

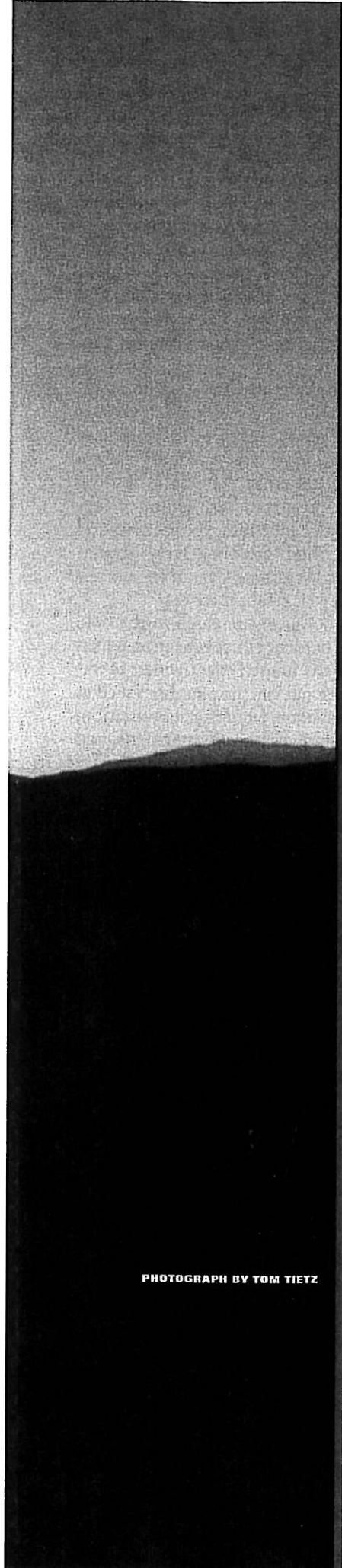
HUNTER EDUCATION IN AMERICA:

New Strategies for the 21st Century...

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A Short History of Hunter

Education in North America Informal hunter education classes began as early as 1938, although firearm safety training for first-time juvenile hunters was not mandated until 1949. In response to an alarming rise in the number of hunting accidents involving firearms, New York was the first state to require first-time hunters to complete a firearm safety course prior to heading afield. This progressive move toward education soon became the standard for other states and Canadian provinces across North America. By the late 1960s, 35 states had followed New York's lead. By 1999, when hunter education celebrated its 50th anniversary, all states, except Alaska, and most provinces required mandatory firearm safety training.



Hunter education has been a remarkable success story in this country. Over the last 50 years, hunter education (in combination with other measures such as shooting hours, shotgun-only zones, and hunter orange) has contributed significantly to fewer hunting accidents. Since 1970, the number of hunting accidents nationwide has declined by half, while the number of hunters has tripled over the same period. To ensure that hunter education continues to be successful in the next century, we must examine new strategies for meeting evolving public and personal expectations.

Informal hunter education classes began in 1938, and were mandated for first-time juvenile hunters in 1949. In the decades that followed, hunter education classes relied on simple messages: handle your firearms safely and obey the game laws. Although hunters were expected by the public to demonstrate—unequivocally—moderation and reverence in the pursuit of game, the ethical component of hunting was not generally emphasized in hunter education courses until recently. It was not until the 1990s that the curriculum of hunter education expanded beyond firearm safety to also include hunter ethics. This was a direct result of a growing concern over the appropriateness of hunting for sport. Changes in the socio-economic fabric of North America, including rising prosperity, put in question people's motivation for hunting—a practice that was questioned little when putting meat on the table was the primary motive. Hunting had evolved into a recreational activity.

Many hunters pursued game as a means to escape the demands of modern-day life and to enjoy the outdoors with family and friends. Yet the non-hunting community challenged the validity of this newly assigned cultural value. As such, it became increasingly difficult for non-hunters to condone taking animals for leisure and sport. In the public's view, some hunting methods, such as shooting baited black bears and treed mountain lions, were morally suspect. Aided by the court's affirmation of hunting as a privilege, it was stressed that hunting

is simply a right granted to the hunter by society and, if the hunter were not held unaccountable, could be taken away. This implied that hunters must earn the privilege and show responsibility for being privileged.

