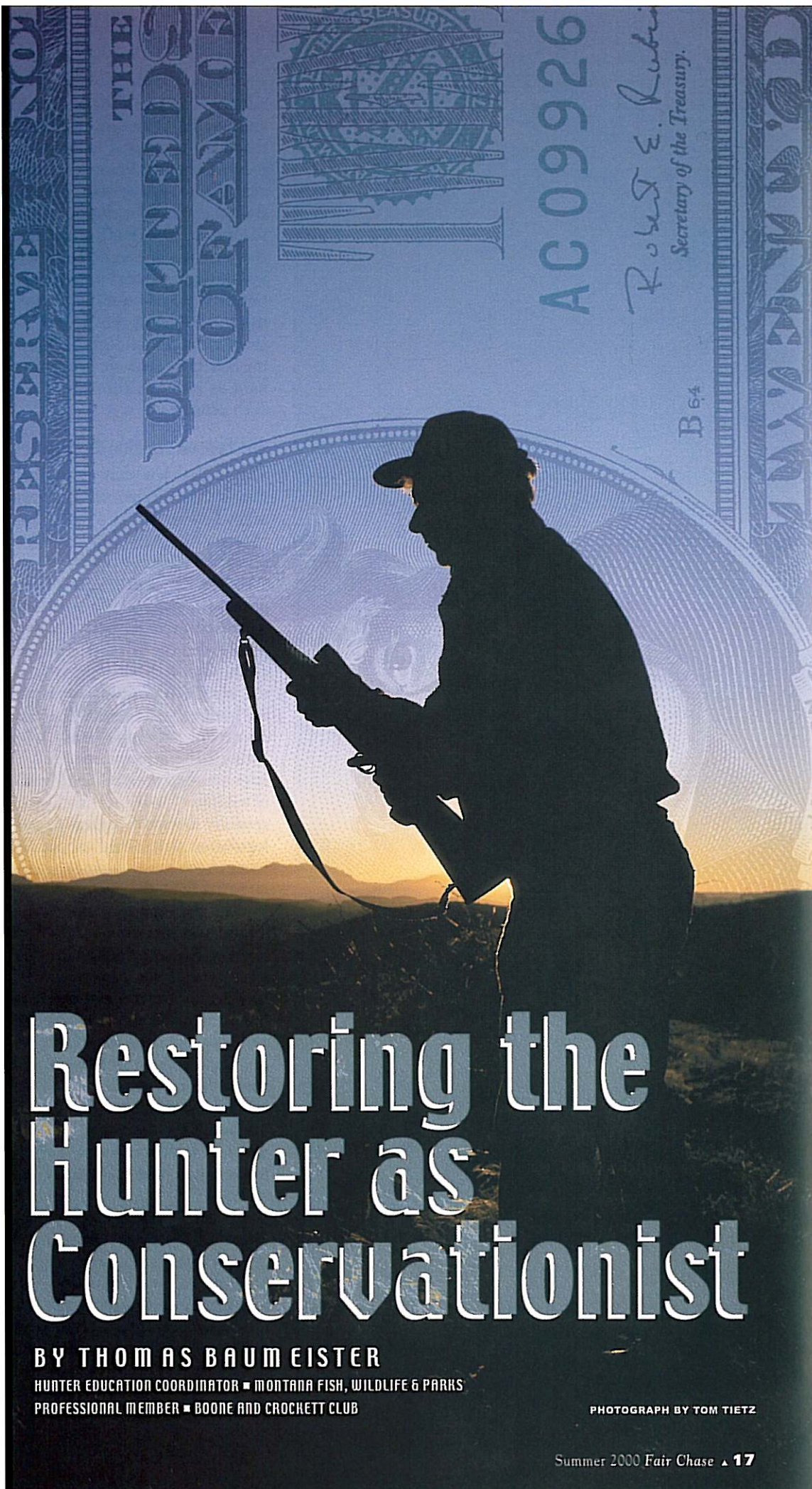


IN A DAY AND AGE when resentment against taxation is even more pronounced than usual, it seems only fair to stop for a moment and take a look at some of the goods and services provided by those much-maligned taxes. For example, the excise fees imposed on such sporting equipment as rifles, shotguns, bows, and ammunition are sometimes the sole source of revenue for wildlife conservation and hunter education programs, both of which directly benefit hunters. Even more surprising is that so few hunters – less than 15 percent, according to a recent survey – are aware of the “user pay/user benefit” program that they support through their purchases.

