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Leveraging Partnerships to Achieve High Impact: Lessons from Wildlife Field Days

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Abstract: Effective wildlife management on private lands can supplement and diversify income by providing opportunities for hunting, fishing, and ecotourism. We offered a workshop series that covered a comprehensive set of issues pertaining to this topic. In the process, we found that using a large, multi-state, multi-agency planning committee enabled us to tap into numerous clientele networks, reach many people new to Extension, recruit expert speakers from many organizations, and spread tasks so that individual

burdens were reduced. This mutually beneficial collaboration is a model for future Extension programming that may become increasingly useful as Extension budgets continue to decline.

Introduction

The current downturn in the economy has many people looking for alternative sources of income. Armed with accurate information on how to manage game species, sport fish, and other wildlife that could appeal to hunting, fishing, and ecotourism markets, landowners could potentially supplement and diversify their income stream. Great interest in wildlife management has been documented among private landowners (Magill, McGill, & Fraser, 2004; Measells et al., 2006). This interest is particularly strong in the Southeastern U.S., where 4.1 million hunters and anglers, and 6.2 million wildlife watchers were reported in Florida and Georgia alone during 2006 (USFWS 2006).

The impacts of the challenging economic climate are not limited to private landowners; the downturn in the economy has also affected many state and federal agencies. Fortunately, the task of providing science-based information on natural resource management to the public is not the exclusive mission of any one public entity suffering budget reductions. Rather, this task is shared among the Cooperative Extension Services of each state and many state and federal agencies. Collaboration among these groups with convergent missions has the potential to simultaneously reduce overlap in outreach efforts while increasing efficiency in the use of staff time and resources.

We used the job of providing an educational program on wildlife management as an opportunity to implement multi-state and multi-agency collaboration. These sorts of synergistic partnerships have been proposed as a model for increasing impact of outreach efforts (Rodewald, 2002; Chen & Perchonok, 2008; Herendeen & Glazier, 2009). Tactics such as pooling resources among partners with similar missions and across state boundaries are projected to become increasingly essential for the future success of Extension, as budgets for Extension programming continue to shrink (Fischer, 2009).

We decided to use a series of field days to convey information on wildlife management to private landowners in the North Florida and South Georgia region, utilizing the expertise of individuals from numerous organizations. Field days have long been used as an education tool in Extension because they serve numerous functions simultaneously. They enable the sharing of information in a top-down fashion through formal talks, encourage discussion between speakers and participants, facilitate networking among participants, and demonstrate how locals are implementing the practices discussed. Despite the availability of more modern means of telecommunication, on-property demonstrations remain a preferred means of learning for many rural landowners (Lasley, Padgitt, & Hanson, 2001; Miller & Cox, 2006; Licht & Martin, 2007; Gaul, Hochmuth, Israel, & Treadwell, 2009).

Methods

We convened a group of individuals from North Florida and South Georgia to serve on a planning committee. Individuals from varied backgrounds were invited so that diverse perspectives were represented when decisions were made regarding workshop content, format, and location. Experts in wildlife management and forest management from state agencies with an outreach mission, as well as private landowners and hunting plantation managers were considered. The committee consisted of 15 representatives from the Georgia and Florida Cooperative Extension Services (both specialists and agents), Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida Division of Forestry, and several private landowners and land managers.

This group of individuals planned and implemented a series of seven workshops that spanned a comprehensive set of topics pertaining to management of wildlife that has the potential to generate income for private landowners. The topics of each of the workshops were:

- Bobwhite quail management
- Dove and waterfowl management
- Sport fish pond management
- White-tailed deer management
- Wild turkey management
- Hunting dog and human first aid
- Soils and herbicides in wildlife food plots

All seven workshops were held between May and November 2009. Five workshops took place at different private properties in either South Georgia or North Florida, and the remaining two were held at public facilities. The primary land use objectives of owners of all host properties were hunting and/or timber production. Specific locations for each workshop were selected such that each demonstrated exemplary management for the species or topic covered during that event.

