

Hunter education important to the future of hunting

by Robin West

I reflected this past weekend while teaching a bow hunting education class and preparing for an upcoming basic hunter education class, how important is this stuff, really? I know the statistics—hunter education significantly reduces accidents and makes our sport safer, but does it have other value? I think it does.

Learning to stalk game, becoming proficient with a weapon of choice, taking proper care of harvested game meat, and a myriad of other related skills all take time and practice, and such learning experiences are all part of the enjoyment of hunting, but there are some basic elements of knowledge and abilities that everyone should have before they first go afield.

Traditionally, firearms safety and hunting skills were passed on within families, but increasingly potential new hunters are finding themselves with little or no previous hunting experience within their immediate families. Nationwide the percentage of hunters within the U.S. population has fallen to well below 10%.

Many organizations and agencies have stepped up to provide the necessary information to prospective new hunters and the Alaska Hunter Information and Training (HIT) Program is a good one. This program is administered by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and includes a variety of activities including basic hunter education, bow hunter education, bear baiting clinics, black powder hunting certification, Becoming an Outdoors Woman (BOW), special shooting events, and more. The HIT Program has a full-time staff, but most of the course instruction is done by volunteers. Organizations such as Safari Club International and The National Wild Turkey Federation are also frequent partners and have donated such things as air rifles and safety vests.

So what do you get if you attend a hunter education class? Well, first of all it is mandatory in some form in all 50 states. Some states require the class for any age of hunter; most require it only for younger hunters. In Alaska there are hunter education requirements for hunting in Game Management Units 7, 13, 14, 15 (Kenai area), and 20 for hunters under age 16 (or older than 16 if born after 1986). There are also education requirements to hunt in certain areas, such as on military installations, and in certain types of hunts

(such as successfully passing the bow hunter education and proficiency test before hunting in a big game hunt limited to the use of archery tackle).

Once a student has passed the Alaska course their certification card is accepted anywhere in the Country for the same activity (basic hunter, bow hunter, muzzleloader). This is one of several good reasons why we see many adults in our classes along with young people.

Firearms safety is the paramount focus of the basic hunter education class, but many other topics are covered, including wildlife identification, conservation and management, outdoors survival, and basic regulations.

One important part of the class addresses ethics—more of the unwritten rules that dictate how we undertake our activities. This is extremely important for the future of hunting because society is primarily made up of non-hunters. While it is true that less than 10% of the population hunts, it is also true that perhaps 10% of the population has strong anti-hunting feelings, leaving the majority of the people in the United States as non-hunters (are neither hunters or anti-hunters). With a democratic form of government, this majority of people (the approximately 80% of the populace) will likely decide the ultimate future of activities such as hunting. They need good scientific information about the management values and legitimate subsistence and recreational values of hunting, but they also need to be left with good perceptions about hunting activities.

Hunting as a sport is hurt when the public views unsafe or rude behavior by hunters. Being polite, leaving a spotless camp, salvaging all game meat, following applicable regulations, respecting the land, not bragging endlessly about your harvest in public places, or displaying knives and guns needlessly in public are some of the things that can help leave the kind of image and impression that helps ensure the future of hunting. Even beyond avoiding negative behaviors, hunters should go out of their way to be the most friendly and helpful folks that others encounter in the woods. This, if you will, is the second form of hunter education: hunters going the extra distance to share information, and perhaps even some game meat, with

non-hunters—working to help not only develop factual information to share, but also to create an environment of support and understanding for an activity in which others may not participate, but are entitled to have an opinion about.

For more information about hunter education programs you can check out www.huntereducation.alaska.gov. You may also sign up for classes locally by

contacting the Alaska Department of Fish and Game at 262-9368

Robin West is the Refuge Manager of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and has been a volunteer hunter education instructor for 18 years. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.