

Current saboteur situation

- There has been an overall increase in the number of saboteurs and monitors, although there are still probably only 500 in total with individuals constantly changing throughout the season and face-coverings making identification difficult.
- Number of hits recorded increased from approx. 400 in 2004/5 season to approx. 1200 hits in 2018/19.
- On a Saturday during the season, over 30 packs can be targeted.
- Sabs are more organised than in the past with several larger groups often working together, particularly on Saturdays and also focussing on packs that continue hunting beyond the middle of March when the majority of hunts finish.
- Local support has increased following dedicated campaigns using local social media pages.
- Landowners are increasingly unhappy about the number of sabs; their presence on their land and the adverse reaction to the landowners and their businesses/other organisations as a result has resulted in the strong possibility of land being closed to hunts
- Saboteurs effectively use video and social media to raise funds and increase awareness of hunting activities, despite much of it being “fake news”, however hunts often have little evidence to counteract allegations.

Tackling hunt sabs has always been a CHA/HO responsibility, but the CA remains committed to taking on its part given the priority of this issue and the crossover into the CA's media, lobbying and PR responsibilities. Therefore, when the CA & MFHA/AMHB met last year and again earlier in 2019, it was agreed that our joint approach to the problem of escalating saboteur activity needed to be two-fold.

Part 1 – The anti-hunting strategy works most effectively when there are damaging incidents which hunt saboteurs can record and disseminate, so the aim is to limit what hunts do to prevent it being promoted to bring hunting into disrepute.

- It is not possible to remove risk from hunting, but it is critical that the risk is minimised and how hunts operate is a crucial part of minimising that risk.
- We all have huge sympathy for hunts that are targeted by sabs, but that starts to wane in circumstances where hunts that are being consistently targeted by saboteurs continue to operate in exactly the same way, exacerbating their own problems and damaging the reputation of all hunts.
- The ability to overtly demonstrate compliance with the law is crucial and areas of concern from the 2018/19 season have been addressed by both the Hunting Office and CA representatives during the course of the summer.

- Equally damaging is the aggressive and violent reaction by hunt supporters, acting as individuals or in an organised way. The majority of the bad publicity for hunts promoted by hunt sabs is not actually about “hunting”, it is about the reaction of hunt supporters to hunt saboteur provocation.

Part 2 – To restrict the ability of hunt sabs to operate (we can never remove this entirely)

- As agreed in 2018, the CA has created a dedicated database to hold relevant data on hunt sabs collected by hunts, and through teams of evidence gatherers.
- We know that unacceptable and illegal behaviour is being carried out by sabs on a daily basis, but frustratingly it is very rare that hunts collect and share any evidence of it, or make complaints about it.
- There are several – and many understandable – reasons why hunts don’t gather suitable evidence: resources, a focus on delivering hunting activity, an inclination to turn the other cheek and a lack of understanding of the processes amongst them.
- Without the evidence required, the lobbying, media and social media functions of the CA cannot be used to full effect against hunt saboteurs, neither can proper intelligence be gathered on specific individuals.
- We all understand that running a hunt is difficult enough without the additional burden of monitoring sabs, but both the CA and HO are in agreement that the failure to gather and store such evidence has been the primary barrier to tackling the sab issue. For example, Phil Davies faces constant frustration when he liaises with police forces about hunt sab issues – the sabs complain, we don’t; they have video evidence, we don’t.

Update

- The CA has subsequently built a dedicated database in which to store data – mainly photographs and video. This is for a different purpose to the basic saboteur data that has long been collected and distributed by the HO on hunting days. The purpose of the HO operation has always been to let hunts know where their local sabs are in order to assist Masters in deciding how they carry on their day’s hunting and that basic data has little further use other than giving a broad picture of the level of activism.
- We have employed Eleasha Sallis to manage the database and to help build a network of individuals at hunts to feed in the appropriate data, as well as to source information from hunt sabs from the internet.
- We have covered off all the complex GDPR issues and instructed hunt contacts how they can legally provide us with data.
- We have started to use the data for the intended purposes.

The data we are collecting is being held for three specific purposes:

1. Potential prosecution or civil action;
2. For use in the media and on social media;
3. To assist the lobbying of police forces, PCCs and politicians.

The results of the new CA system have been promising so far;

- There have been a number of criminal investigations and subsequent convictions for assault and other offences as a direct result of information we have supplied to the police.
- The CA is working with the Counter Terrorism Policing – National Operations Centre (CTP-NOC) and have agreed an information sharing protocol so that we can pass on data showing extremist activity in the field and other connections online. Targeting the ringleaders is a main priority.
- Videos showing “hunt monitors” abusing an elderly hunt supporter, and another showing a hunt saboteur ranting at a female police officer have been viewed hundreds of thousands of times online. Other video footage provided by hunts has been used in police meetings and at the regional seminars to demonstrate the type of footage required and the ease in which it can be collated.

Looking ahead

- There is real potential to restrict the effectiveness of hunt saboteurs and to damage their reputation by continuing to build the network of hunt contacts to provide the evidence required.
- There is still a requirement to fill in the gaps where hunts cannot deliver which was identified ahead of the 2018/19 season when the MFHA undertook to organise dedicated teams of paid hunt monitors to cover the key areas that had been identified as being in need of assistance. These areas included Cheshire (as a priority), the Midlands (Cottesmore/Belvoir/Fernie/Fitzwilliam), Yorkshire, plus the Cambs/Sussex/Suffolk and Dorset/Somerset regions. There were concerted efforts by the MFHA to put a team together in the Cambs & Enfield Chace/Oakley country, but this proved considerably more difficult than initially planned and despite the best efforts it all fell apart before it even got going.
- Some hunts are keen to explore the injunction route, similar to that taken by the Fitzwilliam, however they have been advised that without a catalogue of video evidence there is little chance of this being successful.
- We are looking at different ways of providing appropriate information to hunts regarding saboteur activity. The current emailing system which circulates details of sab activity and vehicle information has worked previously but there may be better ways of presenting the data so that it is more useful. Any feedback on this would be appreciated.

A database is only as good as the data in it and we are right at the beginning of the process, largely because historically the response to previous requests sent out from the Hunting Office for hunts to supply appropriate evidence has been mixed, even from packs with a significant sab problem. However, following the successful meetings held throughout the summer in association with the Hunting Office, more hunts are now realising the importance of gathering evidence to provide to the CA and we should see an increase in prosecutions and the ability to generate a suitable social media response.