Experts from a variety of partner organizations were invited to serve as speakers for each workshop. Individuals represented:

- Georgia and Florida Cooperative Extension Services,
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission,
- Georgia Division of Natural Resources,
- US Fish and Wildlife Service,
- USDA Aphis Wildlife Services,
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service,
- Ducks Unlimited,
- National Wild Turkey Federation,
- Quality Deer Management Association,
- Tall Timbers Research Station,
- Warnell School of Forestry,
- Thomas County EMS,

- Thomas County Fire Department,
- Archbold Memorial Hospital,
- Cargill Animal Nutrition, and
- Gallagher Animal Management Systems.

Each workshop was a half-day event, consisting of 3-4 hours in the field followed by a lunch. The fish pond and first aid events differed slightly in that they consisted of 3-4 hours of lecture and demonstration, followed by a lunch. During the field section of workshops, participants were given a driving tour of the property, with four-six stops selected to highlight topics relevant to the subject of the event. At each stop, one-three speakers discussed a particular topic and often provided handouts related to topics covered. A personal account was typically provided at the first stop by the manager of the host property. Lunch was served at the end of each field tour. Evaluations were handed out to participants as they picked up their lunch (rather than afterwards) in an effort to increase response rates to the questionnaire.

We used the evaluations to develop an understanding of how the program was received by participants. We collected information about participants' satisfaction with each program, their perception of their knowledge before and after the program, whether they anticipated making changes in management practices based on the information presented, and whether they believed program participation may lead to their earning or saving money. We also asked participants how they first learned about these programs.

Results and Discussion

Workshops were attended by 322 individuals. (Note that several individuals attended more than one workshop, so this number represents the number of workshop slots filled, rather than the actual number of individuals who attended a workshop). A total of 185 evaluations were returned.

Satisfaction with the Programs

Attendees were asked three questions that dealt with the quality of the program they attended. First, they were asked if the information presented was clear and understandable. On a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating they felt strongly that the information was *not* presented in a clear and understandable manner and 5 indicating they felt strongly that it was, the average response was 4.4, indicating that information was presented in a clear and understandable manner.

Next, participants were asked if they received the information they were expecting. Ninety percent of respondents indicated they had received the information they were expecting.

Third, participants were asked if they liked the format of the workshop (outdoors rather than indoors with audiovisual aids). Ninety-three percent liked the format of the workshops.

Perception About Knowledge Gained

Participants were asked to rate their knowledge of the topic covered at the workshop before the event on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 representing no knowledge and 10 representing a great deal of knowledge) and then to rate their knowledge after the event on the same scale. Overall, 91% of participants reported that they gained new knowledge. The average increase in knowledge reported as a result of attending each program was 58%. Individuals whose primary reason for attending the workshop was due to interests not

related to work (land owners and hunt club members) indicated a larger knowledge gain (65%) than individuals who indicated their primary reason for attending the workshop was related to work (wildlife biologists, foresters, and land managers; 39%).

Intended Use of New Knowledge

Attendees were asked if they expected to implement their own management program dealing with the topic covered at the workshop, make changes to their management practices with the knowledge they gained, contact speakers or other representatives of the organizations speakers came from with future questions, or share with others what they had learned. Fifty-three percent indicated they planned to implement their own wildlife management program, 59% indicated they planned to make changes to their practices according to new knowledge gained, 41% indicated they planned to contact speakers with future questions, and 79% indicated they planned to share what they learned with others.

The percentage of respondents who reported that they anticipated changing their management practices (59%) was lower than was reported from a similar extension program in Mississippi (85%; Jones, Jacobs, Yarrow, & McPeake, 2008). This may have been due to the large proportion of attendees of our programs who were land managers, wildlife biologists, and foresters (>40%). Individuals in these professions were presumably familiar with much of the information presented and therefore less likely to change practices in response to the information presented than members of the general public.

It is worth noting that the region in which the workshops took place (the Red Hills region) has many large hunting plantations that typically employ one or more land managers, many of whom attended our programs. Historically, this segment of the population has not had high attendance rates at Extension events, so we consider their recruitment a sign of success in reaching a new audience. It must also be noted that what people report they will do in the future may be different from what they actually do. Thus, these evaluations suggest that our programs were well received and that participants found program content to be informative.

Expectation to Save or Earn Money

We asked attendees if they anticipated saving or earning more money as a result of what they learned during each event. Seventy-two percent anticipated saving money, and 33% anticipated earning money as a result of what they had learned. As might be expected, individuals whose primary reason for attending the workshop was related to work (wildlife biologists, foresters, and land managers) anticipated earning less money as a result of knowledge gained than did individuals whose primary reason for attending the workshop was not related to work (land owners and hunt club members).

