

Hunting for the next generation of conservation stewards

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LSU Waterfowl and Ecology Management Assistant Professor Kevin Ringelman has helped develop one of the few sustaining university hunting programs in the U.S., which teaches wildlife ecology majors about firearm safety, game hunting and natural resource management in the Louisiana marsh. Credit: Cody Willhite, LSU

Millions of acres of natural habitat in the U.S. and the wildlife that inhabit these large swaths of private and public lands depend on people who support a myriad of conservation activities. Recreational hunters are an important group of people whose licenses, taxes and fees directly pay for conservation efforts. However, the number of people who hunt as a sport has steadily declined since the 1980s.

"In some states, more than half of funding for state conservation agencies comes from hunters and fishermen. When they leave the sport, there are less funds to do everything from restoration projects to prescribed burns," said Kevin Ringelman, who is a waterfowl ecology and management assistant professor in the LSU School of Renewable and Natural Resources.

He and his colleagues, Associate Professor Bret Collier and instructor Luke Laborde, train LSU wildlife ecology students, who become the professionals responsible for managing the biodiversity of natural systems for species conservation. These wildlife professionals conduct science and collect data that inform the policies to protect natural resources, and implement the [management practices](#). They also interact with stakeholders many of whom are hunters. As part of their students' training for wildlife management careers at LSU, Ringelman and Collier have developed a unique, professional development experience: hunting.

"The hunting experience is transformative for our students, resulting in a deeper connection to the wildlife resource, and a richer understanding of the hunting culture and hunters' stewardship for wildlife habitat," they write in a new paper published this week in *The Journal of Wildlife Management*.

Along with colleagues at the University of California Davis, they describe how the consumptive interaction with nature—the act of harvesting an animal—leads to a deeper appreciation of the resource.

"I tell them it is an oath. We take from the marsh with gratitude and so we must give back with generosity," said co-author John Eadie, the Dennis G. Raveling Professor at UC Davis, who works with the California Waterfowl Association to administer a similar program.

Hunting as a sport in the U.S. became popular after World War II with the baby boomers, who had time, disposable income and an appreciation for nature. It also coincided with the advent of wildlife and [natural resource](#) management programs in the U.S. Hunting peaked in the 1970s when about 7 percent of the U.S. population participated in hunting as a recreational pastime. Since then, the sport has experienced a steady decline as hunters have begun to age out and subsequent generations have been less interested in the sport.

"There are several reasons why people are not taking up hunting as a sport now—namely, the lack of time, lack of access to the outdoors as rural communities become urban and suburban, choosing 'screen time' over going out into nature and the overall loss of a hunting culture," Ringelman said.

According to the latest U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey, there are more than 2.2 million fewer hunters in the U.S. today.

"Right now, less than 4 percent of the U.S. population is a hunter. As a result, our current students are less likely to be hunters than previous generations of wildlife management students," Collier said.

He finds this trend concerning because future wildlife professionals are better equipped to manage wildlife resources and develop policies if they understand the motivations and culture of the hunter constituents that support their work.

To address this problem, Collier and Ringelman have developed one of

the few sustaining university hunting programs in the U.S. In collaboration with private duck hunting clubs that provide lodging and professional guides as well as non-governmental organizations and industry that donate the materials for the program, they consistently offer this voluntary opportunity to all senior wildlife management undergraduate majors at LSU, which is about 34 students per year.

The students learn about gun safety and get to practice on a clay target range at a professional hunting lodge. Before dawn, a professional guide leads each small group on a hunt in the marsh. To see this unique educational experience, watch this video.

After each hunting field trip, the students return to LSU to conduct scientific dissections of the game they harvested to learn about the anatomy and foraging ecology of the species.

"The point of this program is not harvest. We are creating the next generation of stewards of conservation. If we're teaching students holistically about [wildlife](#), then you can't just end a program with harvest," Collier said.

From his experience introducing [hunting](#) to his students at LSU, he sees college students as an untapped group of people who could be part of a resurgence in the sport.

"College students are self-sufficient, independent, have transportation and disposable income as well as a group of peers who share interests," Collier said.

Ringelman also sees hunters' values of getting back to nature, being self-sufficient and sourcing ethical protein as ideals that resonate with millennials and Generation Z.

"It's another avenue for recruiting new hunters," Ringelman said.

More information: Kevin M. Ringelman et al, Successes and Challenges of University First Hunt Programs, *The Journal of Wildlife Management* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/jwmg.21878](https://doi.org/10.1002/jwmg.21878)

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