Under normal circumstances, one might argue that this lack of recognition is of no concern; after all, the taxes get paid and the programs are funded regardless of consumer knowledge. But we have reached the twilight of one era in conservation, and stand at the threshold of another. The choice of which path to take is critical, since it will define not only the course of conservation and hunting, but also establish the role of hunters in defining those courses in the 21st century.

This juncture in the conservation movement presents an opportunity hunters cannot afford to pass up. The same survey that revealed hunters' unfamiliarity with the programs that their tax dollars fund, also revealed an overwhelming support for wildlife conservation and hunter safety training programs and an equally strong opposition to funding non-hunting agendas with hunting revenues. With the funding mechanism in place, the traditional programs of



# Restoring the Hunter as Conservationist

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PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM TIETZ



## Restoring the Hunter as Conservationist

In its 63 years of existence, the Act has generated more than \$3.3 billion in funding to the state wildlife agencies. In recent years, the program has generated more than \$200 million in federal tax revenues annually. Fully 92 percent of this is directly reinvested in wildlife conservation and hunter safety programs; eight percent is retained by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for program administration.

wildlife conservation and hunter safety training are well-established and running smoothly. Revenues that have been used to get these programs up and running are now available to start up other innovative programs. Our choice on how to allocate these funds will define the next era of conservation and will be our legacy to future generations. It is time now to reestablish the hunter as the "keeper" or guardian of the wildlife and hunting heritage that we worked so hard to establish throughout the 20th century.

### The Federal Funding Mechanism

The federal law that established the funding mechanism is known as the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937, or more simply, the Pittman-Robertson Act (the "Act"), after the two Congressmen, Senator Pittman and Representative Robertson, who shepherded the bill through Congress. The Act was the result of the work of a coalition of visionary hunters, and firearms and ammunition manufacturers who dreaded the grim prospect of an impoverished natural world bereft of wildlife. These individuals successfully lobbied Congress to pass legislation that would use an existing excise tax on hunting equipment to fund the restoration of wildlife and their habitats. It was a landmark decision. President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law what became the most successful user-paid conservation program in the world. The Act institutionalized a partnership between hunters, manufacturers of firearms and ammunition, and federal and state wildlife management agencies that has lasted for more than 60 years and will continue for as long as hunters purchase sporting equipment.

A 1970 amendment to the Pittman-Robertson Act recognized hunter safety training as an eligible program to receive funds. The amendment came in response to a need to ensure safe and responsible conduct by hunters in light of a rebounding wildlife resource and an increasing hunter population. For the first time, this provided

secured monies for state wildlife agencies to develop a nationwide system of training programs and shooting ranges for hunters. States may use the apportioned monies to fund up to 75 percent of the cost of a hunter safety training program and for construction, operation, and maintenance of public shooting ranges.

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Here's how it works: A tax of 11 percent is levied on the manufacturing cost of every box of ammunition, bow, rifle or shotgun and is paid by the manufacturer. For example, a hunting rifle that retails for \$500 might cost the manufacturer \$300 to produce. On the \$300, the manufacturer pays \$33 in excise tax, a cost that the consumer assumes upon purchase. The U.S. Department of the Treasury accumulates these taxes in a special conservation trust fund.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service administers this trust fund and apportions funding to state wildlife management agencies according to a state's land area and the number of hunting license holders. However, no state can receive more than five percent or less than one percent of the total tax revenue in any given year. States secure these apportioned funds by applying to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through a simple grant process: states identify program priorities and articulate these to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Service then compares these requests with the provisions of the Pittman-Robertson Act. If the states' priorities and programs fit within the mandates of the law, the funds are granted on a reimbursement basis. In addition, states must match one dollar for every three dollars received from the Act's

fund, often using hunting license revenues. This 25 percent state match has the additional benefit of protecting license fees from being diverted to non-wildlife or non-hunting programs.

While the federal legislation and funding mechanisms may not be well known, the "on the ground" results have received widespread recognition and praise by hunting and non-hunting Americans alike. Across the country, thousands of projects funded by sportsmen dollars have helped restore, enhance, and manage wildlife populations and habitats for multiple uses and values. The success of most of these efforts is undisputed, and hunter purchases of sporting equipment have provided the financial backbone for these programs.

