

July 2009



Communicating About Conservation: Addressing Recreational Shooting Access on Public Lands

COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGNS ARE MOST EFFECTIVE when they are based on a solid foundation of research, including identifying and understanding who the target market is and what messages are most likely to resonate with those individuals. One example of this in the conservation context is a recently completed study and recently launched campaign to maintain access to federal lands for recreational shooters.

On federal lands where unsupervised recreational shooting is permitted, littering, unsafe target shooting, and illegal dumping have become major issues. Some shooters leave behind fragments of clay pigeons and spent shotgun shells, as well as metal, plastic, and glass objects brought out for use as targets. Shooters get blamed for household dumping because home appliances discarded on federal lands are used as targets and left in place. Environmental and property damage (shooting at trees and signs) is also a significant problem. As a result, federal lands supervisors have closed many shooting ranges and areas open to unsupervised shooting on federal lands. (These issues do not appear to be a problem at “supervised” shooting ranges on federal lands, which are mostly managed under permits held by gun clubs.)

To resolve these problems, the Federal Lands Hunting, Fishing and Shooting Sports Roundtable, a coalition of groups from the American Wildlife Conservation Partners, initiated a project to educate federal lands shooters about appropriate behavior

when using federal lands for recreational shooting and keeping those areas in good condition. The project—which is a collaborative effort of the Roundtable, Responsive Management, and Tread Lightly!, a nonprofit organization that develops education and stewardship initiatives—had two major phases: research conducted by Responsive Management, including a five-state scientific telephone survey and a series of focus groups involving sport shooters that shoot on federal lands; and the development of a communications campaign by Tread Lightly!.

The purpose of the telephone survey and focus groups was to determine sport shooters’ attitudes toward shooting and their perceptions of appropriate behavior on federal lands, as well as their reactions to various messages designed to curb problematic behavior on



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR / BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT



An unsupervised flintlock shooting range on the Uwharrie National Forest in North Carolina. Photos by Brian Hyder.

federal lands. The study revealed that littering, illegal dumping, and irresponsible behavior are persistent and fairly widespread problems at unsupervised ranges and shooting areas in the states surveyed. A majority of recreational shooters from each state, and numerous participants in the focus groups, indicated that unsafe shooting behavior, irresponsible behavior, environmental damage, property damage, shooting debris, and litter are currently affecting the quality of their shooting experiences. Among those who said that an unsupervised shooting area or range they used on federal land had been closed, litter, dumping, and property damage were among the top perceived reasons for those closures. The research also found that young males were perceived by the study participants to be the main group responsible for most of these problems.

The telephone survey found—and the focus groups confirmed—that recreational shooters value simple, positive messages that resonate clearly. Many of the longer messages presented to study participants were noted for being open to misinterpretation, and most of the participants in the focus groups lacked enthusiasm for messages they perceived as focusing solely on negative outcomes.

Based on the research results, Tread Lightly! developed the slogan “Respected Access is Open Access” for the campaign. The positive slogan was designed to motivate responsible behavior among shooters and other recreationists and to help them understand the consequences of irresponsible behaviors, such as access closure. The message is simple—responsible behavior leads to continued access. The campaign’s initial focus is on recreational shooters, but the long range goal is to improve behaviors of all recreationists on public lands and waters. The primary target audience for the campaign is males between 15 and 25-30 years of age.

Tread Lightly! introduced the Respected Access campaign to industry representatives, natural resource

and wildlife management agencies, and the media at the National Shooting Sports Foundation’s (NSSF’s) 2009 Shooting Sports Summit in Weston, Florida, June 1–3, 2009. The campaign will be officially launched later this summer.

More information on the Respected Access campaign is available at the Tread Lightly! website at http://www.treadlightly.org/page.php/programs-rao/respected_access_overview.html. The complete Responsive Management report on the telephone survey and focus group research can be viewed at http://www.responsivemanagement.com/download/reports/Shoot_Public_Lands_Report.pdf.

