



BUILDING A LIVING LEGACY

In poll after poll Montana outdoor recreationist have listed access to public lands, waters and wildlife as one of their greatest concerns. Though Montana is blessed with millions of acres of public land we still have one of the highest ratios of private lands in the West. Nearly two-thirds of the acreage in Montana is held by private landowners with a disproportionate amount of those lands occurring in eastern Montana. Even in western Montana with its vast tracts of public land, access across private property to utilize those resources has become increasingly problematic. It has been estimated that fully thirty percent of public lands in Montana are legally inaccessible.

The shift in land ownership and use patterns has complicated this problem. When the majority of ranches were working operations owned by resident families, hunting and fishing opportunities on these properties or access through them to public lands was seldom an issue. With the dramatic increase in new ownership of large ranching properties being driven by nonresident amenity buyers, access to public lands and wildlife has been severely compromised in many areas of the state. In addition, many of the large properties are being subdivided into small tracts severely impacting wildlife values and further complicating public access issues.

These conditions have resulted in increasing problems with attempts to privatize public resources through actions like locking off existing access routes to public lands and attempts to limit use of public waterways by restricting points of entry. Agencies charged with managing the public's wildlife have had an increasingly difficult time accomplishing their goals due to the inability to get public hunters into areas where wildlife is heavily concentrated.

Thankfully there have been many forward thinking individuals in both the government and private sectors who anticipated these problems and took actions to secure the enjoyment of our public resources for generations to come. One of the real bright spots in this picture has been the procurement of additional acreage and access through both fee title acquisition or by conservation easements that preserve wildlife values and provide public recreation but keep the land in private hands.

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks has put hundreds of thousands of acres of private land into conservation easements usable by the general public through programs such as Habitat Montana. They have purchased fee title ownership in parcels throughout Montana for fishing access sites, wildlife management areas and state parks. There are over fifty state parks and over seventy Wildlife Management Area's that provide recreational opportunities to the public scattered throughout Montana. Stream and river access has been enhanced by more than 300 fishing access sites either owned by MFWP or leased from cooperative landowners.

MFWP has an excellent web page that provides an interactive planner that allows you to find the relevant information to enjoy all of the resources that it manages (<http://fwp.mt.gov/default.html>). Although many people complain about what they perceive as the high cost of licenses for hunting and fishing, those dollars have been directly responsible for many of the land acquisitions that will provide hunting and fishing opportunities for generations to come.

The Montana Department of Natural Resources is a major player in land management in Montana. DNRC controls over five million acres of school trust lands owned by the State of Montana. Relationships between the agency and sportsmen and sportswomen have not always been cordial. Prior to 1988 the use of these lands was limited by the requirement that permission from the lease holder must be granted for the public to utilize the land. Under the threat of a lawsuit, legislation was passed that recognized the right of the public to enjoy these properties. This action opened millions of acres of trust lands and provided access to huge amounts of federal lands that had been formerly inaccessible. With a legislative mandate to consider public recreation as an integral part of their mission DNRC has taken a much more pro-active approach to providing public opportunities for hunting, fishing and general recreation. With the help of recreationists from across the state they sought legislation for an innovative land banking program that allowed them to sell isolated tracts of school trust land with low public values and in turn use this money to purchase accessible property with high recreational values and a better rate of return from the leases. They have been able to acquire six parcels totaling over 24,000 acres with four more purchases

currently in the works that will add an additional 12,000 more acres. You can obtain more information on these parcels on DNRC's website under the section on land banking (http://dnrc.mt.gov/trust/land_banking/about.asp).

In the 2007 Legislature, Governor Schweitzer proposed and helped pass a bill to create a \$10 million fund to enhance public access and recreation in Montana. These funds are having a significant impact on public recreation in many areas of the state. One of the newest additions to Montana's outdoor heritage was financed in large part by a grant from this fund. The Circle R River Ranch near Billings brings more than four thousand deeded acres and access to another five thousand acres of public land into the public domain. This property will provide thousands of hunter days to the residents of nearby Billings that were not available in the past.

