

# Summary of Research

## Profile Of A Montana Elk Hunter From 1988 to 1998

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For many elk hunters, the end of one hunting season is simply the beginning of the next. There are stories of past hunts, tracks seen, bugles made, and shots missed. Hunters enjoy the good-natured joshing of who drew the short straw and had to keep the fire stoked, the religious cleaning of their guns, loading of shells, and the endless list of purchases to be made. Hunting is a sanctuary from the everyday grind of work, meetings, customers, and phones—it is the last bastion of “getting away from it all.”

But exactly what is it that elk hunters hope to gain from a day or week in the woods? Meat? Antlers? Or is it camaraderie? In 1988, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) conducted an “Elk Hunter Preference Survey” in conjunction with an exhaustive study of the economic value of elk hunting in Montana. The objectives of the survey were to describe elk hunters in terms of age, income, and other demographic factors, to learn in detail why they hunt elk, and to identify the different types of elk hunters who may hunt for different reasons but who obtain similar benefits. The survey produced a profile of the average Montana elk hunter and shed light on how resident and nonresident hunters view the opportunities and experiences available.

To find out if elk hunter characteristics and motivations have changed over the past decade, in 1998 we conducted a second elk hunter preference survey (King and Brooks, 2000). We found that the overwhelming majority of hunters (96%) still go hunting because they want to be outdoors, enjoy the solitude, the pleasant scenery, and the natural setting. But if we were to paint

a portrait of today’s resident elk hunter, we would see that the average hunter (if there is such a creature) has aged a few years. He is now a 42 year old male with 18 years of hunting experience tucked under his belt, hunts 11 days a year, and earns \$35,000-\$39,999 annually. Note, we say “he” here because most elk hunters (94 %) are male.

The nonresident elk hunter, on the other hand, is slightly older than our resident hunter. He is 47 years old with 12 years of hunting experience, hunts seven days a year, and earns substantially more than the average resident hunter (\$50,000-\$74,999 annually). He, too, has aged since 1988, when he was 43 years old with eight years of hunting experience.

The more recent survey showed hunters’ behaviors and management preferences are still varied, based in part on the type of experience they are seeking. Fewer hunters chose to “rough it” in 1998 than in 1988. More non-resident hunters (37%) than resident hunters (17%) camped, and 15% of the resident and 26% of the non-resident hunters used horses. Seventeen percent of the residents and 21% of the nonresidents preferred the comfort of a trailer or motorhome.

Many hunters chose to drive to an area and then walk into the backcountry. The number of roads available for vehicle use was rated as about right by 78% of the hunters. Half (51%) of those surveyed felt that only open roads should be used to retrieve game with a vehicle, however, opinion on the use of roads for game retrieval was divided in 1998, just as it was 10 years ago.

When hunters were asked about their most recent trip, we found they hunted the same area an average of two years--significantly lower than in the earlier survey when they said they hunted the same area for five years. They walked an average of six miles and mainly hunted with a rifle in 1998, although the percentage using a bow increased from 1% to 15% between surveys.

One-fifth of the hunters surveyed were successful in filling their elk tag in 1998 which was about the same as it was in 1988. Sixty-five percent of the successful



nonresidents and 41% of the successful resident hunters bagged bulls. In the earlier survey, about four-fifths of the elk taken were antlered.

About a fifth of the survey respondents harvested big game other than elk in 1998, mostly mule deer (66%) and white tailed deer (33%).

Two-thirds of hunters were alone or with only one other person in their vehicle. While one-fifth of the hunters didn't see any other hunters, those that did said the other hunters they saw affected their own enjoyment of the trip. Resident hunters were much more likely than non-resident hunters to say there were too many hunters in their hunting area.

Although only 6% of the survey respondents were women, the number of women participating in hunting is increasing. Thanks to programs like "*Becoming an Outdoors Woman*," aimed at creating more awareness and comfort in the outdoors, women are improving their knowledge and skills in gun handling, archery, and orienteering.

As in 1988, nonresident hunters were about twice as likely to belong to a conservation club (66% for non-residents versus 31% for residents).

It is difficult to put the feelings and values of hunters into dollar and cents, but the economic value of elk hunting to the Montana economy is impressive. From Jordan to Libby, hunters' dollars provide significant financial impact in terms of sales for food, lodging, transportation, and guide fees to local businesses. The survey showed the average resident hunter traveled 104 miles and spent \$142 per hunting trip. The average non-resident hunter traveled 1,224 miles and spent \$1,659 per hunting trip.

Interestingly, 61% of the hunters stated their hunting trip was worth more than they actually spent, and they were willing to pay even more to improve their hunting experience, (i.e. improve their chance of getting a 6 point or better bull or to see fewer hunters). Resident elk hunters reported they were willing to pay an additional \$311 over and above what they actually spent on their most recent trip. Nonresidents' willingness to pay was significantly higher, \$931 more per trip. Nonresident hunters typically spend significantly more per trip than resident hunters, and as would be expected, the amount spent has increased over the last 10 years.

What brings a hunter back year after year? Maybe it's the sweat freezing on his or her clothes, giving the coat that frosted look, especially on the shoulders and below the chin where one's breath has condensed, after a day of

tracking in the tranquil quietness of the forest. Maybe it's the dismay of stepping on some deadfall, sending a noisy pop of snapping brush and twigs throughout the timber, even with the snow muffling the noise, bringing elk bolting out of their beds. Maybe it's the "gourmet" meals of canned chili prepared over a roaring fire fueled by dried tamarack, blended with the smell of damp leaves and dirt, the sound of a babbling brook running outside the tent, and the horses snorting for their ration of hay and oats.

Love of the outdoors coupled with the challenge, suspense, and the adrenaline-charged high of the hunt itself most strongly attracts the hunter to their sport. For many, hunting is still a symbol of self-reliance. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, wildlife-associated recreation is important to millions of Americans; nearly two out of every five people participated in hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching in 1996. Success isn't measured by the amount or size of the game bagged; the seeing, stalking, and outwitting of the elk on its turf is most important.

## LITERATURE CITED

King, Z. and R. Brooks. 2000. *Montana Study and Results of the 1998 Elk Hunter Preference Survey*. Technical Report submitted to FWP by the Responsive Management Unit of FWP. Helena, MT: Responsive Management Unit, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

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