

ELK HUNTING IN IDAHO: UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES OF HUNTERS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

The main goal of this study of Idaho Elk hunters is to provide the Idaho Department of Fish and Game representative information about the views of elk hunters in Idaho. Descriptions of who they are, what their preferences and motivations are, how they make decisions about where to hunt, and their opinions on various Elk management issues were collected in the summer of 2012. This study is the first comprehensive investigation of Idaho Elk hunters since a similar study was conducted by the University of Idaho over 20 years ago in 1988-89, and provides an important update to knowledge about Elk hunters. The results provided here, in combination with biological data, are key to continuing to improve wildlife planning and management in the state of Idaho.

SURVEY OBJECTIVES

This current study was designed to provide contemporary data for the quantification of the following characteristics of a sample Idaho Elk hunters:

1. Hunting Elk hunter profiles (basic demographics, travel patterns, hunting history, harvest success, zone use);
2. Elk hunting preferences and motivations;
3. Acceptability of current and proposed management strategies and the trade-offs involved;
4. Decisions about where to hunt;
5. Attributes of a quality Elk hunting experience;
6. Hunting satisfaction; and
7. Perceptions of predators

METHODS

Survey research using a mail back and web-based instrument was used to collect data from stratified random samples of hunters licensed to hunt Elk in 2011 Idaho. This study uses a differential design (Graziano & Raulin, 2007), seeking to understand selected characteristics of groups designated on the basis of preexisting variables. The questionnaire (survey instrument) was designed with input from representatives of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. The instrument was pre-tested on a convenience sample of Moscow, Idaho, residents who had similar recreational propensities that the study required.

SAMPLING

The sample was a stratified random sample of Idaho residents:

- Mailed to 6,200 hunters who purchased a general Elk tag in 2011.
- Sample was stratified by the 29 Elk hunting zones
- Random sample of 200 resident and 20 nonresident hunters in each of the 29 elk zones.
- N=6,200 hunters (18 or older) from all Idaho Elk hunting licensees in 2011 (data from Idaho Department of Fish and Game)

A total of 2,786 useable questionnaires were returned and used in the analyses, which is a 48.5% response rate after accounting for undeliverable instruments and refusals. This response is judged to be adequate to produce a statistically representative sample of the population of Idaho Elk hunters at $\pm 10\%$ level of accuracy.

ELK HUNTER PROFILES

- ❖ Idaho Elk hunters are very experienced, the majority of whom have hunted Elk in Idaho every year since 2005.
- ❖ Hunters most frequently travel on foot when hunting, and they almost never use mountain bikes.
- ❖ The majority of Elk hunters typically use a rifle to hunt. About a third use a compound bow.
- ❖ The three primary reasons hunters decide to hunt during Elk archery, short-range weapons or muzzleloader seasons is to hunt when fewer hunters are afield, to hunt during the rut, and for the adventure of hunting with these types of weapons.
- ❖ Overall, hunters are fairly successful in harvesting Elk in Idaho, averaging about 23% over the past ten years.
- ❖ Almost all Idaho Elk hunters are dedicated to the sport, and if for some reason they could not hunt Elk in Idaho, they would miss it a great deal. If they could not hunt Elk in Idaho, hunters reported they would spend more time hunting other big game, or they would hunt Elk in other states.
- ❖ The majority of Elk hunters typically hunt in the same zone every year.
- ❖ When asked what makes the zone they hunted in 2011 desirable, half the hunters said a zone that was close to their home or cabin, and half said a general zone that they can get every year (not a controlled hunt) was most desirable.
- ❖ One-half of the Elk hunters perceive that in 2011 Elk numbers have declined abruptly in the last 10 years and Elk are scarce in the zone they hunted.
- ❖ Elk hunters have hunted in their preferred zones on average for over 14 years. Those who hunted Elk in other states most frequently did so in Montana, Colorado and Wyoming.
- ❖ Three-quarters of the hunters believe predators are the primary factor limiting Elk numbers in the zone they hunted.
- ❖ A large majority would like to be able to hunt in multiple zones, and over one-half would be willing to pay a higher fee to do so.
- ❖ Almost half of the Elk hunters have experience hunting in a capped zone. Generally, capping has not had much affect on hunting behavior. A majority of hunters felt that Elk hunting has become worse since the zone they hunt in was “capped.”