Initially, it proved difficult for many hunters to accept that a traditional activity—as intertwined with rural America as hunting—could be taken away. Some hunters rebelled, while others were simply left wondering as to what behavior was expected. In Montana, for example, the national discussion over the appropriateness of hunting fueled an intensifying debate over public access to private lands. Landowners felt that hunters were disrespectful of private property in their pursuit of wildlife. Hunter-landowner relations became strained following a failure to achieve consensus on the role of public hunting on private lands. In 1995, a Private Land/Public Wildlife Advisory Council recommended steps to assist hunters to improve their conduct and raise the bar on behavioral accountability. The foremost recommendation was education. Firearm safety courses, with their remarkable success story of reducing accidents, were subsequently charged with improving hunter behavior.

In Montana, as elsewhere, traditional firearm safety courses grew in complexity and length. Manuals were rewritten and curricula redesigned to assist students to become knowledgeable, responsible, and ethical. Half of

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM TIETZ

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Montana's current student manual includes chapters on wildlife management, hunter ethics, conservation history, and land-owner relations. In 1999, the International Hunter Education Association developed minimum guidelines for youth hunter education. These guidelines established learning objectives in areas such as responsibility, safety, and conservation. These concur with the current educational premise that greater knowledge leads individuals to choose alternative, more publicly acceptable courses of action. In turn, these choices lead to an improved public image of hunting, especially among landowners. Yet, while conceptually inviting, the premise and methods for effectively accomplishing these objectives are not as well established.

Current research in the field of outdoor ethics education points to the limited effectiveness of traditional teaching methods such as classroom lecturing, moralization, public awareness campaigns, and external codes of conduct. Yet other more interactive approaches, such as group discussions and experiential learning, don't appear to go far enough beyond raising awareness either. Instructors generally agree that it is considerably easier to convey the three fundamental rules of firearm safety to a young hunter than to instill a personal ethic built on compassion and reverence. Likewise, it is probably easier for a 12-year old to internalize firearm safety rules than to reason on moral grounds. Not matching course objectives with learning capabilities and teaching methods may result in the failure to seek alternative, more effective means of fostering hunter responsibility.

While the causal link between firearm training and the drop in hunting accidents is widely accepted, the effectiveness of hunter education in promoting responsible behavior is largely unknown. Manuals, videos, and bumper stickers are distributed to students with explicit messages on ethics, but little is known whether they actually influence behavior. Documenting

Mentoring

Since the locus for education of juveniles is in the home, parents need to be encouraged to assume an even greater role in mentoring and educating young hunters to become responsible and involved.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM TIETZ

the existence of such a relationship is hampered by a lack of easily measured performance criteria. While it is challenging to establish a causal relationship, actual conduct constitutes the only definitive measure for assessing the effectiveness of a program aimed at improving hunter behavior. In addition to using the number and type of hunting accidents as a measure of responsible behavior, measures such as the amount and type of public access to private lands, the type and frequency of game violations (e.g., number of violators cited for shooting at simulated wildlife), and the type and frequency of public complaints about hunter behavior may, individually and collectively, characterize the state of hunter conduct. This type of information would help identify specific problems and solutions involving hunter education, as well as other approaches, such as apprentice/mentorship programs.

Insufficient teaching approaches and unspecified perfor-

mance criteria have limited the effectiveness of hunter ethics education. This dilemma is further compounded by an unwritten goal of state agencies to maximize the number of graduates. For decades, hunter education programs were operated as a means to recruit young hunters into the sport. Graduating more students translated into greater economic and political support for the state's mandate to protect wildlife populations and their habitats—assuming that each graduate purchased a hunting license and a firearm. Collectively, the revenues generated from the state license sale and federal excise tax have provided the financial backbone for states' conservation agendas for over 50 years. As such, education programs were designed to strike a balance between course requirements and hunter recruitment. State agencies feared that adding greater complexity and length to basic courses would result in fewer hunters. This fear has prevailed and, today, hunter education is

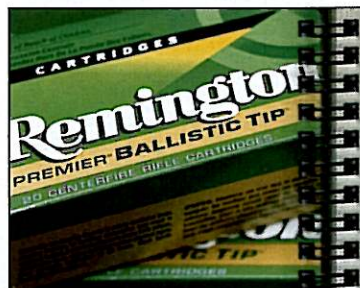
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Nationwide Hunting Statistics

According to a 1994 survey by the National Institute of Justice, one-third of American households own an estimated 192 million firearms. Seventy percent of these, mostly rifles and shotguns, are used for hunting and shooting sports. Yet according to the National Safety Council, in 1998 the number of accidental firearm fatalities declined to the lowest level since nationwide record keeping began in 1903. In Minnesota, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Montana, states with large constituencies of hunters, accidental shootings involving firearms accounted for less than 0.01% of the number of deaths between 1991 and 1995. Unfortunately, these deaths are often the most tragic, since they tend to be most preventable through training.



