

# The Montana Model of Outdoor Engagement

When I attend national meetings of state fish, wildlife, and parks agency directors, there's often a palpable sense of anxiety in the room. My colleagues are worried about the future of their agencies, for good reason.

Hunting and fishing license dollars, along with federal taxes on hunting and fishing gear, pay for almost all state wildlife and fisheries management and habitat restoration. But nationwide, hunter and angler numbers are declining. Hunting participation especially has decreased since the early 1980s. In 2016, only 11.5 million people hunted, less than 5 percent of the adult population. Over the next quarter-century, millions will "age out" of these activities, further accelerating the decline.

This fact may account for the slightly panicked look in my fellow directors' eyes.

When I return to Montana from those meetings, I thank my lucky stars that our situation is not nearly so dire. Yes, hunting participation as a percentage of the population has declined slightly over the past 30 years. But numbers have remained constant, and even risen in the case of fishing. Montana has one of the highest rates of hunting participation in the country. We're near the top in per capita fishing and wildlife watching, too.

Why is Montana bucking the national trend? One major reason is our public access. The Montana Stream Access Law, the Block Management Program, Habitat Montana, generous landowners, and abundant federal lands all provide countless places for people to hunt and fish.

Another reason is Montana's commitment to maintaining the integrity of fish and wildlife populations and habitat, like protecting elk winter range on wildlife management areas, working closely with ranchers and farmers on improving private land habitat, and managing wild trout in rivers for nearly half a century.

Maybe most important is the fact that outdoor life permeates Montana's culture. A major concern in other states is not just a decline in hunting and fishing, but that fewer people are connecting with the outdoors at all. That's due in large part to urbanization, aging populations, and kids spending more time staring at smartphones than sunsets.

But here in Montana, as we say in our FWP tagline, "the outside is in us all." People live in and visit this state because they want to connect with the natural world—by sitting around a campfire, hiking into wilderness, hunting elk and deer, or fishing for trout and walleye.

Across the country, other state wildlife agencies are working with

industry groups and conservation organizations to attract new hunters and anglers, hold on to existing participants, and invite back those who once participated but drifted away. This nationwide effort to recruit, retain, and reactivate is known as "R3."

FWP is part of the R3 effort, but we're moving ahead in a way that works specifically for Montana, a strategy I've been calling the Montana Model of Outdoor Engagement. I envision our model having three main features:

One, FWP would aim to grow not only the number of hunters and anglers—the bedrock of this agency—but also hikers, campers, boaters, wildlife watchers, and others engaged in nature-based activities. This reinforces the fact that outdoor recreation is the common denominator for our entire agency, and that we already provide opportunities for hiking, wildlife watching, boating, and other outdoor recreation at our state parks, fishing access sites, and wildlife management areas. As the department works on recruiting, retaining, and reactivating hunters and anglers, we'll also invite others into the FWP tent. That way we can, for instance, work with the growing number of trail users to ensure that any new trails don't damage critical wildlife habitat and unduly bother wildlife.

Two, the Montana model will focus on improving the service FWP provides to its customers, both longtime and new. A key feature will be a modern tech portal that allows FWP customers to quickly and easily access licenses, regulations, park reservations, hunting and fishing maps, and other information on their handheld or home devices. The new system will also allow us to deliver permit deadline reminders, season updates, emergency notices, and other improved services.

Finally, the Montana Model of Outdoor Engagement will be guided by the four beliefs that shape this agency: inclusion, balance, integrity, and outdoor opportunity.

Across Montana, wildlife habitat is being degraded by fragmentation. State park infrastructure is aging. Trout streams and rivers are warming. Aquatic ecosystems are threatened by invasive species. FWP can't tackle these challenges alone. That's why we need to ensure that people continue engaging in the outdoors. Only then will they value wildlife, parks, and fisheries and help us protect and conserve these resources that sustain Montana's renowned quality of life.

Other states are rightfully alarmed over societal changes that could drastically curtail their conservation funding. Fortunately, Montana is filled with people who crave the outdoors. That fact, along with FWP's long tradition of conservation innovation and leadership, gives me hope. I'm confident that our department can find new and better ways to serve and partner with the hunters, anglers, and park visitors we've traditionally served, as well as with the many others who can't imagine a Montana without clean water, healthy fish and wildlife populations, and abundant outdoor opportunities.

—Martha Williams, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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