



Is the media spurring interest  
in archery or simply following  
a growing trend?



# THE HUNGER GAMES EFFECT

How media propels youth  
into the outdoors (or not)

BY LISA DENSMORE



An hour into an evening flight between Boston and Salt Lake City, my laptop battery died.

In a case of fortuitous timing, opening credits for the in-flight film, *The Hunger Games*, were scrolling overhead. With my work curtailed due to electronic failure, I unknotted my tangled ear buds and pressed the button on my armrest, reclining a stingy three inches. Knowing little of the plot, I was glad for the chance to see the hot box office hit – but not for long.

I watched in horror as confident teenage huntress Katniss Everdeen, played by actress Jennifer Lawrence, narrowly escaped a pack of savage dog-like creatures.

In the games, Katniss represents a rural district in the imaginary country of Panem, where she hunted with a bow amidst the towering trees to provide food for her family and to find solace.

But the wilderness in which she evaded the canine killers, as well as attacks by teenagers from Panem's other 11 districts, was far from natural. An immense arena of sorts, the referees of the games manipulated the outdoors for the spectating pleasure of the urban wealthy. An annual winner-take-all, losers-die affair, in this gruesome, futuristic Super Bowl, teenagers killed teenagers for sport. Katniss' outdoor skills and athleticism gave her the ability to survive.

*The Hunger Games* was a gripping nail-biter. Though uncomfortable with its premise, I had to watch. The rest of the world did too. *The Hunger Games* grossed \$408 million in the United States (\$691 million worldwide). Its sequel, *Catching Fire*, released in November 2013, topped \$409 million at the domestic box office (\$838 million worldwide) in its first seven weeks. The two movies are among the all-time highest grossing films ever produced and mark the first time that the first two installments of a film franchise have both grossed more than \$400 million in the United States.

*Hunger Games*-inspired toys – such as Hasbro's Nerf® Rebelle Heartbreak Bow and Guardian Crossbow, targeted at girls with their pink and white feathery graphics – disappeared from the shelves at retail toy stores, and many sporting goods

NATIONAL ARCHERY IN THE SCHOOLS PROGRAM: LIONS GATE

stores sold out of youth bows. Katniss — the strong, independent, adept heroine — seemed to appeal to young women.

### The Hunger Games Effect?

Despite the brutality of the plot, many believe *The Hunger Games* movies are getting teenagers outdoors, especially girls with bows — Katniss' weapon of choice. “We’ve seen an unprecedented surge in archery interest, particularly since the release of *The Hunger Games*,” says Jay McAninch, president and CEO of the Archery Trade Association (ATA). “The character of Katniss Everdeen — along with films like *Brave*, *The Avengers*, and *The Hobbit* — have introduced archery to millions of young people and adults, and the result has been a massive up-tick in engagement and participation.”

*The Hunger Games* and other movies mentioned by McAninch have undoubtedly been a major public relations boon to the sport of archery. By fortunate coincidence, *The Hunger Games* was released just before the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, a mass-televised event. Normally, archery in the Olympics draws little attention, but in London, it became a media circus. Was it *The Hunger Games* effect, or was it because the United States fielded a particularly strong team, earning a silver medal over the dominant North Koreans? More importantly, do movies and television really get kids outdoors? The verdict is still out. Depending on whom you ask, it has a great influence — or very little.

“We’ve had a noticeable spike in archery licenses, but not just in the last couple of years and not just kids,” says Craig Birhle, communications supervisor for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. “When the second *Hunger Games* movie came out last November, it attracted our interest. I read stories about a girl in a sporting goods store wanting a bow, but it’s one instance. It’s hard for us to track.”

Birhle believes the growing interest in archery in North Dakota is partially due to the decline in the number of gun-hunting licenses for deer in the state. The deer population there has declined 50 percent since 2009 due to several



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severe winters. Many hunters, both adults and youth, who can’t get a gun license are turning to bow hunting as a way to go afield. As a result, resident bow licenses jumped from about 18,000 in 2009 to 21,000 in 2013 — a 14 percent increase in five years.

