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To Revive Hunting, States Turn to the Classroom

By [IAN URBINA](#)

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — When David Helms was in seventh grade, he would take his .22-caliber rifle to school, put a box of ammunition in his locker and, like virtually all the other boys, lean his rifle against a wall in the principal's office so he could start hunting squirrels and groundhogs as soon as classes let out.

Now, when he takes his 8-year-old grandson hunting on weekends, Mr. Helms, 55, searches the boy's pockets before sending him back to school to ensure that there are no forgotten ammunition shells. But most of his grandson's peers never have to worry about that, Mr. Helms said, because they would sooner play video games than join them outdoors.

Hunting is on the decline across the nation as participation has fallen over the last three decades, and states have begun trying to bolster this rural tradition by attracting new and younger people to the sport.

In [West Virginia](#), state lawmakers gave final approval on Friday to a bill that allows hunting education classes in all schools where at least 20 students express interest. The goal is to reverse a 20 percent drop in hunting permits purchased over the last decade, which has caused a loss of more than \$1.5 million in state revenue over that period. At least six other states are considering similar legislation.

Moreover, in the last two years, 17 states have passed laws to attract younger hunters by creating apprentice hunting licenses that allow people supervised by a trained mentor to sample the sport before completing the required course work, which typically takes 8 to 10 hours and can cost more than \$200.

“For us, guns and hunting was a way of life,” said Mr. Helms, the manager of Marstiller’s Gun Shop here. “A lot of places seem to be losing that, and we need to bring it back.”

In that effort, Michigan, Nebraska, South Carolina and Utah have enacted laws since 2004 lowering or removing minimum age requirements for hunters, while Louisiana, Montana and Georgia have amended their constitutions to protect the right to hunt and fish. Eight states are considering similar amendments.

Hunting has seen its ranks fall nationally to 12.5 million in 2006 from a peak of 19.1 million in 1975, according to the federal [Fish and Wildlife Service](#). While the [National Rifle Association](#) has enthusiastically backed the campaign to get states to try to reverse the trend, groups like the United States Sportsmen’s Alliance have been the strongest lobbying force.

Gun control advocates are not pleased.

“In the post-[Virginia Tech](#) era, there is absolutely no reason to be bringing unloaded guns, toy guns or any guns into schools,” said Paul Helmke, president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, a gun-control group based in Washington. “What West Virginia is doing is essentially trying to bolster gun sales and hunting participation by advertising to children, which is really cynical.”

Wildlife officials and environmental researchers offer different explanations for the decline in hunting, including rural depopulation, higher gas prices and the increased leasing of land by small exclusive clubs or the posting of “No Hunting” signs by private land owners.

Others cite the prevalence of single-parent homes, where the father is not present to pass down the tradition, and the growing popularity of indoor activities that offer immediate gratification, like the Internet, video games and movies.

“Hunting takes time, effort and patience,” said Capt. Louis DellaMea of the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources. Shaking his head, he said that among the few young people who do hunt, the habit is to ride an all-terrain vehicle to a tree platform, pour out a bag of corn and sit waiting for the prey to show up.

“In my day, you went looking for the animal — that was the whole point,” he said, adding that what makes hunting fulfilling is the exercise involved, discovering hidden trails and seeing sunrises, bobcats and bears while conducting the search. “The actual killing, that’s secondary.”

Andrew Page agrees about the draw of nature, but as the director of hunting affairs for the [Humane Society of the United States](#), he sees the drop in hunting as heartening, partly because it has come with a simultaneous rise in other types of outdoor activity. The number of birdwatchers, wildlife photographers and other wildlife watchers grew to 71 million in 2006, up from 62.8 million in 1996, according to surveys conducted by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

“Culture is shifting, and we think that’s a good thing,” Mr. Page said. Though he grew up in rural Illinois hunting rabbits, squirrels and pheasants, Mr. Page, 32, said he gave up hunting in his late teens when he realized that he could enjoy nature without killing animals.

But the shift away from hunting has other consequences, too.

In West Virginia, the Department of Natural Resources has lost at least \$1.5 million in revenue from hunting and fishing licenses, which affects the department’s ability to conduct conservation work, state officials said.

Hunting is the largest factor in controlling the deer population, and without enough hunters, the deer population can grow and has contributed to an increase in road accidents, said Steve Brown, the state’s fish and wildlife planner. West Virginia has the highest rate of vehicular accidents caused by

deer, according to State Farm Insurance. In 2006, the state Division of Highways reported 15,918 deer were killed in motor vehicle collisions.

Lt. Tim Coleman, the state's hunting education coordinator, said in the last several years, the Department of Natural Resources had increased the number of hunting trips it offered for women, children under the age of 15 and disabled people.

Other states are trying different approaches.

In Illinois, game managers are holding learn-to-hunt classes for single mothers. In Vermont, the Fish and Wildlife Department sponsors youth hunting weekends three times a year. New Hampshire started a "Leave No Child Inside" initiative last year that encourages families and children to try fishing and hunting.

Evan Heusinkveld is the associate director of state services for the United States Sportsmen's Alliance, which is part of the Families Afield campaign, a coalition of hunting groups that has lobbied for lowering or removing minimum age requirements for hunters. He said that hunting is more fulfilling for families than children's sports because it is more participatory.

"While the soccer mom watches her son or daughter play a sport, hunting involves both parent and child learning and experiencing together," he said, adding, "Hunting is actually safer than boating, biking or swimming."

Thirty states have no minimum age to begin hunting, but all require supervision or the completion of hunter education courses. Among the 20 states that have age limits, most require children to be 12 before they can hunt big game, which often involves using a rifle or shot gun and can include targeting white-tail deer, wild turkeys and black bears.

Rather than teach hunting in schools under the guise of fostering gun safety and promoting exercise, Mr. Helmke, of the Brady Campaign, said that states

like West Virginia should focus on bolstering gun-safety laws and financing other types of outdoor activities.

West Virginia has some of the weakest gun restrictions of any state, he said, adding that so far, despite the recent creation of federal incentives in response to the Virginia Tech killings last April, the state has not submitted a single name to the federal database that is meant to prevent dangerously mentally ill people from getting access to firearms.

Gov. Joe Manchin III has not said whether he would sign the hunting education legislation, but an aide said issues that had concerned the governor appear to have been resolved.

The sponsor of the bill, Billy Wayne Bailey, argues that the state has a responsibility to protect its cultural traditions.

“It’s hard to find too many 55-year-olds that are still playing basketball or football, but a lot of people well into their 80s enjoy hunting,” said Mr. Bailey, a state senator from Wyoming County and a Democrat. “For us,” he added, “this is a pastime we want to preserve.”