ELK HUNTING PREFERENCES AND MOTIVATIONS

- ❖ Hunters reported that harvesting a mature bull (6 points a side) or a large bull (greater than 350 Boone & Crockett points) was most desirable.
- ❖ When asked how important various reasons were to them for hunting Elk, the top six reasons were “just being outdoors,” “seeing Elk in a natural setting,” “being close to nature,” “viewing scenery,” “being with friends,” and “doing something with my family.”
- ❖ The motivations associated with harvesting Elk were of less importance than these reasons that describe being immersed in the natural setting. In almost every case, Idaho Elk hunters prefer to preserve the amount of opportunity to hunt over hunting for large bull Elk.

ACCEPTABILITY OF CURRENT AND PROPOSED MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND THE TRADE-OFFS INVOLVED

- ❖ Elk hunters generally favored five of seven potential ways to improve Elk hunting, if needed. The most favorable or acceptable was to choose only one weapon such as archery, muzzleloader, or rifle.
- ❖ A majority of Elk hunters clearly found three potential restrictions to increase the quality and size of Elk in Idaho and to improve Elk hunting opportunities to be favorable or acceptable. Over 70% favored making some Elk zones foot and horse access only, restricting the use of OHVs, and choosing a single weapon for the entire Elk season.

A clear majority found it unacceptable to be restricted to being able to purchase an Elk tag only every other year, having more controlled hunts that provide larger animals but not being able to hunt Elk every year, and more controlled hunts but not being able to hunt Elk every year if you did not draw a tag.

- ❖ Seventy two percent of the Elk hunters said that that it was unlikely or very unlikely that they would quit hunting Elk if IDFG introduces restrictions that reduce Elk hunting opportunities to improve populations.
- ❖ A majority of the Elk hunters feel it would be acceptable to have a big game regulation that sets the general season conditions for 2 years in advance, but almost 30% said that they would need more information.

WHEN AND WHERE TO HUNT

- ❖ The top five characteristics that affected their choice of where to hunt Elk in Idaho were the ability to hunt every year, an area where they have access to public lands, an area where they think they have the greatest chance of harvesting an Elk, an area where wolves are not present, and an area with few other Elk hunters.
- ❖ Elk hunters primarily prefer to hunt on any weekday, on the last week of the season or the first week of the season. They tend to avoid the first weekend, any weekend in general and opening day.

ATTRIBUTES OF A QUALITY ELK HUNTING EXPERIENCE

- ❖ Attributes that define a quality Elk hunting experience center on preserving the hunting opportunity. Most important were being able to hunt for Elk every year and seeing a harvestable Elk.

HUNTING SATISFACTION

- ❖ One-third of hunters felt that there were times when the numbers of other hunters seriously detracted from their hunting experience. The four aspects Elk hunters were most satisfied with in 2011 were the opportunity for friends and family to hunt Elk together, the timing of the Elk season, the length of the season, and the amount of Elk hunting opportunity.
- ❖ They were least satisfied with the number of bulls seen, the number of harvestable Elk seen, the number of Elk seen, and Elk harvest success.

PERCEPTIONS OF PREDATORS

- ❖ Three-quarters of the Elk hunters reported that the presence of wolves affected where they hunt Elk, and just over one-half said the opportunity to hunt Wolves along with Elk is important to them.
- ❖ Close to one-half (46.5%) hunt Elk in zones with few Wolves.
- ❖ Over two-thirds (64%) said they did not choose their Elk zone because of the negative effect Wolves have had on their Elk hunting experience.
- ❖ Almost two-thirds of the Elk hunters anticipate Elk numbers will increase now that IDFG is responsible for managing wolves.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- ❖ The respondents have a considerable amount of experience hunting in Idaho, averaging almost 50 years of Idaho hunting experience.
- ❖ Idaho Elk hunters also hunt for other species, notable Mule deer and upland game/birds.
- ❖ Idaho Elk hunters have lived in Idaho an average of 33 years and have an average age of 49.3 years.