

Effective Communication about Hunting, Trapping, and Angling Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow

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During the introduction to a CLfT workshop, instructors tell participants that CLfT will improve their ability to interact with hunters in professional and personal situations, and to communicate about hunting and other uses of wildlife with diverse audiences. Some participants have questioned what interactions they can expect and specifically how CLfT content can help make those interactions successful and productive.

This information should help with many types of interactions between resource professionals and hunters (or fishers and trappers and the public interested in these activities). There are suggestions on appropriate actions or comments for specific situations. Please realize that human behavior, mood, context, and other factors shape any human interactions unique to the situation that neither CLfT nor training can anticipate or control. Nevertheless, the CLfT program staff and instructors hope that you find this information useful.

Remember, you now have an advantage. As a CLfT graduate you should understand the many things hunters are concerned with and passionate about. These include their firearms, their dogs, their favorite hunting spots, and their family or friends hunting with them. In the field, any one of these things can lead to an “ice-breaker” comment to start a conversation off on the right foot. It could be an observation on how well-behaved the dog is, or a comment on a unique firearm, or perhaps how nice it is to see the kids in the hunting party. It is obviously up to you to decide what to say, but a first impression that conveys your understanding and knowledge about hunting can set a positive tone for whatever you need to convey to, or find out from hunters.

Several “tip sheets” from professional communicators are included. Some of the material comes from trapper education. We believe you can use “trapping” and “hunting” (or even fishing) interchangeably to meet your needs. Where there might be some confusion, we will address the issue.

Some of the ideas or “tips” presented will seem trivial or just common sense. That may be, however, remember you are new to the hunting scene and even the seemingly trivial may prove very useful until you become comfortable with your new skill set.

The following ideas to help establish rapport with hunters were provided by the Wisconsin Outdoor Writers Association....

Hunters are passionate about their sport and many live and breathe hunting and fishing. It should not be surprising that at work people who hunt, talk to their coworkers about their

hunting experiences, their dog, their plans for upcoming hunts, new equipment, new regulations, and anything related to the outdoors.

When you meet and talk with hunters in the field, some things to keep in mind are primarily from a safety standpoint, disruptive perspective, and social perspective;

Safety concerns:

- Anytime when in the field, always remember the rules of safe handling of firearms, and always be cognizant of where a person's shotgun or rifle is pointed.
- If by accident the muzzle should be pointed toward you, don't hesitate to ask the hunter to take control of his/her firearm and point it in a safe direction!
- If you are walking toward a hunter in the field, you should avoid walking from a "downfield" area which is where the hunter could be shooting if a bird were to flush into the air, or right through an area where the hunter will be hunting that could flush birds, or where you would leave scent that might scare game approaching the hunter.

Disruptive perspective:

- Put yourself in the hunter's shoes. If you enjoy playing poker with friends or being out on a motorcycle or jogging, would you enjoy being "interrupted" by someone asking you questions? The key is always to treat people like you would like to be treated. Is this a good time to engage the person or would it be better for you to wait and contact the person a little later?
- If a hunter is working a field with his/her dog, or is sitting on a deer stand or hunkered down in a duck blind, realize that by approaching to talk with the hunter you will be inadvertently disrupting the hunting process. Try to avoid doing this when birds are in the air or at a particularly "good " hunting time such as just after sunrise or just before sunset when wildlife tends to be on the move, or when a bird hunter is in the field and the dog is on point.

Social Perspective:

Try to understand the hunter's perspective at the time. For instance, is it a time when he/she is alone and enjoying the experience of being alone in the outdoors, or just after missing a shot at decoying birds and perhaps upset at himself/herself or disgruntled, or just after arriving at a public hunting ground and letting the dogs out of the car and being keyed up to get out into the field. Is this a time when the hunter would likely feel like being social? Is it a time to give him/her some space?

- Be cognizant of where a hunter's dog is, so that you don't step on its tail or run over the dog with your car when leaving or approaching. Ask permission if it's OK to pet the dog.
- Realize that if you are employed by a natural resources agency, you will be looked up to as someone who knows the local area, habitat and wildlife. Do not be surprised if the hunter asks your recommendation of where to hunt or asks about other hunter's success in the region. Do not hesitate to admit if you do not know and encourage them to talk to a local employee and provide a name and contact information.
- Though you may read in the papers of people who are apprehended for violating bag limits or hunting regulations, the vast majority of hunters are ethical sports people. They abide by laws

and are out to have a good time, pursue wildlife, and enjoy the friends and family whom they hunt with.

- If you will be working in natural resources, become familiar with terminology used by hunters. For example, “my stand” usually means a deer stand which could be in a tree or some high point providing good visibility.

There are many ways in which you may come in contact with hunters. Contacts can be face-to-face, one-on-one, group settings, or indirectly through a range of communication tools, including print or social media.