In addition to paying for the restoration of wildlife, since 1970 hunters have also provided millions of dollars through the Act to support hunter safety training in North America. With help from 63,000 volunteer instructors nationwide, wildlife agencies have established a comprehensive network of training courses, including shooting ranges. This system provides newcomers to the sport with information and training to be safe and responsible. Each year, more than 650,000 students graduate from the program. Today, hunting is one of the safest outdoor activities in America – since 1970 the number of hunting accidents has been cut in half, while the number of hunters has tripled over the same time period. It is possible, however, that the role of safety training has reached its limit of effectiveness in reducing hunting accidents. The relatively rare accident today is less a function of poor training than it is a chance event given the number of hunters afield.

### **A New Opportunity**

The success of both the wildlife conservation and hunter safety training eras is widely acknowledged. In some sense, one might say, the critical programs conceived and implemented in these two eras are now in "maintenance

mode." While they still require significant commitment of resources and personnel, the vast majority of the monetary funds, time, and creative energies devoted to establishing them are now free for use elsewhere.

Enter the third era of the hunter-conservation saga. There is once again an opportunity for the hunter to provide a vision how to use sportsmen's dollars to advance the conservation agenda. In this era the focus may shift toward the hunter as the appointed guardian, like gamekeepers of old, of North America's rich wildlife and hunting heritage. What is needed now are more hunter-advocates and ambassadors to safeguard the conservation accomplishments of the 20th century and to forge new goals and a new civic conscience for the 21st century hunter.

George Bird Grinnell, Theodore Roosevelt, and Aldo Leopold were hunter-advocates and ambassadors. We are the beneficiaries of their vision and strength of character. These early conservationists laid the foundation for the hunter to emerge as the ultimate North American conservationist. They envisioned the hunter as one who would not only pursue the hunt with joy, diligence, and a strong sense of ethics, but as one who would also shoulder the responsibility of safeguarding and promoting the physical, spiritual, and cultural resources of the hunt for generations to come. This hunter acquires the right to pursue his or her quarry in the wild not simply by virtue of the purchase of a hunting license, but through the fulfillment of his or her responsibility to protect that quarry in the political and social arenas.

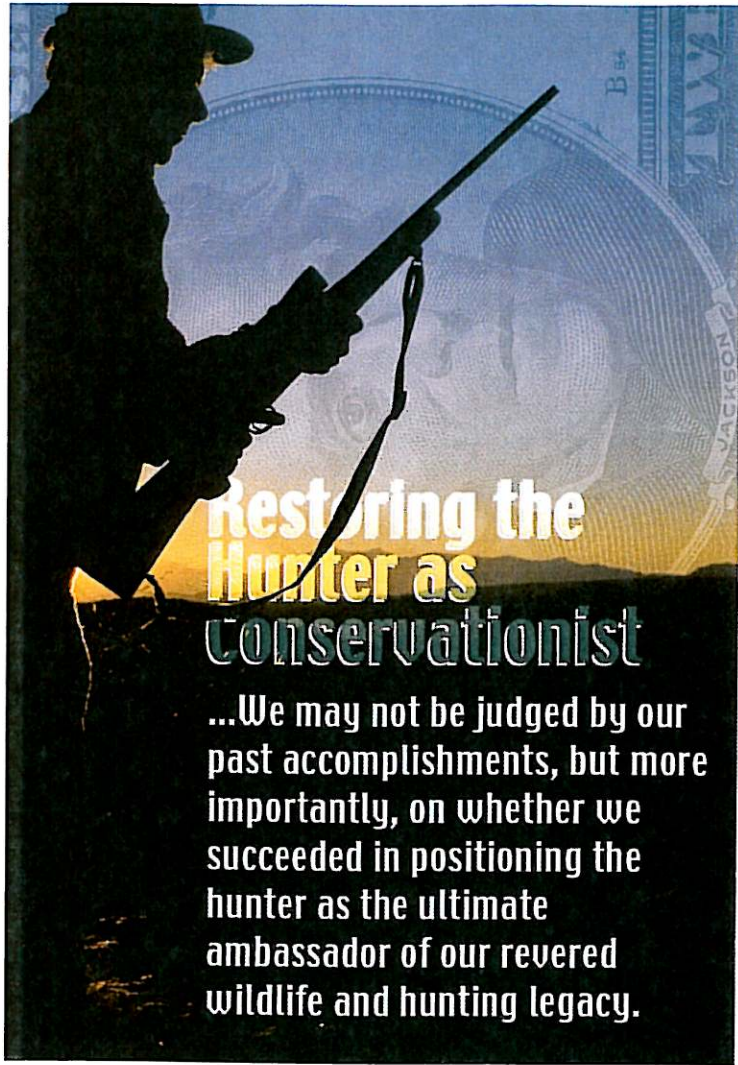
A responsible and involved hunter-conservationist may be characterized as one who has: (1) an awareness of the challenges to wildlife, habitat, and hunting, (2) an understanding of the social, political, ecological, and economic role of hunting in modern society, (3) a set of values and feelings of concern for the environment and the future of hunting, (4) skills for identifying and solving public con-