The number of youth bow licenses has been on an upward trend in North Dakota since the state began tracking them 20 years ago. In 1993, the state issued 930 youth bow licenses. By 2012, that number had increased 53 percent to 1,420. Birhle believes a big reason for the increase is the National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP), which came to North Dakota in 2005. “The number of schools in NASP has increased steadily, particularly over the last seven years,” says Birhle. “Also, the deer population in North Dakota was at an all-time high in 2006 and 2007. That opportunity spiked some of the influence, too.”



### Archery in the Schools

The upward trend in youth bow hunters in North Dakota parallels trends in other states where NASP is strongly entrenched in schools. Launched in 2002 through a joint effort among the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, the Kentucky Department of Education, and Mathews Archery (a bow manufacturer), the program was designed for children grades 4-12 in Kentucky. NASP is now a national program and a joint effort among schools and conservation agencies in 47 states. Educators support it because it helps improve student motivation, attention, behavior, and attendance. Conservation agencies use it as a way to teach kids outdoor skills, which will hopefully lead to a lifetime of enjoyment in wild places and thus an interest in stewardship of natural resources.

If a school is interested in starting a NASP program, a certified NASP trainer – usually from the state’s conservation agency – visits the school to train teachers how to run the program. National funding comes in part from the program’s national sponsors, which includes the bow hunting brands Mathews, Genesis, Horrell, Easton, and Gordon, and nonprofit organizations such as the National Wild Turkey Federation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Archery Trade Association, and National Guard. Most local funding is through the state agencies and school systems involved in the program.

NASP students begin with an easy target five to seven yards away, then work up to a NASP competition distance of 10 to 15 yards. Today, more than 8,500 schools participate in the program, making this youth development program larger than even Little League baseball.

“Everyone is trying to find a reason for the increase in youth archery, but I’m not convinced it’s the media,” says Eric Edwards, education outreach coordinator for the Missouri Department of Conservation. “The main reasons kids get involved in NASP are because of their friends, it’s fun, and the fact that most kids hit the target most of the time. The percentage of girls and boys – roughly 60 percent boys, 40 percent girls – has stayed the same since *The Hunger Games* movies came out. We haven’t seen a spike in just the number of girls.”

Edwards feels the Pixar animated movie *Brave*, about a bow-wielding princess determined to carve her own path in life, created more interest in archery than *The Hunger Games*, at least in Missouri. “When *Brave* came out, grandparents called to find programs,” says Edwards. “We also get calls because of the TV show *Arrow*.”

“Correlation is not causation,” warns Jim Low, a colleague of Edwards and a spokesperson for the Missouri Department of Conservation.

Like Edwards, Low believes the increased interest in archery is more a result of NASP than the media.

“You’re more apt to value what you know,” says Low. “When I asked my son why he got into bow hunting, he said he remembered watching me shoot a few arrows when he was about five years old. It made an enormous impression. The picture of his dad with a fully drawn recurve bow burned itself in his brain. When the opportunity to shoot a bow himself came up, he jumped at it. He’s still in archery today.”

Jeff Long, a North Dakota Game and Fish Department education coordinator who trains teachers to run NASP in North Dakota schools, feels the media is merely picking up on a growing interest in archery rather than driving it. “You can see little pieces of archery in ads, but not it’s not directly about the sport,” says Long. “Take the Cadillac ad with the arrows in the air. The message is people hitting the mark. Advertisers are tapping into what’s hot, not creating it.”

On the other hand, Long does feel that the combination of televised 2012 Olympics events and movies like *The Hunger Games* and *Brave* augmented NASP as a powerful recruiter. “It was the perfect storm for archery,” he says.

“NASP was already built. Millions of kids had gone through the program. When those kids see archery on TV, it reignites their interest. Then the television coverage of the Olympics was overwhelming. Normally there’s no press at Olympic archery events, but after *The Hunger Games* and with the success of the U.S. in London, there was so much interest.”

### Media: More Hype than Recruitment

While the anecdotal evidence is undeniable, research does not support popular movies and the Olympics as the primary reasons for the surge in youth archery participation. In December 2013, the Walker Research Group released a survey of more than 3,300 NASP participants from 35 states. Eighty-eight percent of boys and 89 percent of girls gave “for fun” as the number one reason for participating in the program. The second and third top reasons were “to improve my scores” (73 percent boys/77 percent girls) and “to compete with friends” (68 percent boys/59 percent girls). “Because of what I have seen in the movies” and “because of what I have seen in the Olympics” scored between 12 percent and 17 percent among both boys and girls as reasons for participating – the two lowest ranked responses in the survey.