How and how much you interact with hunters, or fishers or trappers for that matter, will depend on your job responsibilities. Please realize that the public’s expectation of anyone who works for a resource management agency is that they (you) can speak with some knowledge on hunting or other outdoor topics. If you do not know the answer, you should know where to direct them for assistance.

Special interactions:

Incidental contact with a hunter(s) in the field could (rarely) become confrontational. It is possible that an agitated or threatening hunter could be calmed if you can determine the cause of the agitation. However, hunters are armed which escalates the danger of a confrontation. Treat it as you would any other aggressive and potentially dangerous situation. Be prepared to extricate yourself, to call 911 if necessary, and have all the contact information for the local sheriff and conservation officers at hand. Talk to your agencies’ Conservation officer/warden training staff about videos, print materials, or other resources used to train new officers how to handle hostile encounters.

When in the field, be alert to the possibility of observing a fish and game violation. All natural resources professionals have a fundamental responsibility to the protection of the resource. If a violation is suspected or observed, collect as much information as possible (notes, smart phone photographs, memory, etc). Avoid creating a confrontation that you are not equipped to handle. Notify a conservation officer/warden about the incident and let them respond.

Communication with non-hunters about hunting and other resource uses.

Besides interactions with hunters, it is very likely you may need to communicate with non-hunters about such topics as regulation changes that could impact property owners, proposals to add species to the “game” list, proposed deer management hunts in parks or other public spaces, or any number of issues. CLFT provided you with information on the role of hunting in conservation and management, the biological basis of hunting, safety considerations, and other topics which you can use to convey the rationale, benefits, and safeguards behind hunting-related proposals.

Keep in mind that hunting enjoys broad support among the American public. Increased support may be difficult to achieve. Thus, it is important that hunting-related activities, proposals, and communication not do anything to damage the support we currently enjoy. Recall from CLFT

that over the past few decades, national surveys suggest that public support for hunting averages about 70-75% (Responsive Management report for the National Shooting Sports Foundation). This is an excellent level of support, but it is very dependent on how the survey questions are worded. If the question includes the utilization of harvested game meat, support is at the levels reported. For certain types of hunting like predator hunting or trophy hunting, support is lower. Communication efforts should be sensitive to public opinion.

Communication related to fishing is less complicated and less burdened by animal rights/welfare concerns and emotion. There are about 3 times as many fishers as hunters and fishing is generally not controversial. Fishing is considered a relaxing pursuit popular with families and children. Fish are cold blooded and often considered less sensitive when it comes to pain or suffering and “catch and release” is a popular option with fishing, not possible with traditional hunting. In addition, there is a commercial aspect to fishing that everyone understands since fish of many species are readily available in grocery stores whereas game meat is not. All that considered, fishing is easier to discuss, better understood and accepted by the public, and not a major public relations issue for resource agencies.

Trapping however, is a different matter. There are very few active trappers in the U.S., relative to hunters and fishers. Trapping has never enjoyed the broad public support hunting and fishing have. There are numerous misconceptions, much misinformation, and powerful emotions surrounding trapping. Many resource professionals lack even basic knowledge of the methods and relevance of modern trapping and the motivations and demographics of trappers.

As a result, resource agencies have joined forces through their regional and international associations to promote better understanding of the need for and value of trapping. “Trapping Matters” workshops are being offered throughout the county to improve the ability of resource professionals to discuss and build support for trapping. Do not hesitate to seek out your agencies’ furbearer specialist or trapper education administrator -for more information on Trapping Matters and trapping data relevant to your state if you need it.

Communications training is a key element of “Trapping Matters” workshops. Program organizers have granted permission to use several of the “Trapping Matters” documents to support this CLfT document. One is entitled “Communication Tips” and includes tips for media interviews and the other focuses on social media communication. Please be aware that these tips are equally applicable to trapping, hunting, and fishing communication.

Communication Tips

Whether you are preparing for an interview with a local newspaper or TV affiliate, writing a short message for a trapper's association newsletter, or crafting a response to a negative post on a blog or online forum, there are a few basic "rules" to follow to make your story more engaging, more useful, and more effective.

Know your story. Think hard about what you want/need to say about trapping to your audience. What does your audience want/need to know? Think about it from their perspective, as well as yours. Write down your objective before you write or speak a single word of your story. Everything else should work toward achieving that objective.

Use key messages. You should be able to tell your story with a few key messages, preferably three or four. Communication research suggests that three or four points are easy for audiences to remember. It also makes them easier for you to remember. Counting down the key points also adds focus and emphasis. Flag your key messages; e.g., "The most important thing to remember is", "It all boils down to this...;" "And don't forget..."

