

by Jonathan Karlen

Student-led Initiative in Montana makes Hunting More Accessible for Peers



Montana recently passed a law to make hunting accessible to thousands of college students. University of Montana Boone and Crockett Fellow Jonathan Karlen describes transforming an idea into a law.

Fall at the University of Montana brings a buzz of excitement. As snow begins to whiten the Rocky Mountains that ring the campus in the small city of Missoula, you can sense that the opening day of deer and elk hunting season is approaching. Conversations turn to plans for hunting trips and recipes for wild game. When the opening day of rifle season arrives, students' groans about waking for early

by Jonathan Karlen

classes give way to sunrise hunts. On weekends, come sun, rain, or snow, students pile into cars and pickup trucks bound for remote parts of Montana's 30 million acres of public land. Mondays mean sharing adventures from the field.

However, thousands of college students across Montana were, until very recently, unable to hunt and fish with their classmates. Their status as non-resident (out-of-state) students made hunting and fishing licenses prohibitively expensive.

I became aware of how it affected my friends and classmates when I served as President of the University of Montana Student Chapter of The Wildlife Society.

At our meetings, guest speakers discussed the North American Model of Conservation and how wildlife management and conservation activities are funded primarily through hunting license sales and a tax on hunting equipment.

When students asked me about learning to hunt, there were several resources to point to. My academic advisor and the Boone and Crockett Professor of Wildlife Conservation, Dr. Joshua Millspaugh, teaches a hands-on class where students can earn credit to learn about hunting and wildlife management; and student clubs facilitate hunting mentorship programs, gear swaps, range days, and carpools. Almost all practical barriers for an aspiring hunter were mitigated.

But when non-resident students, who comprise more than half of the university's Wildlife Biology Program, would learn the cost of a hunting license, they no longer viewed learning to hunt as an attainable goal.

For Montana's several thousand non-resident students, the fee to hunt a buck on public land was \$338 per season, nearly ten times more than the cost to their resident peers. The big game combination license (deer, elk, upland bird, and fishing) cost non-resident students \$555. By contrast, their resident classmates could purchase a license to hunt the same species for only \$82, including fees. Non-resident students were effectively priced out of hunting. It seemed unfair. While non-resident students paid prohibitively high license rates, they spent hundreds of millions of dollars in Montana and lived in the state nearly year-around for several years.

For non-resident students, Montana becomes home. They work and volunteer in Montana communities and usually cannot travel to their technical state of residence during the hunting season. As a result, if they can't hunt in Montana, they can't hunt at all. Many students are unable to become residents of Montana for practical reasons, such as the potential to lose residency-based financial aid.

The Montana State Legislature sets fees for hunting licenses. Although I was learning about policy and politics in some of my classes, I hadn't seen the legislative "sausage-making process" up close. I was in for a few surprises.

The state capitol building, in the town of Helena, lies on the eastern edge of the Rockies, with mountains visible in every direction. Inside the capitol building, a visitor may think they're in a museum

by Jonathan Karlen

of the American West. Around every corner, paintings and sculptures commemorate pivotal events in Montana history. The first time that Dr. Millspaugh, Tony Schoonen (Boone and Crockett Club CEO), and I made the two-hour drive to Helena, I had little idea of what to expect.

It was January, and lawmakers, lobbyists, and journalists had descended on the capitol for the start of the 90-day legislative session. That gave us four months to turn our proposal into a law. Since the legislature meets only once every two years, this would be our one opportunity to succeed.

We realized we needed to present lawmakers with a compelling, long-term vision. Our experience at the University of Montana, seeing how students of all backgrounds were interested in hunting, inspired us to share a vision where future leaders in conservation, business, education, and government were conversant in hunting and wildlife management. A vision where fewer voters would be swayed by misinformation in the era of ballot-box biology.



University of Montana Learn-to-Hunt students pluck upland birds.