The percentage of respondents who anticipated saving money as a result of new information learned (72%) was lower than was reported from a similar Extension program in Mississippi (95%; Jones et al., 2008). This may again be due to the large proportion of attendees of our programs who were land managers, wildlife biologists, and foresters, who were most likely already well informed on the topics covered prior to attending the events.

Program Advertisement

Although we used a variety of media to advertise (flyers and brochures, emails, websites, and press releases in newspapers), most respondents learned of the workshops through one of two means: 34% through email and 31% through flyers/brochures. A much smaller percentage of respondents heard about the workshops through newspapers (10%) or websites (5%). A substantial proportion became aware of the

workshops through word-of-mouth (24%).

Participants who attended for reasons unrelated to work (land owners and hunt club members) were more likely to have learned about the programs through the Internet (email or website), newspapers, or word-of-mouth. In contrast, participants who attended for reasons related to work (wildlife biologists, foresters, and land managers) were more likely to have learned about the programs through flyers/brochures.

Participants who had not been involved in recurring Extension programs in the past (51%) were more likely to have learned about the programs through flyers/brochures, newspapers, or word-of-mouth. On the other hand, individuals who had prior experience with recurring Extension programs were more likely to have heard about the programs through the Internet or through several means of communication.

These results were in stark contrast to those obtained from a similar Extension effort in the Southeast where the importance of newspapers in attracting participants to a forestry event exceeded that of flyers and brochures (Hughes, Jacobs, Yarrow, & McPeake, 2005). Our results suggest that announcements in area newspapers reached a limited audience and that email and flyers were far superior in recruiting large numbers of attendees. However, because newspapers were useful in recruiting individuals who had no prior educational relationship with Extension, this medium may be worthy of use for future endeavors when targeting new audiences is a primary objective.

Lessons Learned

By convening a planning committee of individuals from heterogeneous backgrounds, we were able to tap into numerous clientele networks. This enabled us to reach a large number of people who themselves had diverse backgrounds, many of whom had no prior experience with Extension. Had we simply formed a committee of Extension personnel from a single university and used existing Extension mailing lists to advertise our programs, it is highly unlikely we would have accessed the large and heterogeneous audience we did.

The diversity of the planning committee was also helpful in recruiting speakers from an assortment of agencies and organizations, which in turn allowed workshop participants direct access to true experts for each workshop topic. The size of the planning committee allowed us to spread the tasks associated with organizing and implementing the events across many individuals, reducing the temporal commitment and financial burden on any one person or organization. Finally, the involvement of individuals from more than one state helped fulfill multi-state requirements for earning Extension funding. This mutually beneficial collaboration was seen as a positive for all involved and is highly recommended as a model for future Extension programming. Larger partnerships may become a greater necessity as Extension budgets continue to decline. We advocate that these alliances are a meritorious alternative regardless of budget issues, due to the many other benefits obtained.

The overwhelming majority of individuals who completed evaluations indicated they had received the information they were expecting, liked the format of our programs, and felt the information was presented in a clear and understandable format. We received very few suggestions for changes to format or content. This indicates that our diverse planning team did a good job of anticipating and then meeting the needs and expectations of clientele. We recommend the recruitment of speakers from a variety of backgrounds as well as the continued use of field days for conveying information pertaining to wildlife management. Despite the availability of many other, more modern means of communicating information, the traditional Extension format of field days continues to be well received. Also, the use of a series of half-day events that each covered a specific topic but that collectively provided a holistic management scheme appeared to be an effective way to sustain interest, as evidenced by the continued participation of many individuals at all or most of the events. We recommend the use of a series of short-duration events as an effective means

of sustaining interest when conveying information on an assortment of interrelated topics.

Flyers, brochures, and email were superior to other means of advertisement in our region, but different types of advertising recruited individuals with different motivations for attending. Knowing this will enable us to better tailor our investment in the various means of advertising to target our desired audience in the future. Because the importance of various means of advertising seems to vary by region of the country, we encourage others to investigate the issue of which means of advertisement are most appropriate for recruiting the desired audience in their own region.

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