Use positive language. Trapping can be a controversial topic, and you may need to respond to some very negative and perhaps erroneous messages. Don't dwell on those. Make corrections as necessary, but quickly return to delivering your key messages in a positive manner.

Avoid jargon and buzzwords. Every field has its own list of buzzwords that are meaningful to insiders, but don't usually translate well (and often cause confusion among) outsiders or the "general public." Carefully consider your target audience before using any jargon.

Stick to what you know. Don't make claims in an interview or article if you aren't sure they are true. You might "get away with" making rough generalizations in a private conversation at the local diner, but there is no place for that in formal communications venues. Writing or saying something that is later discovered to be incorrect or imprecise is much worse than not saying anything at all.

Be enthusiastic! Whether you're writing or speaking, let your knowledge and passion for the topic come through! People are much more likely to "tune in" to your message if you deliver it with confidence and enthusiasm.

Tips for Media Interviews

In many situations, you will need to conduct an interview in order to deliver your information to a broad public through a representative of the media—whether it be traditional media or social media. Following are tips to help you prepare for and conduct a successful interview.

When expecting an interview, or even giving a public presentation, it is always helpful if you have a fact sheet on the topic that the reporter or audience can take with him/her giving basic information and statistics that they can use in the video or article. Also, include your name, title, phone number and email if they want to contact you for further information/questions. This also helps when giving statistics to be sure the reporter has the correct information.

Preparing for an interview

Know your story. The key to giving a successful, message-driven interview is to know what story you want to convey to the reporter. What is it you want to say about trapping? What would

you like to see written about trapping? What would you like the headline in tomorrow's newspaper to be? This should be the focus of your interview. Remember that it is your story, and no one is better able to tell it than you. Give examples of your personal involvement with trapping to illustrate your point. "Trapping has been important in my line of work because ..."

Use simple facts and figures. Use simple facts to describe the situation with qualitative distinctions, e.g., "Wildlife biologists use trapping as a method with which to manage wildlife populations." Reporters crave quotable figures, numbers and statistics. These provide evidence for the story you are telling. Just be sure your figures are correct. "In this state, we have (x) number of active trappers each season."

Use quotable language. Reporters will listen for quotable language—one or two quotes that will help tell the story. They are looking for interesting, unusual and vivid language, quotes that will sum up an issue or explain a difficult subject. Use metaphors and stories to explain complex information in plain terms. Example: "Because of trapping, we've been able to relocate otters to this area. There are as many otters living here now as when Lewis and Clark first explored this region." Avoid negative or defensive language. Remember that reporters find negative language to be very quotable ("No, we don't make that product any more;" "It wasn't a failure;" "I am not a crook."). Keep what you say very positive and distance yourself from the negative.

Put yourself in the reporter's shoes. The reporter must write a story that is newsworthy, takes a new look at an issue, goes beyond what everyone has already said, or reports on something new. He or she must talk with a lot of people in the industry in order to find a good story. You can help by having a story that is useful to the reporter. As long as it is neatly summarized, supported by facts, has quotable language and is completely understandable, your story has a good chance of being told.

Consider the audience. Think of the interview process as talking to the public through the reporter. The reporter is simply the conduit through which you can reach your audience. Remember, an interview is not an intellectual discussion, debate or argument. Reporters like to talk to "real" people, not slick spokespersons. This approach gets your message through the reporter and to the people you want to reach.

Use key messages. You should be able to tell your story with a few key messages, preferably three or four (see Communication Tips). Always develop some personal messages, too. A reporter may ask you why you are the best person to be speaking on behalf of your organization. Use your own personal experience to build credibility for yourself and for trapping activities.

Anticipate tough questions. Anticipate questions (especially tough questions) and attitudes the reporter may have. Prepare answers that defuse these questions and give you room to make transitions or refocus attention on your key messages. If you are prepared to address the toughest questions and know how to make transitions to your key messages, you'll feel more comfortable talking to reporters.

Giving the interview

Although the tone of an interview should be that of a lively conversation engaging and enthusiastic, open and forthright - it is your responsibility to remain focused.

Decide in advance just how candid you will be. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so, and offer to follow up later with an answer. If you can't respond to a question, explain why. It is a good idea to give the reporter an indication of when you might be able to respond more specifically.

Remember to be concise. A 20-minute interview may end up as a seven-second sound bite on TV later that night or as only three lines in print. Be able to crystallize your thoughts into a few hard-hitting sentences.