To prepare for our first day in the capitol, I had compiled research about hunting licenses in Montana — legislative history, financial aspects of license policies, and prior attempts to enact similar change. The facts alone told a compelling story. 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. The license prices

by Jonathan Karlen

changed in 2015, when, as part of a broad set of license reforms, the cost of a non-resident student big game combination license increased by a whopping 700%, from \$70 to \$490. As a result of the price hike, student participation in hunting plunged by nearly 80% and never recovered. In 2017, a bill in the legislature sought to make licenses more affordable for students but was struck down in the very first committee hearing. How would we succeed where that effort had failed?

I had spent weeks not only researching hunting license laws, but also reading about the individual legislators, their districts, voting records, and policy priorities. Now, these lawmakers were sitting in front of us. I recognized them from videos of prior hearings — where they often shot down proposals like ours. Waiting to make my presentation to the Montana Sportsman's Caucus, a bipartisan group of legislators who can endorse wildlife-related bills, I was silently repeating my pitch, tweaking my introduction, experimenting with my delivery, and deciding what facts to emphasize. After a lightning round of questions, ranging in topics from licensing data and federal conservation funding to student credit loads, the caucus voted unanimously to support the concept of resident-rate licenses for non-resident students. While it was a big victory, there was plenty of work ahead.

In the following weeks, while I drove the icy roads from Missoula to Helena, with fog often making the mountainous landscape look more like a tundra, I rehearsed my elevator pitch, over and over. I practiced answering the toughest questions I could think of.

During the next few weeks, I had dozens of conversations with lawmakers. I usually had only 30 seconds or a minute while they walked to a meeting. We spoke in elevators, parking lots, and at water fountains. Often, they were rushed, but sometimes it seemed that they enjoyed talking with me—maybe it was a brief reprieve from a lawmaker's several-hour tax policy hearing. Occasionally, we had longer conversations, where we would have a friendly debate about the issue of hunting license costs. When we couldn't come to an agreement, we at least understood each other's positions.

I discovered that my status as a student was an asset. I lacked the baggage associated with a political party or interest group. With most lawmakers, I could find common ground, regardless of their party or district. Sometimes, that common ground was conservation funding, others wanted to recruit students to Montana, and many saw the proposal as a way to preserve Montana's hunting heritage or establish a fairer set of license prices.

We were fortunate to find a bill sponsor in Rep. Steven Galloway, of Great Falls, a city of about 60,000 on Montana's plains. Rep. Galloway is passionate about Montana's hunting traditions and supporting rural economies.

Dozens of conversations with legislators culminated with us writing a bill (HB 647) that would allow most full-time undergraduate and graduate students to hunt at a resident rate. When introduced, HB 647 had nearly 50 co-sponsors on both sides of the aisle. But it also had some vocal opponents among lawmakers and interest groups.

The next step was our first committee hearing. A majority of the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee, a group of roughly 20 representatives, would have to vote to support the bill or it would not move

by Jonathan Karlen

forward. About half of all bills die at the committee phase. It felt like we were standing at the start of a vast minefield, where losing control of the messaging around our bill would lead to its swift death.

Leading up to the hearing, students began writing to legislators to express their support. Then, on a gray day in March, a group of students joined Dr. Millspaugh, Tony Schoonen, and me to testify before the House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee.

“Having the chance to hunt and fish in Montana would mean so much to me,” said Travis Hawkins, a University of Montana senior studying Finance and Management Information Systems. “It would further cultivate my love for wildlife and public lands that will be with me for my entire life, and that I hope to pass on to my kids.” Travis’ voice was one of the many student voices heard in the room that day.

Opponents, including the Montana Wilderness Association, Walleyes Unlimited, and Trout Unlimited forcefully argued against the bill. Their main concern, they told the committee, was that the bill would lead to a slippery slope: First, students would get resident-rate licenses, then other groups would ask for the same.

There was a stark difference in tone between the students’ passion for hunting and conservation, and the lobbyists arguing that students hunting would trigger a chain of events eventually causing a gut-punch to the Fish, Wildlife and Parks budget.

