

EDUCATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF CONSERVATION LEADERS

The Boone and Crockett Club University Programs is designed to provide science-based knowledge from seasoned wildlife professionals and educators to college graduates in the wildlife field to better prepare the graduates for the responsible and wise management of wildlife in the future.



CSF Partnering with Boone and Crockett Program at the University of Montana on Bill to Make Hunting Accessible to Montana Students

Sharing stories around a fire at deer camp, exploring public lands, and enjoying wild-game dinners are time-honored hunting traditions. The locavore movement has engaged a new generation of young hunters who are now sharing in these traditions. Most don't have conventional hunting backgrounds; rather, many are learning to hunt as college students.

On the University of Montana campus, where students can earn credit for a hands-on course about hunting and wildlife management, the decades-long, nationwide decline in hunting participation seems distant. A closer look, however, reveals that hundreds of Montana's college students aren't hunting—not because they lack interest or access, but because a hunting license for non-resident students is unaffordable.

The opportunity to hunt a buck on public lands costs Montana's non-resident students \$338, nearly 10 times more than their resident peers. A big game combination license (deer, elk, upland bird and fishing) costs non-resident students \$555, while their resident

classmates can purchase a sportsman's license to hunt the same species for only \$82, including prerequisite fees.

Despite the current prices, hunting in Montana hasn't always been cost-prohibitive for non-resident students. Between 2010 and 2015, non-resident students could purchase a big game combination license for \$70—the same price as a resident. During this period, there was a 35% increase in the number of students who purchased a big game combination license. However, the license prices changed in 2015, when, as part of a broad set of license reforms, the state legislature increased the cost of a non-resident student big game combination license by 700%, from \$70 to \$490.

The increased license prices drastically reduced the number of students that hunted. In 2016, when the price hike took effect, the number of non-resident hunter-students fell by 76%. Fewer than 115 non-resident students purchased a license in the entire state. Participation has not recovered since, and the number of students purchasing a big game combination

license has declined each year.

Montana's student license prices not only hamper participation in hunting, but lawmakers failed to recognize the unique relationship that non-resident students have with the state's communities and economy. Unlike most non-residents who spend a week or two visiting Montana, non-resident college students make a multi-year commitment to study in the state. Students live, work, and volunteer in Montana communities upward of nine months each year and contribute well over \$100 million to the state's economy annually. For comparison, eligibility for resident-rate hunting licenses requires living in Montana for only six months per year.

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While students exceed this requirement, they are often excluded from resident-rate licenses because of technicalities related to their status as a student, such as needing to maintain residency in their home state for scholarships and financial aid.

Non-resident students are also uniquely impacted by Montana's hunting and fishing license prices. If non-resident students can't afford to hunt in Montana, they may

College students are emerging as a bright spot in the fight against declining hunting participation. Together with the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF), we are working to ensure that Montana's college students aren't priced out of an opportunity to hunt and fish.



A University of Montana Learn-to-Hunt student practices his shooting skills.

not have an opportunity to hunt—or learn to hunt—at all, because traveling to their home state to hunt during traditional hunting seasons is unrealistic for most non-resident students.

For us, here at the University of Montana, as a professor of wildlife conservation and an undergraduate student of wildlife biology, the adverse effects of hundreds of students being priced out of a hunting license are clear and troubling.

Fewer people purchasing hunting licenses jeopardizes state wildlife agency funding at a time when agencies are tasked with managing wildlife amid unprecedented conservation challenges, such as those posed by habitat loss, climate change, invasive species, and wildlife diseases.

In addition to the ecological challenges confronting wildlife managers, state wildlife agencies serve increasingly polarized constituencies divided on how to manage wildlife. On top of the division, misinformation about hunting and its role in conservation has become pervasive. Now, with fewer hunters to advocate for their position as

a key stakeholder, it is essential for the hunting community to engage with young adults in meaningful ways so that they can experience firsthand the investment that hunters make in conservation.

Upon graduation, students travel throughout the country working in every facet of society, often becoming leaders in their communities. Whether or not students continue to hunt, they will form a base of young people who understand hunting, will defend the role of hunters at the forefront of wildlife policy, and will vote for conservation-minded leaders who prioritize causes important to sportsmen and sportswomen.