Federal agencies have a long history of both land acquisition and conservation easements for enhancing wildlife habitat and expanding public recreational opportunities. They have utilized a combination of land swaps and appropriated funding to consolidate and expand public property and maintain existing access and create new opportunities.

Our congressional delegation takes access to public lands seriously. They are actively engaged with the Forest Service in the issues surrounding the dispersal of Plum Creek timber properties throughout Montana. Plum Creek is one of the major private land owners in the state. They have had a long history of allowing public recreation on their holdings but there is great concern over what the effects of subdividing and selling their property will have on wildlife habitat and recreation. The Forest Service as well as many other federal and state agencies have been actively involved in purchasing key properties from Plum Creeks holding to insure that existing recreational opportunities continue to exist.

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service is currently involved in a process to sell public cabin sites located on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge on Fort Peck Reservoir and use the proceeds to enhance the refuge through the acquisition of inholdings and adjacent properties. This is one of the premiere hunting and fishing destinations in North America and the new opportunities for growth will greatly enhance an already world class resource.

The Bureau of Land Management is another major stakeholder in land management in Montana. They have actively been acquiring critical wildlife habitat from willing private sellers throughout Montana. In the Helena area they partnered with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the Conservation Fund to acquire the Iron Mask and McMaster Ranch properties. These ranches will provide critical wildlife habitat for a broad range of wildlife species as well as an outstanding recreational asset located only miles from the state Capital.

All of these beneficial activities by the various federal agencies are dependent on support and funding from congress and the president. President elect Obama talked about the importance of public lands and access to them in his campaign stops in Montana. This is a positive sign that the federal agencies will have an even greater impact in enhancing public recreation and wildlife opportunities under his administration.

The private sector is also increasingly involved in providing recreation opportunities to the public as well as conserving wildlife habitat and open space. Private land conservation brokered by nongovernmental organizations has long depended on donated easements that protected habitat from development but generally did not include any provisions for the public use of the land.

In many cases these conservation easements have been placed on properties that were purchased by the same amenity buyers that have created issues with access to public land and wildlife through their management practices. In the face of growing public concerns about the public subsidizing these conservation easements through both state and federal tax deferrals but receiving little in the way of increased recreational opportunities many non-governmental organizations (NGO's) have incorporated significant changes into their programs.

Organizations like the Conservation Fund, the Trust for Public Land, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the Nature Conservancy have played an instrumental role in conserving wildlife habitat while insuring that public opportunities to use the resources are preserved and enhanced.

New organizations like the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust are making public access a priority in any conservation easement or fee title acquisitions that they fund. MWF was the primary proponent for the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust and continues to be intregally involved through membership on the Citizens Advisory Board with two MWF officers and through administrative support of the trust. These MWF members help determine property priorities. Innovative groups like the Public Land/Water Access Association have used both legal and legislative strategies to greatly improve the access situation in Montana.

While many of us bemoan the loss of the good old days in Montana in regards to access there is a tremendous amount of effort being exerted to preserve and enhance our opportunities. If you care about public lands and wildlife now is the time to jump into the fray with your support.

The common thread that links all of these actions is the direct role that MWF staff, affiliates and individual members play in shaping and implementing the policies and decisions that make all of these acquisitions possible. MWF is intimately involved with

MFWP, the state of Montana and the federal agencies on the full range of land management issues. MWF and our affiliate clubs work hand in hand with the various land trusts to identify and champion proposals for new additions to the public estate. Affiliate clubs such as PLWA, Flathead Wildlife, Russell Country Sportsmen, and Billings Rod and Gun are on the forefront of the fight to maintain and enhance public access and our public estate.

Join the fray and help Montana and MWF work for the future - become a member of the Montana Wildlife Federation today!!