

Developing A Hunting Lease Enterprise

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Management of wildlife on private lands can become an economic enterprise within certain constraints. Wildlife generally cannot be bought or sold. However, a landowner can control access to his private land. He can transfer this right of ingress to whomever he desires by gift or sale, subject to any conditions which he wishes to impose. Allowing access to one's property for a fee, in order to hunt, is the basis of a hunting lease enterprise.

The first requirement in the development of a hunting lease enterprise is a good understanding of what is being offered for sale. A successful enterprise provides more than just access. It provides the opportunity for enjoyable outdoor experiences. For most hunters, taking a limit of game is not critical to having an enjoyable trip. Even when game is relatively scarce, a memorably pleasant experience is possible.

Many little things external to the hunt itself contribute to a enjoyable trip. Hospitality goes a long way. A friendly atmosphere, a feeling of welcome, and conviction on the part of the hunter that he is not a problem or that he is not being criticized for his lack of "savvy" are things which cost little but give big returns. The hunter should feel that the landowner is seriously interested in his enjoying the hunt. Others such as the service station attendant, cafe waitress and grocery store checker also play an important part in making a hunting trip to a particular area a pleasant memory.

A successful hunting lessor, like a successful retail merchant, will appreciate his hunters' business and will probably grow to enjoy their visits. Causes for dissatisfaction with the hunting lease arrangement on the lessor's part could be many; however, it is extremely important that he objectively examine the situation because his actions could be the source of any problem.

A hunting lease enterprise is more similar to a retail service business than to agricultural production. There are neither standard products nor structured markets. Hunters (customers) must have direct access to the land; thus, some degree of direct contact between producer and consumer is necessary.

Hunting leases have caused unpleasant experiences for some farmers and ranchers simply because they did not know what they were getting into. They were poorly prepared to deal with the problems or to recognize the opportunities that arose. If a rancher does not enjoy extended contact with numerous strangers, he should not

deal with hunters directly, but designate a contact person to do so. Adjoining neighbors might combine their ranches into one game harvest unit with one man handling the hunting and the other ranchers seeing after the livestock chores during the hunting period. A variation of this might be a partnership in which one partner operates the livestock business and the other manages the hunting lease, with profit sharing between the two enterprises.

In order to combine small ownerships into a management unit of sufficient size for leasing, one owner might manage a hunting operation on several ranches. He could receive compensation for his work time, with each ranch being paid according to the number of acres hunted and the amount of game harvested from each ranch. This is a type of share-partnership that has been used for quail hunting.

Hunting rights could be leased to a third party who, in turn, would sub-lease to hunters. This lease broker business would be separate from that of any of the ranches hunted on. Such an arrangement can be satisfactory. However, past experience has shown that it is not without problems since the rancher will come in contact with two different groups of people with two different objectives. The lease broker will be interested in making a profit and may not have a long-term interest in the ranch, and since the hunters may not be concerned about the ranch, they will be responsive to the lease broker instead of the rancher. Before choosing this route, perhaps it would be better for the rancher to have one season of experience dealing directly with hunters. He would then know what to expect and could anticipate constraints that he wants to incorporate into any further lease agreement.

The presence of hunters on a ranch will necessitate some planning and some adjustments in the livestock operation. If calving, lambing or kidding occurs during the hunting season, these animals might be concentrated in a trap or a pasture and this area excluded from the hunting lease. This would allow the rancher to continue checking his stock without any disturbance to animals or hunters.

A written lease contract is an excellent means of communicating those things that are important to the rancher and the hunter. The process of writing out the lease agreement will prevent many problems from ever developing.

There are many time frames for hunting leases, from year round to single day. Each has advantages and disadvantages. There is no single “best lease” arrangement since each should be custom designed to meet both the rancher’s and hunter’s needs. Considerations might include adequate harvest of game, particularly deer; livestock management; calving or lambing times and movement of livestock; best hunting times; early season versus late season; and hunter-preferred hunting time (first week of season, weekends or holidays). This list is not exhaustive, but suggests some examples.

Until a rancher has gained some experience with hunting leases, a short duration lease, certainly no longer than the hunting season, would be advisable. Even with experience, the landowner may be in the most advantageous position to renegotiate his hunting lease on a yearly basis. Various conditions change such as prices, hunters and ranching conditions. It would be best to be able to make the appropriate adjustments in the lease agreement to keep up with changing conditions.

If the rancher enjoys people, then there are many things he can do to ensure a pleasant experience for hunters. For example, several years ago one Hill Country rancher installed butchering facilities on his ranch for his hunters to use. He showed them correct butchering techniques and even demonstrated how to make sausage. The hunters processed their own deer. Some hunters actually spent a couple of days on the total trip just processing their game. It was an integral part of the hunting trip, a pleasant recreational experience.