Several days and one amendment later, the bill passed the committee on a 15-3 vote. Shortly afterward, the bill was heard on the House floor. From my laptop in the Boone and Crockett Lab, I watched representatives debate the bill—at this point, there was nothing I could say or do to shape the outcome. After a brief, but spirited, debate the bill passed the House of Representatives on a 71-25 vote.

Our big success in the House brought us to the Senate Fish and Game Committee, where students again came to testify, and opponents were now joined by the Montana Audubon Society. The bill passed that evening on a 7-4 vote. A victory, but on tighter margins than we had hoped. Next: the full Senate.

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Jonathan Karlen testifying in support of the HB 647 before the Senate Fish & Game Committee, Helena, Montana, 2021.

Before the vote in the full Senate, I drove back to the capitol to talk again with senators. I felt more desperate. We had come too far to fail on the last of six votes. Senators seemed more cautious about supporting the bill because a “yes” vote would send the bill to the Governor, rather than another committee that could kill the bill. On the vote tally screen, high on the wall of the senate chamber, the names of each senator slowly turned red and green. The final vote count was 33-17. The bill passed.

In early May 2021, Dr. Millspaugh and I joined Governor Gianforte and UM students for the bill signing, officially making HB 647 law. In 2022, hundreds of Montana students will purchase their first hunting license.

The experience made clear to me that, as students, our access to education, social networks, and professors who are experts on virtually every topic, position us to make a meaningful contribution to the policymaking process.

Montana’s new law expanding hunting opportunities for students is also a component of a larger, national movement to engage a much-needed younger generation of hunters and conservationists.

There is now broad recognition that college campuses harbor unparalleled potential for recruiting lifelong hunters and conservationists and starting a dialogue about wildlife management. Campus-based

by Jonathan Karlen

hunter recruitment programs are proliferating across the country. Driving the success of campus-based hunter recruitment programs is that most college students are open to, and encouraged to, learn new skills.

Dr. Millspaugh and I see students' passion for and curiosity about hunting and conservation each semester. Most striking is that many of the students interested in learning to hunt are not from rural areas; rather, many grew up in cities, had non-hunting families, and may not have supported hunting before starting college. Today's students are growing up learning about threats of climate change, problems with factory farming, and the importance of sustainable food. They also want to be active conservationists. Students see wild game meat as a healthy, affordable, and sustainable alternative to much of what is offered at the store.

State legislative bodies are beginning to take note of college-student hunters. More than half of U.S. states now allow non-resident students to purchase resident-rate hunting licenses. Among these states, however, statutes often restrict the student populations eligible for licenses through age limits, provisions that exclude graduate students, or onerous application procedures. In states without statutes addressing non-resident college students, thousands of young people are priced out of a hunting license, paying rates meant for visitors who often hunt with an outfitter. When states don't allow full-time students to hunt at a resident rate, they reduce the efficacy of the substantial investments being made to recruit hunters on campuses.

Our hope is that every state will remove unnecessary barriers to college students interested in hunting. I believe students are poised to lead this effort.

We cannot expect our future leaders to carry forward the legacy of hunters as conservationists if they view hunting as an inaccessible and elitist activity. We are at a critical juncture for the future of hunting and conservation: if all college students—resident and non-resident—can afford to hunt, a network of dedicated state agency and NGO professionals will ensure that they learn the skills to hunt safely and ethically. As Theodore Roosevelt wrote back in 1889: "From its very nature, the life of the hunter is in most places evanescent; and when it has vanished there can be no real substitute in old settled countries."

Jonathan Karlen, a Boone and Crockett Fellow at the University of Montana, served as President and Education Outreach Officer of the University of Montana Student Chapter of The Wildlife Society (TWS). He recently completed a bachelor's in Wildlife Biology with a minor in Climate Change Studies and is working toward a Master's in Public Administration. He can be reached at jonathan.karlen@umontana.edu

Banner Image: Students and Dr Millspaugh join Gov. Gianforte to sign HB 647

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