

Lease Hunting in the Central Hardwood Region: An Examination of Tradeoffs

Stephen M. Bratkovich and Donald W. Floyd¹

Abstract: An examination of literature pertaining to lease (fee) hunting resulted in a description of tradeoffs for landowners, hunters, wildlife managers, and wildlife in the Central hardwood forest region. Landowner advantages associated with a lease hunting enterprise were better vandalism and trespass control, increased income, increased services, enhanced wildlife management, and farmland preservation; disadvantages were increased landowner liability, increased time and financial investment, changes in farm operation, and increased resentment. Advantages of lease hunting to hunters, wildlife managers, and wildlife were increased wildlife management, reduced hunting pressure on private land, and reduced hunter/landowner conflicts; disadvantages for these groups were increased hunting pressure on public lands, increased hunting expense, and conversion of hunting into a sport only for the wealthy. A possible consequence of lease hunting in the Central hardwood forest region is discussed. Recommendations are provided to Central hardwood forest and wildlife managers regarding the relationship between lease hunting, landowner attitudes, and private forestland management.

INTRODUCTION

Over 60% of the 2.4 billion acres in the United States are privately owned. Central hardwood forest states such as Illinois, Indiana and Ohio, for example, have percentages of private land ownerships much higher than the national average (Hackett 1989). Consequently, a large proportion of wildlife-related recreation takes place on private farms and forests. Nationally, approximately 82% of all hunting in 1985 occurred on private land (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 1988).

In recent years, the concept of landowners seeking compensation for providing hunting access has increased in popularity. Two concurrent trends have contributed to private landowners investigating the potential of their property for a lease (fee) hunting enterprise (Rasker et al. 1991). The first is an increased demand for outdoor recreation. A 1962 prediction that the demand for outdoor recreation would triple by the year 2000 was realized by 1983. The President's Commission on Americans Outdoors (1987) recommended that ways be found to stimulate the private sector to provide recreational opportunities.

The second (long-term) trend is the agricultural sector "slow down". The 1980's farm economy was characterized by low agricultural prices, high costs of production, and increased international competition. Long-term trends indicate that there is no longer the same high rate of agricultural expansion seen between the mid-1950's and the mid-1970's.

Over one-half of all lease hunting in the U. S. occurs in six southern states: Texas, Georgia, Louisiana, Virginia, Alabama, and Mississippi (Shelton 1989). The proportion of private land leased in the South for recreational access (which includes hunting) more than doubled between 1981 and 1987 (Gynn 1989). Even though lease hunting in Central hardwood forests is relatively

¹Marketing Specialist, USDA Forest Service, State and Private Forestry, 1992 Folwell Ave., St. Paul, MN 55108, and Assistant Professor, Natural Resources, 2021 Coffey Rd., The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210.

small compared to the South, its adoption will likely increase in the near future. The purpose of this paper is to (1) summarize the literature on the advantages and disadvantages of lease hunting, (2) discuss a possible consequence of lease hunting in the Central hardwood region, and (3) provide recommendations to Central hardwood forest and wildlife managers regarding the relationship between lease hunting, landowner attitudes, and private forestland management.

WHAT IS LEASE HUNTING?

Lease hunting is an arrangement whereby the landowner grants the right of ingress (access) on his/her property (for a specified time period) to the hunter, for the purpose of hunting in exchange for services, goods or a fee. The right to control access to private land is a property right of all landowners.

"Shooting preserves", where animal populations (exotic or native) are increased through a stocking program are not addressed in this paper. Also, no mention will be made of raising game for commercial markets.

In the United States, lease hunting is a controversial topic. State governments control the right of possession of wildlife and landowners control the right of access to land ("split estate" problem). Arguments continue to surface on the issue of whether it is right to have to pay to hunt publicly-owned game on private property.

One viewpoint is that, "Paid hunting...reduces the public's interest in wildlife, [and] hands wildlife to a wealthy minority for their exclusive use" (Geist 1988). Others have argued for many years that, "As the farmer sees the picture, he feeds, raises and protects the game, the state claims it and the sportsman gets it, while he gets only crop depredations and trespass problems" (Howard and Longhurst 1956).

