

**The future of Montana's** hunting tradition is closely tied to private lands. While landowners grant access for public hunting, hunters, in turn, help control wildlife populations. The availability of private lands for hunting is important to ensure adequate harvests of wildlife populations and to provide recreational opportunities. More than 60% of the land in Montana is in private ownership, most of which is allocated to livestock ranching. Ranching is a one billion-dollar industry; hunting supplies \$333 million to the \$2.5 billion tourism industry.

Relations between hunters and landowners are strained and, as a consequence, fewer landowners are granting access to hunters. The recent decline in access has prompted hunters to pressure the state wildlife agency and legislature to address this issue. Wildlife officials are particularly responsive to resolve this perceived conflict because fewer access opportunities are not only unfavorable to the future of hunting, they also change the profile of constituents supporting wildlife programs and limits opportunities for wildlife management.

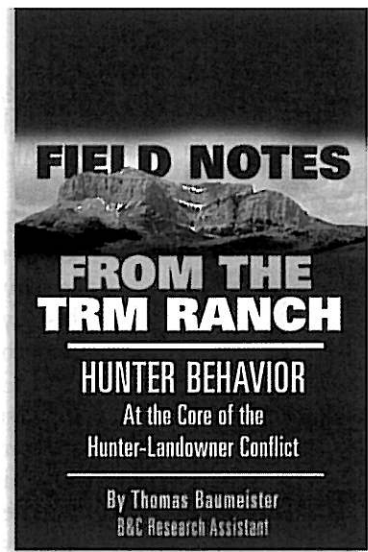
In response to these pressures in Montana and in other states throughout the West, various incentive programs are currently being tried to encourage landowners to grant access. To date, most of these programs have had limited success. Although some landowners have agreed to open their lands in return for some compensation—often cash payments—private land continues to be closed off to hunting at an alarming rate. This may suggest that other factors are important in influencing the relations between hunters and landowners besides simple economic incentive programs. It has been suggested that existing efforts may have failed to isolate and address the cause of the hunter/landowner conflict. At the core of the problem seems to be a decline in personal, positive interactions between hunters and landowners.

A statewide survey conducted by researchers from Montana State University in 1995 revealed some interesting insights into perceptions that hunters and landowners have of each other. According to this survey, many ranchers cite past property damage by hunters, such as driving off roads and leaving gates open, as reasons for land closures. By providing access free of charge, the landowner supports a public activity at a cost, including road maintenance, weed control, and potential liability claims, with often little benefit in return. These experiences and perceptions by landowners of hunters are accentuated by the often limited effectiveness of hunting as a means to control game populations and the high costs to landowners of managing hunters. These and other sources of “bad experiences” with hunters, including trespassing and littering, suggest poor behavior on the part of hunters as the primary deterrent for allowing hunting. The lack of recognition and appreciation by hunters for these contributions to hunting and wildlife conservation are at the heart of the problem.

Similarly, hunters also feel that poor behavior by a segment of the hunting community is at the core of conflict. Besides too little access, hunters ranked driving off roads and trespassing as the major areas for conflict. These findings are also supported by a national survey of state wildlife administrators who were asked to identify the causes of the decline of hunting access on private lands. Misconduct by hunters was identified as the single most important factor responsible for this decline, including behaviors such as trespassing, property damage, littering, livestock disturbance, and alcohol use during hunting. Administrators suggested that improving hunter behavior may be as important as establishing incentive programs and that in some cases incentives may not be the best approach to ensure public access.

Hunters and ranchers also share similar thoughts on how to resolve the conflict. Hunters feel that greater consideration and appreciation by ranchers, better communication between hunters and ranchers, and better identification of property boundaries offer the greatest potential for conflict resolution. The favored solutions by the ranchers include stiffer penalties for violators, better communication between hunters and ranchers, and greater consideration and appreciation by hunters. The potential for greater involvement by state and federal agencies and changes in hunting seasons were rated poor solutions.

Results from this survey strongly suggest that individual hunters and sportsmen groups need to build stronger ties with the ranching community. Overall, better communication between hunters and landowners and greater consideration and appreciation of the other group are necessary. In short, hunters need to recognize landowner perceptions, respond to demands by landowners for improved hunter behavior, and work with individual landowners to establish personal, positive relationships. While incentive programs continue to be important, landowners must first experience improved hunter behavior before additional access will be granted, either independently or as part of existing incentive programs.



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