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Hunting and the Changing Face of Texas

Contact: Dr. Billy Higginbotham (903-834-6191), b-higginbotham@tamu.edu

VERTON -- What is the future of hunting in Texas and how is our population going to impact that future? Those are questions frequently pondered by Dr. Billy Higginbotham, Texas Cooperative Extension wildlife specialist at Overton.

“Demography, the study of the size, distribution and characteristics of a human population, paints an interesting portrait of our state,” said Higginbotham. “The population of Texas is changing at a rapid rate, and these changes will surely impact hunting and how all Texans perceive the sport in the 21st century. “The major demographic trends affecting the future of Texas include changes in the rates and sources of population growth, increase in minorities and changes in household composition. Each of these trends also promises to impact hunting’s future.”

The specialist said over the past 150 years, Texas’ population has grown from slightly over 200,000 to about 20 million. More Texans means less wildlife habitat. Fully 80% of Texans live in urban areas. Suburbs gobble up vast amounts of wildlife habitat and related hunting areas.

“Our population has increased,” said Higginbotham, “but our hunting population has dropped from about 8 percent in 1970 to around 6 percent today. Our total hunter numbers have stabilized at around one million. Our overall population is increasing, but it’s clear our hunter numbers are not.”

Aging is another factor Higginbotham said is working against hunting. The average hunter was 36 years old 25 years ago. Today, he’s closer to 42. The specialist said there aren’t enough young hunters joining the sport to replace those who retire from the activity.

“The face of Texas is also changing,” said Higginbotham. “Ethnically, Texas hunters are 94 percent Anglo, 3 percent Hispanic and less than 2 percent African-American. By 2030, Texas will be 36 percent Anglo, 10 percent African-American and 46 percent Hispanic. This represents a significant decline in the ethnicity that has traditionally made up the vast majority of hunters.

“The average Texas household also has implications for the future of hunting. The sport has traditionally been a male- dependent, kinship-linked sport. Almost a third of Texas households are non-traditional family units, with 15 percent of all households headed by single parents. Of these, almost 80 percent are headed by women - a traditional non-hunting segment of the population.

“Today’s hunters are 93 percent male. Historically, males have participated in hunting with fathers, friends or sons. Females typically hunt with fathers, brothers or their spouses. The increase in non-traditional family units and single parent households has certainly impacted the recruitment rate of youth into hunting.”

The specialist said such other factors as lease costs, game scarcity and having no place to hunt are cited as reasons why hunters quit the sport. The high dollar commitment and competition for time from other outdoor recreational activities have also served as hunting deterrents for many Texans.

A recent survey the specialist referred to, revealed that fully one-third of Texas’ citizens have no interest in hunting.

To stem the tide away from hunting, Higginbotham said a "Future of Hunting Think Tank" has recently been formed to address the problems, trends and solutions facing the sport. He feels proactive efforts like the Think Tank and aggressive statewide youth educational programs are positive steps that must be taken to educate Texans about hunting and its role in the 21st century.

“Hunting has been an important part of our Texas heritage and remains an important part of the Texas economy,” said Higginbotham. “Of the estimated \$1.4 billion dollars hunting generates toward our economy, half is spent in rural areas. If hunting is to survive well into the 21st century, concerted efforts must be made to recruit new hunters into the sport, including youth, females and minorities and to educate the non-hunting public on the role and importance hunting has in our state.”