A listing of all the legal, historical and philosophical reasons for or against lease hunting is beyond the scope of this paper. It is important to recognize though that many differences do exist.

TRADE-OFFS FOR WILDLIFE, WILDLIFE MANAGERS AND HUNTERS

Whenever lease hunting is practiced, three groups, in addition to landowners, are potential winners and losers - wildlife, wildlife managers and hunters.

Studies in Montana (Lacey et al. 1988) and Oregon (Rasker et al. 1991) found that landowners who lease land tend to invest more in habitat and management practices than landowners who do not lease. Therefore, all of the above groups may receive benefits from lease hunting if landowners who lease land tend to practice better wildlife management. Increased landowner demand for wildlife management assistance will generate increased demand for the expertise of wildlife managers. Wildlife managers also benefit when landowners furnish detailed harvest data from their land that would otherwise not be available for decision-making.

A survey of all 50 state wildlife divisions/departments found that 19 agencies reported wildlife had increased on leased lands with no agency reporting a wildlife decline on leased land (Wiggers and Rootes 1987). Lease hunting can have a negative impact however when a high percentage of previously "open land" is leased, resulting in hunting pressure increasing dramatically on state wildlife management areas (Smith 1988). This can result in an uneven distribution of wildlife populations and unsatisfactory harvests with the wildlife manager "pressured" to alleviate the resource management conflict.

From a hunter's perspective, lease hunting provides a reserved, uncrowded hunting area. It also makes hunters more aware of their conduct and that of fellow hunters, since careless actions can deny them further entry to the property. Therefore, fewer landowner-hunter conflicts should result in more access to private land (Wildlife Management Institute, undated) which will also be a benefit to wildlife managers.

Purchasing a hunting lease makes hunting more expensive. Also, as lease hunting becomes more common, fewer private tracts may be available to the general public. Thus, lease hunting has the potential of converting hunting into a sport for the wealthy (Fitzhugh 1988, Geist 1988).

TRADE-OFFS FOR LANDOWNERS - ADVANTAGES

Landowners may receive several benefits from implementing lease hunting practices. Many landowners are able to improve trespass control, increase income, manage wildlife populations and preserve their farm by implementing lease hunting as an alternative land use.

Vandalism and Trespass Control

Vandalism has been reduced and better trespass control obtained through lease hunting (Rasker et al. 1991, Shelton 1981). More than 60% of landowners using leases do so to control access (USDA 1987). A perceived need by landowners to "regulate" hunting on private land may explain why 53% of surveyed landowners in Virginia post their property, while only 10% prohibit hunting (Bromley and Hauser 1984).

Increased Income

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (1988) reported that hunters paid landowners \$77.8 million in access fees in 1985. Gross returns to individual landowners will vary but white-tailed deer leases, for example, have ranged between \$2 to \$10 per acre per year (Wiggers and Rootes 1987) with an average in the South of less than \$3 per acre per year (Lassiter 1985, Marsinko et al. 1992, Melchior 1989). A 1979 Colorado survey reported that 78% of non-residents and 48% of resident hunters would consider paying fees to hunt (Benson 1983). A Kansas study revealed that 35% of the hunters approved of lease hunting with the majority believing they would not change their habits drastically should lease hunting become widespread (Maier and Karim 1987). Therefore, increased landowner income from a hunting lease operation is a viable possibility based on existing lease rates and a willingness from a certain percentage of hunters to support the concept.

Increased "Other" Services

Many hunting clubs that lease land from private landowners invest large sums of money in road development, graveling, culverting, fence building, patrolling, etc., that benefit landowners. Landowners often barter for free services such as medical, dental, tire repair, discounts on trucks/cars/guns, etc., which are provided in lieu of, or in addition to, monetary returns (Shelton 1981).

Enhanced Wildlife Management

Lease hunting arrangements can include wildlife management plans for controlling numbers and quality of wildlife, particularly deer. Leases can be specific, directing attention at some game species and protecting others. Also, the number of hunters can be controlled, as well as where they hunt (Bromley 1988, Davis and Benson 1992).

