.

Develop a database of private hunting leases in Florida. "People could go to the database and find out where there are lease openings," Stephens said.

Summit attendees also discussed putting together a package to present to private landowners, pointing out the advantages of leasing property for hunting.

Conduct an inventory of all lands of a certain size owned by state and local governments and determine which of those holdings are not open to hunting and why.

Stress ethical hunting practices and explore ways that hunting's image can be improved.

"In my opinion, we need to focus on habitat protection, high ethics and the need to educate the public as to the necessity to have hunting as part of wildlife management," Robertson said.

If nothing else, the summit represented a first step, a recognition that hunting is hurting and something needs to be done about it.

"We now have a very good database of folks who care," Stephens said.

"This isn't the state or the feds telling us what to do," Marvin said. "It's the hunters saying this is what we have to do."

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