

As we move towards the

21st century, the demand for hunting opportunities in the Rocky Mountains continues to rise, especially for big game. Montana, with its wild places like the Rocky Mountain Front, ranks at the top of most desired places to hunt. Over the last few years, the number of nonresidents applying for big game licenses has steadily increased, far exceeding the annual quota allocated by the state. In the near future, this trend will likely prevail as more hunters are crowded into fewer remaining hunting areas in the West. With this growth and demand, hunters, especially nonresident hunters, are willing to spend large sums of money for exclusive access to wildlife and for specialty services such as guiding. To capitalize on this willingness, outfitting and guiding businesses are flourishing. Yet, the market is highly competitive and businesses are seeking unique niches by exploring new opportunities to provide specialty hunts and one-of-a-kind experiences for their clients. These types of hunts are often served best on private lands.

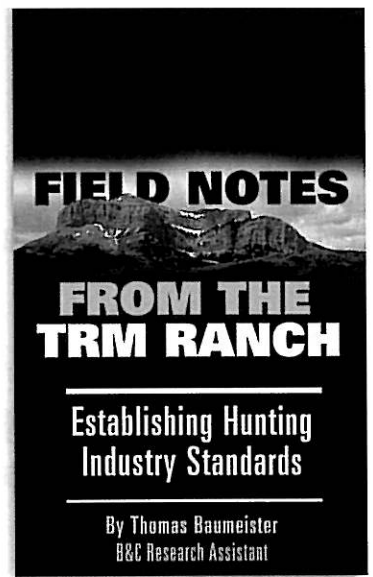
In Montana, more than sixty percent of the land base is privately owned, much of which is in large ranch holdings. This land base, in combination with low human population and high wildlife populations is conducive for an expanding outfitting industry. As

the demand for specialty hunts increases, the outfitting industry will continue to meet it. Each year, more ranches diversify their operations by converting from general public to private hunting through outfitting. To many ranchers, this can be a lucrative side-business. Unfortunately, these high financial rewards can lead some businesses into ignoring standards of quality and ethics.

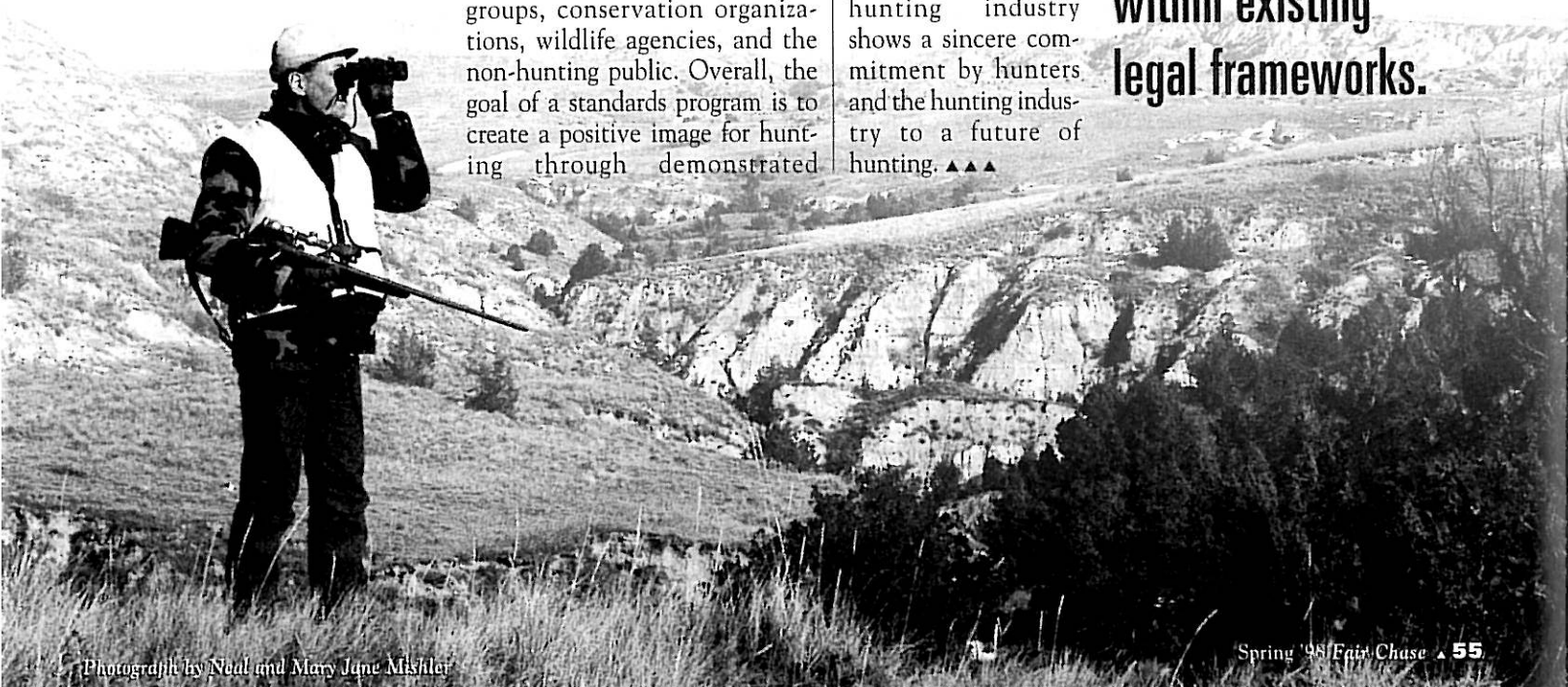
Almost every outfitter and guide inherently views their niche market as upscale with the highest standards of quality and ethical conduct. However, in reality, the quality and ethic reflected in these services varies widely ranging from exceptional to unacceptable. Unfortunately, there is no truly effective system by which the public, both hunters and non-hunters, can distinguish outfitters and guides who operate with high ethical and quality standards in the field. Guide and outfitter associations do not have such evaluation programs, nor are there any private rating systems. There is a real need for a program that evaluates the performance of the hunting industry and establishes standards for ethical conduct within existing legal frameworks. Establishing such a system requires an organization that functions independent of the hunting industry and special-interest groups yet is endorsed by the hunting industry, sportsmen groups, conservation organizations, wildlife agencies, and the non-hunting public. Overall, the goal of a standards program is to create a positive image for hunting through demonstrated

responsible, wise, and ethical use of wildlife that many non-hunters would find acceptable. The establishment of catch-and-release by the sport fishing industry is a classic example of how diverse groups and media can work together in establishing standards, which are widely advocated and perpetuated in the field. The adoption of such standards should be viewed by the hunting service industry as a sound investment in their future.

Whether we like it or not, the future of all hunting in North America will be decided by non-hunters. These non-hunters will base their determination upon the degree to which they judge hunting an acceptable and ethically justifiable activity. It is in the best interest of outfitters and guides to start regulating themselves, rather than to have laws and regulations be passed to meet the demands of non-hunters. Establishing external guides or standards for specific behaviors within the hunting industry shows a sincere commitment by hunters and the hunting industry to a future of hunting. ▲▲▲



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Photograph by Neal and Mary Jane Miskler