Farmland Preservation

Even during the years of agricultural expansion (1970's), agricultural land in the U. S. was being converted to non-agricultural use at the rate of 3-million acres per year (Coughlin and Keene 1980). In Florida, for example, spiraling population growth has put tremendous pressure on farms and other undeveloped lands to be converted into housing developments, shopping centers, etc. Increased income via lease hunting can turn a marginal farm into a profitable one in certain instances, thus preserving the farm (Miller 1988, Smith 1988).

TRADE-OFFS FOR LANDOWNERS - DISADVANTAGES

Lease hunting is not a feasible alternative for some landowners. As with any alternative land use, it requires additional investment in management effort.

Liability Status

An increase in landowner liability is a major reason why lease hunting often has failed to develop into an economic enterprise (Dudderar 1981). Landowners participating in a national Agricultural Stabilization Conservation Service's Pilot Public Access Program indicated that liability was a significant concern (Kaiser and Wright 1985).

The level of legal responsibility is greatest when a fee is paid in exchange for the privilege of access. In reality, however, incidents of hunters suing landowners are uncommon (Yarrow et al. 1989).

Increased Time and Money Investment

Operating a lease hunting enterprise as a business requires careful management to make it profitable. Careful management requires a commitment of time and money. Machinery time, the expense of establishing and maintaining wildlife habitat and eliminating hazardous conditions are just a few items that require a time and money investment. If a business commitment is not made, then the lease hunting enterprise is just a sideline which tends to make it non-profitable (Bromley and Benson 1987, Fitzhugh 1987).

Changes in Farm Operation

Entertaining the public may require changes in the farm operation to prevent conflicts with other uses or land management practices. Charging for hunting access may mean changing the way the farm owner and relatives, neighbors and friends hunt on the farm (Bromley and Benson 1987).

Increased Resentment

Relatives, neighbors, friends and hunters may have ill-feelings and resentment since land formerly hunted upon for free is now managed under a lease arrangement. Landowners leasing land in Florida, for example, expressed a fear of vandalism and/or potential "burning out" by disgruntled local residents (Marion and Gates 1988).

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From a forester's perspective, a positive consequence of an increase in lease hunting in the Central hardwood region is the potential forest management spin-off from enhanced wildlife management.

For example, hardwood cutting practices to improve habitat for deer, turkey, and grouse often enhance the forest for timber products such as sawlogs and pulpwood. Since private non-industrial landowners in the Central hardwood region tend to own forestland for non-timber purposes (Birch 1982, Brooks and Birch 1986, Kingsley et al. 1988, Marty et al. 1988, Young et al. 1985), wildlife management via lease hunting could be the incentive to induce landowners to adopt management practices that benefit the wildlife and the timber resource. A recommendation is that foresters and wildlife managers become knowledgeable about lease hunting and assist landowners in investigating the feasibility of establishing a lease hunting enterprise.

Since few existing landowners in the Central hardwood region currently lease hunting rights, few early adopters (role models and opinion leaders) are available to assist potential entrepreneurs. In addition, while there is a wealth of literature nationwide on the subject of gross financial returns from leasing, little information has been published on private non-industrial forestland net returns (i.e., profitability) from leasing. Increased liability and an unknown hunter demand for leased land are also potential barriers to private land leasing. Therefore, even though resource managers might recognize the potential for better wildlife and forest management, disincentives still exist that will likely delay the rapid adoption of lease hunting by private landowners in the region. A recommendation, therefore, is that state wildlife agencies in the Central hardwood region develop pilot leasing programs on private land on an experimental basis. The pilot programs should be coordinated with various agencies and stakeholders (state forestry agencies, Cooperative Extension Service, Soil Conservation Service, U. S. Forest Service, local sportsman's clubs, etc.) and should have a goal of examining not only the potential profitability of lease hunting but the value of lease hunting as a wildlife and forest management tool.

