

In light of the bitter Sunday hunting debate, Maine hunters should start barbecuing

Listening to the bitter Sunday hunting debate over the past few weeks reminded me that we already know how to meet the needs of hunters and resolve the fears of landowners.

Kenneth “Doody” Michaud, Fort Kent’s police chief since 1976, could teach hunters a lot about good landowner relations. He and the local snowmobile and ATV clubs work hard to build and keep good relationships with landowners. The local clubs not only deal with problems and complaints quickly, they also show landowners how much they are appreciated.

“In Fort Kent, I have 110 landowners,” Michaud told me a few years ago. “And every summer we give them two tickets for the husband and wife to go to the chicken barbecue at the Blockhouse. And we pay that out of our snowmobile grant.”

Did you ever hear of hunters barbecuing chicken for landowners? Well, maybe it’s time they started.

Just urging hunters to ask permission to hunt on someone else’s property isn’t enough to prevent conflicts between roughly 200,000 hunters and the private landowners who control 94 percent of the state’s land. Many hunters aren’t comfortable knocking on landowner’s doors to ask permission and most landowners aren’t comfortable dealing with request after request. What’s needed is a third party to work with both groups, to insure that both landowners and hunters get what they need.

Hunters don’t have to invent a system. They just need to adapt one that already works. And in light of the hard feelings generated by the Sunday hunting debate, there’s never been a better time to get started.

There are several hundred sporting clubs scattered throughout the state, most of which are looking hard for ways to attract new members, especially younger members. Many could be revitalized if they had something new to offer -- not just to landowners, but also to their own members.

So I’m proposing representatives of the Maine hunting community (from the Sportsman’s Alliance of Maine, the Maine Bowhunters Association, local rod and gun clubs and other affected groups) and representatives of the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife form a small working group. My choice to lead it would be IFW Deputy Commissioner Paul Jacques, who skillfully led the Governor’s ATV Task Force and many other groups.

The next steps would be:

1. To develop a pilot program for a grassroots landowner relations program. The group could choose the best ideas from other programs, from the Maine Bowhunters Association landowners program to the strategies used by snowmobile and ATV clubs. Just as snowmobile clubs do, sporting clubs could work with landowners in their own communities. They could find out what individual landowners need or want to keep their land open to hunters. Some landowners might want to reserve certain times for their own use. Others might permit hunters, but only on foot. Some might want to limit the number of hunters on the property at one time. Some may simply want an intermediary to handle phone calls about access. A model agreement could be developed that could be adapted to suit individual landowners and clubs. (Virginia has one for recreational leases that could serve as a starting point.) The agreement would set down what the landowner would allow and what club would do. For instance, the landowner might put up signs saying, "Access by permission only," but the contact number would direct hunters to a club member.
2. To look for other ways to reward or help landowners. Landowners who deal with snowmobile and ATV clubs have another layer of protection because the Maine Department of Conservation consider landowners a top priority. DOC's Off-Road Vehicle Division won't give out grants for trail maintenance unless landowner permission has been obtained. Those grants also can be canceled if clubs don't respond adequately to landowners' problems. For larger landowners, such as Central Maine Power, DOC even co-signs all CMP power line licenses with clubs, which obligates the department to be responsible for trail maintenance. The same is true for forestry companies, such as Mead, International Paper, Georgia Pacific and others. DOC administers railroad crossings on the Bangor and Aroostook, and St. Lawrence & Atlantic. DOC also purchases liability insurance for landowners who allow authorized snowmobile/ATV trails. The ATV Task Force put together a lot of information on this subject that could prove helpful for hunting.
3. Seek funding to start a pilot program. We'd probably need to develop a database to keep track of local landowners and their preferences. We'd also need funding for public relations, to reach both landowners and hunters. It would be a good idea to pay a part-time project coordinator from the local club to keep the program on track. Perhaps Maine's statewide sporting organizations or even local clubs could donate some money. As my donation, I'd be willing write an Outdoor Heritage grant (for free) and search my grant database for other sources of funding.
4. Enlist a local club (perhaps more than one) willing to give the program a try in the upcoming hunting season. Clubs could hold meetings before the hunting season to let hunters know where and when they could hunt. It also would be a good opportunity to talk about ethics and courtesy. If hunters break the rules, club members could field complaints from landowners and talk to the hunters. In other

states, some sporting groups offer insurance to members for a few dollars a year to cover damage or accidents while hunting.

5. Although clubs could mediate many problems between landowners and land users, there always will be some people who refuse to cooperate. So law enforcement officers, particularly the local game warden, could work with clubs and landowners, be aware of the problem areas and show up to deal with troublemakers. This would fit in well with the Maine Warden Service's plans for expanded community policing.
6. At the end of the 2005 season, the working group would evaluate how well the pilot program worked and develop a program for use by clubs across the state.

Snowmobilers once had big problems with landowners, but now they've developed an infrastructure that's not only designed to deal with complaints, but also to give landowners the feeling that they're appreciated and that their concerns matter. ATV riders are following that same path. Over time and with DOC's support, snowmobilers changed their image with landowners, town leaders, legislators and law enforcement officers. Now they're seen as neighbors - responsible ones - not as threats.

It's clearly time for hunters to do the same. As former fish and wildlife commissioner Bill Vail often said, in the future, the question will not be: Is there any game to hunt? It will be: Is there any place to hunt game.