Mike Miller, coordinator for the Pass It On-Outdoors Mentors program with the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism, is another who feels the power of the media is only a minor influence when it comes to introducing kids to outdoor activities. “Kids need the experience first,” says Miller. “There’s no substitute for getting kids outside.”

Kansas implemented Pass It On in 1999 as a way to stem the decline in resident fishing and hunting license sales. The program, which involves local mentors, aims to raise awareness of those outdoor pursuits among kids who weren’t getting opportunities to get outside. The program covers a variety of outdoor endeavors, including fishing, camping, target shooting, birding, canoeing, studying insects, and other

activities. It begins with a Youth Outdoor Skills Day. After that introductory experience, kids are encouraged to participate in outings with a mentor such as youth hunts ahead of the regular seasons for turkey, deer, upland birds, and waterfowl.

About 3,000 kids participated in Kansas’ Pass It On program in 2013, which is targeted at ages 10 to 12. Miller feels that most kids in the program are not influenced by movies like *The Hunger Games* because they’re not watching them. They’re too young for the movie and too bored by outdoor television shows.

“Outdoor shows show the trophy whitetail or turkey,” says Miller. “The emphasis is not on the experience. It’s on the trophy. Shooting a doe to a young hunter is just as exciting and a huge accomplishment. Kids might go to the media – not just movies and television shows but also social media – after the experience, but it’s not a profound recruitment tool.”

The Pass It On program works hard to ensure a good first impression and an exceptionally fun and rewarding follow-up experience, which Miller says is what really hooks kids on an outdoor pursuit. “A few figure out that it’s the best thing they’ve ever done. Then mom and dad figure out how to make it happen again. We have to work harder to give kids experiences with so many distractions today.”

### Virtual Reality

Miller feels the media can be useful if it raises awareness about outdoor activities, but watching it on a screen is nothing like the experience of a deer coming into bow range or a fish hitting a lure.

“Even in small communities, kids are just as susceptible to electronic distractions such as phones and video games,” says Miller. “I once took a kid deer hunting who had spent hours on a deer video game. He thought it would be the same [in real life]. He got so nervous he missed. He was shocked at his reaction. ‘It’s nothing like the video game’ he told me.... I live in Pratte, Kansas, with a population of 6,000. It’s a half-day to hunt pheasants on the edge of town. In larger urban areas, it might be full day or longer. Video games are instant – they take less time. But if you can expose kids and parents to an outdoor activity and it’s something they want to do, they’ll keep doing it.”



Miller predicts that if *The Hunger Games* and similar movies are having an impact on participation numbers, it's a temporary one similar to the spike in participation that the movie *A River Runs Through It* had on fly fishing.

Richard Louv agrees. Author of the landmark book *Last Child in the Woods* (Algonquin Books, 2006), Louv coined the term "nature deficit disorder" to describe the negative physical and emotional impact on humans when they are alienated from nature. He points to the movie *A River Runs Through It* which, like *The Hunger Games*, was based on a best-selling book. It caused a noticeable – though fleeting – increase in fly fishing.

"It was very clear that fly fishing shops really boosted their business after *A River Runs Through It* was released, but after five years, it abated," says Louv, an avid angler himself and the author of the book *Fly Fishing for Sharks: An Angler's Journey Across America* (Simon and Schuster, 2001). "*The Hunger Games* might have an effect on archery for a while, but I'm not sure it will lead to an interest in nature. At least it has trees in it."

## The Future

Founder of the Children and Nature Network, which works to connect children to the natural world, Louv believes that movies like *The Hunger Games* and outdoor-centric television programming give little reason for kids to venture outdoors.

"The number one selling book genre among young adults today is dystopic fiction about the post-apocalyptic world," says Louv. "What's troubling is the lack of another set of images." He also points out the lack of role models for kids and the fact that much of what appears in the media involving nature is related to either recycling or dying species.