The vast majority of research cited in this paper was generated outside of the Central hardwood region. Additional lease hunting research is needed in the region before in-depth technology transfer and educational programs can be implemented. Research questions that need to be addressed include, but are not limited to:

1. Who are the forest landowners most likely to adopt lease hunting on their property? (Farmers?, industrial owners?, absentee owners?, resident owners?, etc.)
2. What are the personal characteristics of landowners most likely to adopt (age, income, education, etc.) and how can they be identified?
3. What is the demand for lease hunting in the region and what are the characteristics of hunters most likely to lease land?
4. What are the acreage (tract size) requirements needed to operate a successful lease hunting enterprise? How much will the acreage requirements vary by distance from urban areas, proximity to public hunting areas, abundance of wildlife species, etc.?
5. What are the projected costs and returns of operating a lease hunting enterprise in the Central hardwood region? What are the likely scenarios of profitable and non-profitable enterprises?

In sum, lease hunting in the Central hardwood region is a move in the direction of multiple use which can result in more complete utilization of the forestland resource. However, lease hunting will undoubtedly remain controversial due to traditional values and the "split estate" problem. Forest and wildlife managers are encouraged to be objective and forthright in discussing with landowners the positive and negative tradeoffs of this alternative land use.

LITERATURE CITED

- Benson, D. E. 1983. Wildlife as a farm and ranch business. Colorado State Univ. Ext. Serv. Publ. No. 6.514. Ft. Collins, CO. 2 p.
- Birch, T. W. 1982. The forest-land owners of Ohio - 1979. USDA For. Serv. Resour. Bull. NE-74. 84 p.
- Bromley, P. T. 1988. Personal communication.
- Bromley, P. T., and D. E. Benson. 1987. Supplemental income from wildlife on your land. Virginia Coop. Ext. Serv. Publ. No. 420-095. Blacksburg, VA. 2 p.
- Bromley, P. T., and T. G. Hauser. 1984. Hunter access to private lands in Piedmont, Virginia. P. 266-271 *In Proc. Symp. Annual Conf. of SE Assoc. of Fish and Wildl. Agencies.*
- Brooks, R. T., and T. W. Birch. 1986. Opportunities and constraints for wildlife habitat management on private forests of the Northeast. No. J. Applied Forestry 3:109-113.
- Coughlin, R. E., and J. C. Keene. 1980. National agricultural lands study: The protection of farmland. U. S. Gov. Printing Office, Washington, D. C.
- Davis, R. K., and D. E. Benson. 1992. An evaluation of Colorado's ranching program for indigenous wildlife. *In Proc. Symp. 3rd Int. Game Ranching.* Pretoria, S. A. 27 p.
- Dudderar, G. R. 1981. Dollars from wildlife. *In Proc. Symp. National Ext. Wildl. and Fisheries Workshop.* LA Coop. Ext. Serv.
- Fitzhugh, E. F. 1987. Hunter's attitudes in California compared with fees and expenditures for private lands hunting. P. 141-145 *in Proc. Symp. International Ranchers Roundup.* Texas A & M Univ.
- Fitzhugh, E. L. 1988. What can we learn from California's ranching for wildlife program? P. 69-73 *in Proc. Symp. Recreation on rangelands - promises, problems, projections.*
- Geist, V. 1988. How markets in wildlife meat and parts, and the sale of hunting privileges, jeopardize wildlife conservation. *Cons. Biol.* 2:15-26.
- Guynn, D. C., Jr. 1989. Fee hunting on private lands in the South: Synopsis, conclusions, and future directions. P. 149-155 *in Proc. Symp. Fee hunting on private lands in the South,* Yarrow, G. K., and D. C. Guynn, Jr. (eds.). Clemson Univ. Ext. Serv.
- Hackett, E. 1989. The relationship between agencies, wildlife users and wildlife resources. P. 64-71 *in Proc. Symp. Fee hunting on private lands in the South,* Yarrow, G. K., and D. C. Guynn, Jr. (eds.). Clemson Univ. Ext. Serv.
- Howard, W. E., and W. M. Longhurst. 1956. The farmer-sportsman problem and a solution. *Trans. N. Am. Wildl. Conf.* 21:323-331.
- Kaiser, R. A., and B. A. Wright. 1985. Recreational access to private land: Beyond the liability hurdle. *J. Soil and Water Cons.* Nov/Dec:478-481.
- Kingsley, N. P., S. M. Brock, and P. S. Debald. 1988. Focus group interviewing applied to retired West Virginia nonindustrial private forest landowners. No. J. Applied Forestry 5:198-200.