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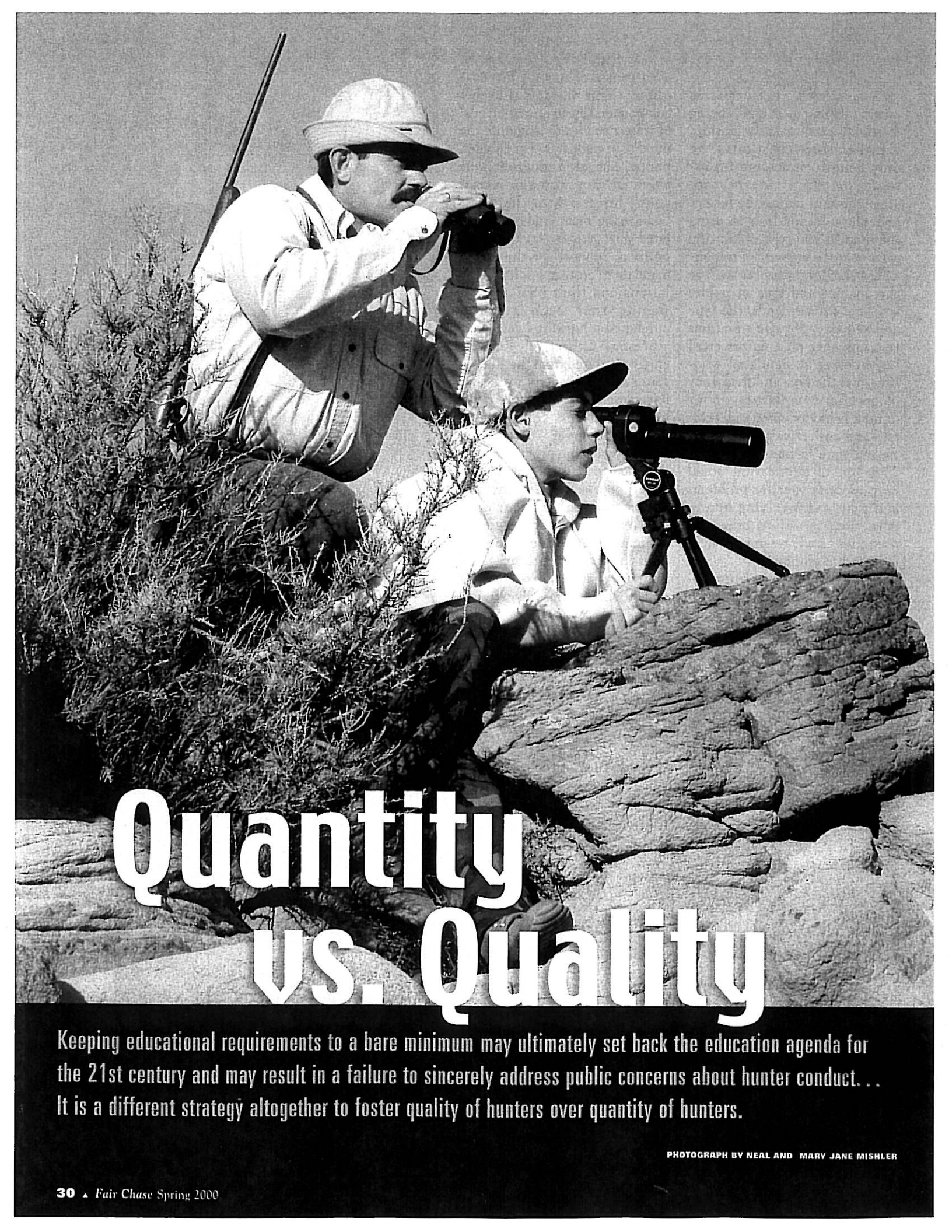
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Quantity vs. Quality

Keeping educational requirements to a bare minimum may ultimately set back the education agenda for the 21st century and may result in a failure to sincerely address public concerns about hunter conduct. . . It is a different strategy altogether to foster quality of hunters over quantity of hunters.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NEAL AND MARY JANE MISHLER

challenged to maintain this balance in light of the changing public approval of hunting. While the public and some hunters demand greater educational requirements for all hunters, not just youth, including proficiency testing, there is concern that this will accelerate the already declining trend in hunter participation.