State agencies and NGOs spend millions of dollars annually to recruit hunters. Now, a growing body of research is honing-in on college campuses as ideal environments for hunter recruitment programs. In college, students have a newfound autonomy to learn new skills and are generally encouraged to pursue a diverse range of activities. The skills and hobbies students gain are often practiced among their peers and become ingrained in their



University of Montana Learn-to-Hunt students participate in hunter education classes.

lifelong identity. College is also one of the last periods in life where strong cohort effects drive behavior. When barriers to hunting are removed, students do the “recruitment” among friends and classmates. This means that for each student who has the opportunity to hunt, several more will be introduced to hunting, become aware of the role of hunting in society, and may become lifelong hunters themselves.

With college students proving a key demographic for hunter recruitment, national conservation

organizations and student-led initiatives are working to make hunting accessible to students who lack a hunting background and may not have otherwise considered hunting an option. The aforementioned class at the University of Montana is centered around what motivates most young adults to hunt: healthy and environmentally sustainable food, outdoor experiences, and the development of lifelong skills. To complement the hunting education provided, student-led groups are mitigating financial and logistical barriers to getting

into the field by organizing carpools, gear swaps, and mentorship programs.

The one barrier to hunting that neither national conservation organizations nor student groups can overcome is a license price that makes hunting inaccessible to most students. This is the

barrier we set out to address beginning last summer, when we contacted Ellary Tucker-Williams, the Rocky Mountain States senior coordinator and Marcomm Liaison with the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation.

A few months before the Montana legislative

session commenced, we began working with Ellary to develop a strategy for passing legislation that would allow Montana's full-time, non-resident students to hunt at a resident rate. A policy that would lay the groundwork for campus-based hunter recruitment programs to reach their

full potential. If enacted, the policy would also broaden Montana's base of hunters, creating a positive revenue stream for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

The framework of our effort has been the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation political infrastructure in Montana. Through this infrastructure, we've worked closely with stakeholders to craft a policy proposal that will achieve our goals and have broad support. Last November, we began discussing student licenses with the Montana Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus Advisory Council (LSCAC). Our first win came when the council, chaired by Mac Minard, voted in support of our proposal. During the meetings, the representatives of each organization offered insightful feedback which we used to further refine our proposal in preparation for discussions with legislators.

The positive vote and strong support from the advisory council led to our working with Montana State Representative Matt Regier, R-Columbia Falls, HD4, who serves as one of the chairs of the Montana Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus, and Rep. Steve Galloway, R-Great Falls, HD 2, a member of the caucus. Together with Reps. Regier and Galloway, we turned our proposal into a bill draft that, if passed, would offer full-time, non-resident students resident-rate general hunting and fishing licenses.

With the legislative session underway, we joined Tony Schoonen, CEO of the Boone and Crockett Club, to visit the state capitol. After a morning of meetings with legislators, we presented our proposal to the bipartisan, bicameral Montana Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus. A discussion with the caucus about the unique



ABOVE: Learning to butcher wild game is one part of the class, focusing on healthy and environmentally stable food. **BELOW:** University of Montana Learn-to-Hunt students practice identifying wildlife tracks.



relationship non-resident students have with Montana and the importance of making hunting accessible to young people concluded with a unanimous vote of support—providing exciting momentum as we prepare for our first round of legislative hearings in the coming weeks.

Since beginning this process, we've been grateful to collaborate with the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, the Boone and Crockett Club, the representatives and senators of the Montana Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus, and the advisory council to the Sportsmen's Caucus. Together, we have begun to take meaningful action in pursuit of our shared vision: A diverse generation of young people who will form an educated populace around hunting, conservation, and wildlife management. ■



The Club supported HB 647 with our Boone and Crockett Club professor, chief executive officer, and several students testifying in favor of the bill in front of the Montana House Fish and Game Committee. If passed HB 647 will allow full-time, non-resident students to purchase hunting and fishing licenses at resident rates thus removing a cost inhibitor and putting more students in the field, many of whom have participated in our Learn-to-Hunt Program at the University of Montana and TRM Ranch. From left to right: Wyatt Nielsen, Rep. Steven Galloway, Josh Millspaugh, Tony Schoonen, Jonathan Karlen, James Goerz, Travis Hawkins, Nicole Bealer, and Allison Reinhardt.



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JAMES REED, Sports Afield Magazine

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