Throughout the interview, proceed with caution, although never with obvious hesitation. Listed below are several procedures:

Take control. Realize that if you have a story to tell, if you are driven by enthusiasm for that story if your messages are, in a sense, a mission-then it will not be unreasonable for you to take control and begin to tell your story. Take the initiative. Explain. Emphasize the key messages that must be understood or taken into account. Use rich examples that help tell your story. As you answer questions that move away from your story, make transitions back to what's most important. Answer the question, and then come back to your point. Use phrases such as, "Let me put that into perspective...", "What people really need to understand is..." Correct misstatements made by the reporter as soon as possible in a courteous, nonthreatening manner. Your interview may live forever, and you want all the information to be absolutely correct.

Turn negatives into positives. If you are asked negative questions, answer with positive responses. You may have to stop the negative impression with a simple "No" or "That's not true" responses but do not dwell on it. Move on to your positive story. Don't repeat the negative language. Make transitions to your message as you respond.

Avoid profession buzzwords. Jargon and lack of clarity confuse the reporter, reducing the effectiveness of his or her primary tool: language. Every industry has its own jargon that will not translate well to outside audiences or to the general public. Use language that the reporter and the audience will understand, find meaningful and perceive as appropriate.

Beware of "off the record" ..VERY Important! Do not say anything to a reporter that you don't want to see in print or on the air. Do not talk "off the record" and do not assume when the tape recorder is off, the note pad is tucked away or the cameraperson is packing up his equipment that the interview is over. Avoid off-hand comments, sarcastic remarks and inappropriate humor. Your tone, manner and discussion before, during and after the formal interview should be seamless, emphasizing the same story.

Do NOT speculate. Sometimes reporters will ask questions that are speculative. That is perfectly fair; people (their audience) tend to think that way. So always be prepared for the "what if" question. However, do not answer this type of question. Speculating can often lead to misquotes or misunderstanding.

Some additional thoughts on interviews especially on television were provided by Dave Carlson, a Wisconsin Outdoor Television personality.

- Let your supervisor know who you have contacted or who has contacted you and what you discussed. This is especially true when dealing with the media.
- Be ready to give the reporter your card bearing your name and contact information.
- Be patient, cool and courteous. As long as it does not impede your work or endanger anyone, maybe even invite questions about your work and how you use equipment. (Trapping animals for research, burning fields for wildlife habitat, digging trout stream banks, etc.).
- Dealing with the media, try to develop trusting relationships with credible reporters who have shown some eagerness and passion for resource managers and natural resources. It will go smoothly for both sides.
- Respect their rights to do their job and assure them you are doing your best job to ensure that the resources pass on for future generations.

Communication Tips for Social Media

There are many general-interest sites that recommend strategies for social media. Some of the best tips were written by Scott Kleinberg, former social media editor for the Chicago Tribune, and can be Googled. In fact, many of these ideas are based on his writings. But here are some tips for those who maintain social media networks for wildlife agencies:

In many ways, social media is no different from print or verbal communication. Deal in facts, not opinion. Be polite and upbeat. Too often, people use social media only as a way to promote something. Have a conversation instead. It's a social network, and that means engaging with your audience.

Your audience is universal. What may be perfectly appropriate to send to a friend with common interests — a trophy picture to memorialize a hunt, for instance — could well offend the general public. Blood, gut piles, tongues lolling out of mouths are all bad ideas on social media.

Use every tool at your disposal. Video, photos, Twitter, new stuff like Periscope. Stay abreast of the market, and try out the new networks. Your audience is probably doing the same.

Study analytics to build your audience. Figure out why a tweet or post was popular — it could be anything from the time of day it was posted to the fact that you used a photo well.

Watch your language. The beauty of social media is also its danger. You can post anytime, anywhere. Remember that whatever you say — especially in anger — can be used against you or your organization. Scott Kleinberg suggests thinking about what you would be comfortable sharing with your grandmother. Good idea! Your words will live on. Stuff posted to public sites has a way of surviving, even if you try to delete it (which usually is a bad idea). Double-check your words and attitude before posting. Look closely at photographs. Do not be silly, and use proper grammar.

Stay above the fray. Sometimes it is tempting to fire back in a flame war. It usually does not end well. Have a thick skin and deal in facts. Trolls want to make you angry. If you get angry and respond in that vein, they win.

Don't pass on information without checking it out. Your credibility matters.

Have a plan for each social network. Your Twitter feed should be different from Facebook, which should be different from Instagram. People should follow all of your accounts; if they overlap they likely will follow only one.

Respond to negative comments. But do not delete them until you investigate and resolve the issue. Follow what Kleinberg calls the "3 C's" — calm, cool and civil. Blocking a commenter sometimes has unintended consequences, such as allegations of censorship.

Conclusion. CLft staff and instructors sincerely hope that the information and experiences provided in your workshop make you more comfortable and capable talking about hunting, fishing, or trapping whether the conversation is around the family dinner table, in the office lunchroom, in the field, or in a public forum. Wherever it may be, we believe that you and our natural resources will benefit. Thank you for your participation and future accomplishments.