- Lacey, J. R., S. B. Laursen, J. C. Gilchrist, R. M. Brownson, J. Anzick, and S. Doggett. 1988. Economic and social implications of managing wildlife on private land in Montana. *Northwest Sci.* 62:1-9.
- Lassiter, R. L., Jr. 1985. Access to and management of the wildlife resources on large private timberland holdings in the southeastern United States. College of Business Adm. Monogr. No. 1, Tenn. Technol. Univ., Cookeville, TN. 253 p.
- Maier, P. A., and M. Karim. 1987. How do some Kansas sportsmen and landowners feel about lease hunting? *Kansas State Univ. Coop. Ext. Serv. Misc. Publ. Manhattan, KS.* 16 p.
- Marlon, W. R., and C. A. Gates. 1988. Hunting lease arrangements in Florida and the Southeast. *Florida Coop. Ext. Serv. Circular 793.* Gainesville, FL. 19 p.
- Marsinko, A. P., W. M. Smathers, Jr., D. C. Guynn, Jr., and G. L. Stucky, Jr. 1992. The potential economic effect of lease hunting on forest management in the Southeast. *So. J. Applied Forestry* 16:200-203.
- Marty, T. D., W. B. Kurtz, and J. H. Gramann. 1988. PNIF owner attitudes in the midwest: A case study in Missouri and Wisconsin. *No. J. Applied Forestry* 5:194-197.
- Melchior, M. A. 1989. Wildlife and fee hunting on forest industry lands in the South: A Weyerhaeuser company perspective. P. 99-106 *in Proc. Symp. Fee hunting on private lands in the South*, Yarrow, G. K., and D. C. Guynn, Jr. (eds.). Clemson Univ. Ext. Serv.
- Miller, O. 1988. From beans to birds. *Turkey Call*, March/April:50-52.
- President's Commission on Americans Outdoors. 1987. *Americans outdoors: The legacy, the challenge.* Island Press, Washington, D. C. 426 p.
- Rasker, R., R. L. Johnson, and D. Cleaves. 1991. The market for waterfowl hunting on private agricultural land in western Oregon. *Res. Bull. 70*, College of For., Oregon State Univ. 14 p.
- Shelton, R. 1981. Fee hunting in Mississippi. *In Proc. Symp. National Ext. Wildl. and Fisheries Workshop.* LA Coop. Ext. Serv.
- Shelton, R. 1989. Fee hunting systems and important considerations. P. 24-32 *in Proc. Symp. Fee hunting on private lands in the South*, Yarrow, G. K., and D. C. Guynn, Jr. (eds.). Clemson Univ. Ext. Serv.
- Smith, F. 1988. Personal communication with Florida Bureau of Wildlife Land Management staff member.
- USDA. 1987. Estimating prices for access to opportunities for hunting, fishing, and viewing wildlife on public and private lands. *Natural Resources and Environment Steering Comm. Report.* Washington, D. C. 26 p.
- USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 1988. The 1985 national survey of hunting, fishing and wildlife-associated recreation. U. S. Gov. Printing Office, Washington, D. C. 167 p.
- Wiggers, E. P., and W. A. Rootes. 1987. Lease hunting: Views of the nation's wildlife agencies. *Trans. N. Am. Wildl. and Natur. Resour. Conf.* 52:525-529.

Wildlife Management Institute. Undated. Improving access to private land. Washington, D. C. 15 p.

Yarrow, G. K., D. C. Guynn, Jr., and B. S. Mabry, Jr. 1989. Liability and fee hunting: Landowner concerns. P. 42-46 *in* Proc. Symp. Fee hunting on private lands in the South, Yarrow, G. K., and D. C. Guynn, Jr. (eds.). Clemson Univ. Ext. Serv.

Young, R. A., M. R. Reichenbach, and F. H. Perkuhn. 1985. PNIF management: A social-psychological study of owners in Illinois. No. J. Applied Forestry 2:91-94.