## **Restoring the Hunter as Conservationist**

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- 3. A set of values and feelings of concern for the environment and the future of hunting.**
- 4. Skills for identifying and solving public concerns through personal conduct and advocacy.**
- 5. Active involvement in working towards resolving hunting problems by using acquired knowledge and skills, and taking thoughtful, positive action toward the future of hunting.**



## Restoring the Hunter as Conservationist

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cerns through personal conduct and advocacy, and (5) active involvement in working towards resolving hunting problems by using acquired knowledge and skills and taking thoughtful, positive action toward the future of hunting.

The obstacles to moving into this third era are many. Two of the more prominent and immediate problems are a sharp decrease in the number of people participating in hunting activities and a lack of awareness of the avenues for public involvement in shaping the goals and missions for hunting.

With respect to the first point, if hunter numbers decline, hunting purchases also decline. And if purchases decline, so do the revenues available for reinvesting in the resource and in hunter programs that enhance and promote the hunting experience. Predictably, as the resource declines, hunter interest further decreases, and the cycle spirals downward. State wildlife agencies are now pursuing ways of recruiting new hunters into the sport by mimick-

ing the initiation process once performed by family members.

The second point presents even more opportunities for intervention and advocacy. We need to increase hunters' awareness of the valuable tool provided by the Pittman-Robertson Act. Funds appropriated under the auspices of this Act can do wonders for the future of hunting provided hunters are aware of the Act's many provisions. There are opportunities to expand the program beyond safety and legal concerns to include programs that engage the hunter more actively in carrying the conservation torch onward — to rekindle in the hunter the passion and devotion epitomized by early conservationists. Continuing education, mentoring programs, and outreach efforts are all different means to accomplish this goal. All of these are presently eligible, but largely underutilized, programs under the Act.

In addition to awareness of the provisions of the Act, hunters must also know at what points they can intervene in the process in order to have their views and concerns addressed in funding requests. States set the priorities that expand hunter safety training programs, hunter access programs, and public outreach agendas. Greater involvement by hunters at this level is critical to ensure that the user pay/user benefit program works on behalf of the hunter.

Carrying out a new vision for greater involvement and responsibility will require from individual hunters an effort and commitment similar in magnitude to that which was necessary to restore wildlife over the last 60 years. But it will also require a shift in the priorities and resources at the state and federal level. Existing hunter safety programs are ill-equipped and their missions too narrowly construed to accommodate this new broader vision. The new civic-minded hunter will require a thorough understanding of the history and evolution of the North American hunter and the economics and politics of the modern conservation movement. Hunter education programs might serve as the

medium to foster the desire to secure the conservation and hunting legacy that earlier generations of hunters provided us. They provide insight into the provisions of various conservation acts and may also suggest avenues of intervention.

In a democracy an activity cherished by few will persist only if it is acceptable to the majority of people and only if it is persuasively advocated by its proponents and participants. Never before in the history of the Pittman-Robertson Act has there been a more opportune moment to advance hunting than today. Hunters have demonstrated unequivocally our commitment to restoring wildlife and to making hunting safe; the abundance of thriving game species and the exceptional safety record of hunters stand as testaments to our ability to follow through with our commitments. There is little reason to believe that we cannot also succeed in our mission of creating a new hunter-advocate who is willing to exercise his or her rights as well as to accept his or her responsibilities.

In the 20th century, an unlikely alliance of hunters, industry, and government agencies worked to restore wildlife to unprecedented levels of abundance and diversity. The era of wildlife restoration is drawing to a close and on its heels there follows a new era with a new mission for the 21st century hunter. One can only hope that visionary, committed, civic-minded hunters will step up efforts to lobby for the restoration of the *hunter* to the conservation legacy. The Act can be a powerful instrument in this mission, and in a democratic society, we must learn to make effective use of the tools that government provides for redirection and articulation of the public interest.

At the close of the 21st century, we may not only be judged by our accomplishments in restoring abundant and diverse wildlife and in making hunting a safe outdoor activity, but more importantly, on whether we succeeded in positioning the hunter as the ultimate ambassador of our revered wildlife and hunting legacy. ▲▲▲