There are spin-off benefits to this enhancement of the recreational experience. It helps overcome hunter hesitation in killing does, since the hunter takes home processed meat rather than a “mother deer” carcass. This promotes good relations with the hunter’s family because he brought home processed meat rather than a smelly carcass. It also gives the hunters an opportunity to recall and share a pleasant experience when the hunter serves his sausage to guests. This option must conform to current Texas Parks and Wildlife regulations and interpretation.

Today, hunters are under pressure to bring home something every time they hunt. When the hunter arrives home, everyone from his wife and kids to the neighbors and men at the office ask him what he shot. If he brings home something, he has a response to this inquiry. Recognizing this pressure, one rancher buys dressed quail from a game farm to ensure that his poorest hunters will always go home with one good mess of birds. One year when calf prices were down, a rancher gave part of a calf, processed and frozen, to each of his big game hunters who did not get a deer. He viewed this as a good return for his calves and an investment in keeping satisfied customers.

Recognizing that many hunters have never enjoyed a meal of well prepared game, some ranchers prepare a game supper for their hunters. A few ranchers have made such game suppers an annual affair for many years. As an example of the significance of such good will efforts, on

one lease, several of the older hunters continued to participate in the lease even though they no longer actively hunted, just so they could continue to bring their wives to this dinner get-together.

These evidences of goodwill are not part of a hunting lease but are means for the rancher to express appreciation to the hunter for his business and a way of recognizing hunters who are cooperative and sensitive to the rancher’s interest. Of course, each of these promotional activities involves time and expense, so they must be evaluated in terms of costs and benefits derived.

To enhance the hunting experience, it is important to know about the physical condition and hunting skills of lessers. Wounded animals that escape, or shots missed because of a sight being knocked off during the trip to the hunting camp, are not uncommon. A safe firing range for checking the zero of the rifles is useful. A mound of earth pushed up within a clearing with easy access, located so as not to disturb the hunting, makes a good range. However, a steady bench-rest made from posts set in the ground increases the usability of the range.

Some landowners have elaborate ranges with moving targets. This serves two purposes. One is seeing that the firearms are functional. Another is giving the hunter some practice and the astute hunting lessor an opportunity to evaluate the hunter’s shooting ability. It also allows the lessor to make operational adjustments based on the hunter’s ability. Seeing that a poor shooter gets a blind in a smaller clearing increases his chance of a clean kill and reduces the chances of disappointment from a wounded animal escaping because a shot was taken at too great a distance. Similar ideas apply to shotgun shooting. A hand trap and case of clay pigeons not only can help the hunter sharpen his shooting skills, but might also provide a pleasant substitute to offset a shortage of birds, uncooperative dogs or tired feet. Some ranchers have skeet ranges, traps, towers and/or crazy quail layouts for bird hunters.

There are other things which involve little or no cost but which reap benefits—trash receptacles for hunters to use, outline maps showing how to get to the ranch from the nearest highway, small aerial photos of the ranch with hunting and nonhunting areas marked, newsletters to hunters during the summer to inform them of game conditions, etc.

Focusing on customer satisfaction does not require large capital investments. Plush overnight facilities are not mandatory for a successful hunting lease. Some hunters prefer to camp out or bring recreational vehicles. Minimum requirements for overnight stays might simply be a good access road to a location with water, a camp fire site, table and trash receptacle. The point is that purchasing a hunting lease, for most hunters is investing in an opportunity for a pleasant experience, not purchasing a commodity. Management of the hunting lease enterprise to ensure that the customer has a pleasant experience is the key to successfully dealing with hunters.

The economic success of a hunting lease requires that business decisions be based on records, just as in any other business. Notes scribbled on the back of an envelope and filed in the shirt pocket may be sufficient if access is only provided to a very small group of hunters. However, with the addition of services, facilities, utilities and supplies, records must be kept in order to make sound economic decisions. Getting the greatest net return from a hunting lease does not necessarily mean managing game for the highest dollar "trophy bucks," investing in a plush hunting lodge, offering guided hunts, stocking exotic game or beginning a put-and-take game bird operation. Within rather restrictive circumstances these practices may be profitable, but for most hunting lease operations they

would be unrecovered costs. A third component of a hunting lease enterprise is that of efficient game management. Efficient game production, like livestock production, not only influences the quantity and quality of animals, but also affects net returns. Game management practices must contribute to population abundance or welfare at reasonable cost. Tradeoffs with other land uses will be necessary, but multiple uses can be compatible.

Optimum profitability in a hunting lease enterprise requires coordination of marketing, advertising, production and good business management.