"If all you watch about nature is how we are destroying it or some natural disaster, would you want to go outside?" asks Louv, who wishes for shows similar to *Lassie*, which he watched as a kid. "On *Lassie*, Jeff and Porky built treehouses, then got lost in a swamp. *Lassie* saved them. It made me want to go outside and have adventures. There's nothing like that on TV now and barely anything in books or



magazines. Instead, we get grown men wrestling alligators."

Louv believes that 24-hour news exacerbates the problem, creating eco-phobia or fear of environmental disasters among kids, the effects of which could have negative long-term consequences for conservation. "When we overload kids with stories about things like climate change, they are less likely to have joy in nature," says Louv. "We teach them that going outside is dangerous. It's not due to sensationalism; it's repetitive-ism. It plays into 'stranger danger.' Violence has actually decreased over the last 30 years, but fear has sky-rocketed due to 24-hour news. Kids are afraid to go outside. In the end, if you don't give kids the psychological, physical, and learning benefits of nature, they won't desire it. And if they don't love it, they won't protect it."

Louv's concern about creating tomorrow's stewards of our natural surroundings is echoed by Scott Talbott, director of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. "Eighth-grade delegates to the 2010 Wyoming Youth Congress on Children and Nature indicated that the top three barriers to spending time outdoors were homework and school (90 percent), electronics (59 percent), and

weather (44 percent),” says Talbott. “Two-thirds of hunters start before age 20, which hints that creating lifelong pursuits in the outdoors is rooted in childhood experiences. As things such as electronic entertainment and over-scheduling compete for our children’s attention, the best thing we as adults can do is introduce them to the wonder of the natural world.”

### A Natural Introduction

Is the concept of the natural world too big for kids to grasp? When I asked my 12-year-old step-daughter Zoe, an avid reader who devoured *The Hunger Games* series and loved the first movie (the only one she’s seen so far), whether *The Hunger Games* makes her want to try archery, she gave me a blank expression. Zoe is an outdoorsy girl who likes to hike, camp, swim, ski, and fish. She’s a proficient paddler and shot her first deer last fall.

I changed my line of questioning. “Why do you like to go fishing?” I asked, expecting her to describe the adrenaline rush when a fish bites,

the chance to spend time with her dad without her brothers, or the fact that she’s outdoors.

“It’s just fun,” she replied. “I just like to catch fish.”

Her response was telling. Kids may watch movies and read books like *The Hunger Games*, but ultimately, it’s what they participate in that has the greatest impact on what they love. Kids can’t “do” the outdoors, but they can certainly do things in it, such as fishing and archery. The key is getting them involved.

It doesn’t matter whether their interest arises from watching Katniss Evergreen take aim with her bow, sitting in duck blind with a patient grandparent, or watching a bug carry a leaf between blades of grass in the backyard. Kids learn to love the outdoors by doing things in it.

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## MEDIA IMPACT ON ARCHERY

If media is getting kids (and others) outdoors, the impact is currently greatest in the sport of archery. The Archery Trade Association (ATA) and USA Archery report the following statistics, which they credit in large part to a combination of movies such as *The Hunger Games*, *The Avengers*, *Brave*, and *The Hobbit* as well as television coverage of archery during the 2012 Summer Olympics.

- “Release Your Wild” — a campaign sponsored by ATA with the support of industry manufacturers and organizations to connect people with archery lessons, equipment, and leagues — reached 14.9 million people on Facebook between October 2013 and March 2014.
- ATA’s consumer Web site, *Archery360.com* — where archery fans can go for archery news, lifestyle, how-to’s, and other information — had 327,549 page views between October 2013 and March 2014.
- Membership in USA Archery — the governing body for Olympic archery in the United States — has risen dramatically. (Membership is open to anyone involved in archery.)
- Female membership increased 65 percent (from 2,483 to 4,128) between December 2012 and December 2013.
- Youth membership (under age 17) increased 81 percent between March 2013 and March 2014.
- USA Archery Facebook “likes” increased from 3,342 (2011) to 9,821 (2012) to 49,088 (2013).
- USA Archery Twitter followers increased from 1,733 (2011) to 8,909 (2012) to 15,200 (2013).
- Participation in U.S. National and Junior Olympic Archery Development (JOAD) National Championships (both indoor and outdoor) increased 31 percent from 2012 to 2013.