

What are the public's attitudes towards hunting?

Hunting has become a controversial issue, with hunters on the one hand, who realize that the hunting industry is essential to ensure a future for wildlife, and animal-rights activists on the other hand, who would do anything in their power to make an end to the organized hunting industry. These animal-rights organizations often exert pressure on governments to ban hunting by creating the impression that their point of view enjoys the support of the majority of the public, while hunting associations are supported by only a small number of hunters.

Recent research that was conducted amongst the economically active public in Port Elizabeth, showed that the majority of the public (53%) supports hunting, while a mere 26% opposed hunting and 21% had neutral feelings towards hunting. An important finding was that people who oppose hunting can be divided into two categories. The first category was of the opinion that although they personally disapprove of hunting they also felt that other people should have the right to hunt if they want to. Evidently, these people do not pose any serious threat to the hunting industry. The second category was of the opinion that nobody should be allowed to hunt. Although these people represented only 15% of the public, they pose a serious threat to the hunting industry. These results indicate that only a small percentage of the public finds hunting truly socially unacceptable.

As far as demographical factors are concerned, gender has the most significant influence on the public's attitudes towards hunting. Females were much more likely to oppose hunting than males. While 40% of females opposed hunting, only 14% of males opposed it. Similarly, 68% of males supported hunting, while only 35% of females supported it.

The public who opposed hunting was mostly of the opinion that hunting endangered wildlife (54%), that it is morally wrong to kill animals (51%), that hunting inflicts pain on animals (47%), that they love animals (31%), that animals are used to benefit people (27%), that hunters behave badly (19%) and that hunting is a

dangerous activity (17%). It is important to realize that these findings show how hunting is viewed through the eyes of those who oppose it.

The majority of the public (78%) were of the opinion that hunting has the potential to be beneficial to wildlife populations *if it is done correctly*, while only small percentage of the public (12%) were of the opinion that hunting cannot be beneficial to wildlife populations even if it is done correctly. This shows that the public recognizes the potential benefits of hunting to a large extent. Despite this, it was found that 41% of the public believe that hunting endangers wildlife populations. These almost contradicting results show that, although the public recognize the potential benefits of hunting, many are also of the opinion that hunting does not live up to its potential to be beneficial to wildlife, possibly because they believe hunting is done in an irresponsibly or unsustainably manner. This implies that a large proportion of the public is probably not aware of the many contributions hunting makes to conservation. Therefore, the message needs to be conveyed to the public that hunting is done in a responsible and sustainable manner, and the contributions that hunting makes to conservation should be highlighted.

The research also showed that negative attitudes towards hunting are often based on people's incorrect beliefs about hunting. The belief that hunting endangers wildlife was identified as the most significant belief on which people base their negative attitudes towards hunting. People that hold this belief towards hunting were *nine* times more likely to feel that hunting should be made illegal (36%) than those who felt that hunting does not endanger wildlife (4%). Another incorrect belief, on which negative attitudes towards hunting were often based, is that hunting does not form an important part of wildlife management. People that hold this belief towards hunting were *ten* times more likely to oppose hunting (71%) than those who believed that hunting was an important part of wildlife management (7%). It is important to realize that people's attitudes towards hunting can be influenced by exposing them to information that may alter their underlying beliefs about hunting. Thus, the public's attitudes towards hunting can be positively influenced by addressing people's incorrect beliefs and by educating the public about the importance of hunting in the management and conservation of wildlife.

Hunters have the potential to positively influence people's attitudes towards hunting. The research showed that the degree of exposure to hunting has a significant influence on a person's attitude towards it. People who have never been directly exposed to hunting were five times more likely to oppose hunting (35%) than those who have been directly exposed to hunting in the past (7%). This is probably because someone who has never been exposed to hunting will be more likely to have an inaccurate perception of it. It was also found that social ties have a significant influence on a person's attitude towards hunting. The research showed that people who have family members or friends who hunt (even if they do not hunt themselves), are much more likely to approve of hunting (66%) than people who do not have any family members or friends who hunt (37%). This is probably because a person who has family members or friends who hunt has been exposed to the hunting mind and is aware of the benefits of hunting. It is thus clear that in order to improve the public's attitudes towards hunting, one must improve the public's understanding of what hunting is all about.