Keeping educational requirements to a bare minimum may ultimately set back the education agenda for the 21st century and may result in a failure to sincerely address public concerns about hunter conduct. This, in turn, may result in a rise of legislative initiatives to ban certain forms of hunting, which will narrow personal decision space, educational opportunities, and a healthy debate over the appropriateness of hunting. To prevent this, a discussion needs to be advanced that draws attention away from maximizing recruitment and, instead, focuses on the quality of hunter needed to carry forth the conservation agenda, including the privilege to hunt. It is a different strategy altogether to foster quality of hunters over quantity of hunters.

As such, it may in fact turn out that fewer but more involved, knowledgeable, and responsible hunters is all that is needed to provide the economic and political support for protecting game species and their habitats, while simultaneously meeting public expectations. This is contrary to those who believe that preserving the hunting heritage requires numbers *en masse*, and that barriers to participation must be kept low by all means, even at the expense of advancing the level of ethical conduct. Fostering this discussion on potential tradeoffs between quality and quantity will require substantially greater involvement from the community of hunters, parents, outfitters, conservation organizations, and the public. State agencies may facilitate this discussion and assist in achieving consensus on setting priorities for the education agenda.

Those educational programs that can demonstrate measurable effectiveness in advancing knowledge, skill, and ethics will emerge as leaders in the field of outdoor education. Hunter education is well positioned to assume that leadership role. Each year, the program reaches 650,000 prospective hunters directly and their mentors indirectly. Some of the essential ingredients that have and will continue to provide for success are a remarkable track record of effectively reducing hunting accidents, a shared sense of urgency over declining public acceptance of hunting, and a corps of committed volunteers, administrators, and research scientists, as well as an institutionalized program with national representation and funding. However, fostering greater responsibility in the individual may require a different approach than is currently employed in hunter education. Since the locus for education of juveniles is in the home, parents need to be encouraged to assume an even greater role in mentoring and educating young hunters to become responsible and involved. Continuing education can assist parents to become better mentors, as well as provide graduates of hunter education with some guidance to develop a personal code of conduct under the motto "*it takes a hunter to make a hunter.*"

Hunter education is not a panacea program for preserving hunting. In the end, it will be easier to blame hunter education for failing to improve hunter behavior and public acceptance of hunting, than for the community of hunters to accept responsibility. Unless the hunting and non-hunting communities cooperate in setting an agenda, hunter education may be best off returning to basic firearm safety and game laws. To continue enjoying hunting, we as a community must actively participate in ensuring that tomorrow's hunters meet personal and public expectations. The future of hunting depends on our commitment. ▲▲▲

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Hunter Education in Montana

In 1957, Montana's hunters succeeded in changing hunter education, established in the 1940s, from voluntary to mandatory for first-time juvenile hunters. Since then, 376,000 individuals have been certified. Throughout the 1990s, the program certified 5,500 to 6,500 students annually—the majority of which were fifth and sixth graders. In Montana, more than 17% of all fifth and sixth graders enroll in hunter education. All hunters 17 years and younger, Montana residents and non-residents alike, must present a certificate of successful completion of a hunter safety course prior to purchasing a Montana hunting license. For Montana residents, this certificate is awarded following the completion of a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks hunter safety and education course. The department requires a minimum of 12 hours of instruction. A typical course consists of a series of classroom lectures, a half-day practical field exercise, and a live-fire .22 caliber rifle shoot, followed by a 75 question, multiple choice exam in which the applicant must score at least 84%. Hunter education is offered in most Montana communities. Unlike public education, however, a corps of dedicated volunteers teach hunter education. In 1998, instructors in Montana volunteered more than 25,000 hours, only 20% of which was used to teach classes; the remainder was donated in setting up programs and in securing local community support. Since 1970, hunter education has received monies generated from a federal excise tax on the sale of firearms and archery equipment. These funds are administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and apportioned to state agencies at a rate of three federal dollars for every dollar put up by the state. States compute their contribution as an in-kind share using the value of the donated volunteer hours as a basis. Funds are used to develop student manuals, furnish teaching aids, train instructors, and administer programs.