

## Mentoring young people to go outdoors



Tips  
from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

**Mentoring**  
The woods are my passion. The woods always have, and hopefully always will, call to me. When the going gets tough, I get going, to the woods. It does not make a difference what I am going to do in the woods, so long as I am in the woods. Fishing, hunting, hiking, packing, you pick, and I will be there, leaving all responsibilities behind.

As a kid, my grandmother could never understand me. I would have a pile of homework due the next day and she would assume that I was upstairs working on it. When she would check in on me, of course, I was not there. The woods called and I answered. Schoolwork would have to wait.

Sitting in a classroom, serving a sentence called elementary school, I could never pay attention to the boring lectures the teacher would deliver. My little mind would wander off to a place with towering trees, a fast moving creek, a roaring campfire, all set with a snow capped mountain in the distance.

The fishing would be fantastic. Large, stream-bred cutthroats were nailing my fly on every cast. Later I would climb the mountain in search of that huge mule deer buck I saw earlier. Life was good in the woods and I never wanted to go back to the other life.

Suddenly and without warning, the woods would disappear. A loud crack of a ruler hitting the desk



I am doing my part in mentoring my grandson Tyler Rackay in the hunting sports. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

would end the dream. Next some teacher would scold me for daydreaming and not paying attention to her lecture about the Boer Wars, like they were my fault or something. I would head home after school again, with a note about my poor study habits.

People who loved the outdoors raised me in an outdoor culture. Growing up in an outdoor culture does not seem to be the case anymore. The number of people who hunt and fish seems to be diminishing as the baby boomer generation slowly moves on to the great tax shelter in the sky.

There are certain outdoor activities that more people are engaging in but hunting and fishing are not one of them. In the early 1980's, hunting license sales were at a peak, showing around 17 million hunters nationwide. By 2016, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports that the decline has continued, with only 11.5 million people now taking part in hunting.

Studies suggest that part of the problem is that millennials are part of a global shift away from eating meat because of sensitivities over animal cruelty. Currently, young adults may be less likely to own guns than

past generations. This is not the only reason.

The current generation is very interested in knowing where their food is coming from. The biggest issue is urbanization. More and more people live in city areas and are disconnected from the country life and knowing from where their food comes.

If you pay attention to the demographic shift of hunting and fishing license purchase by age, you will find that the numbers fall off. When people hit their 60s and 70s, they just stop hunting and fishing.

The fishing numbers are also in danger of collapsing, but not at the same pace as hunting. If we can find a cure for the hunting crisis, perhaps we will use the same method to save fishing. Currently, the fishing numbers are a decade behind the hunting numbers. Perhaps we can correct the hunting drop and apply what we learned to fishing. Time will tell.

Our generation needs to do a better job of mentoring the young people. We need to pry them away from their cell phones, tablets, and video games, and get them into the outdoors. The time is now to start introducing them to

hunting, fishing, camping, and wildlife.

Americans' interest in hunting is on the decline. The most severe impact is one of a financial nature. Just about all funding for wildlife conservation stems from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses, permits and taxes on firearms, bows, and other outdoor equipment.

The lack of funding is not just affecting Colorado. Wisconsin is suffering a \$6 million deficit that has forced the state's Department of Natural Resources to reduce warden patrols and control of invasive species.

Michigan's legislature had to give some of their state's wildlife projects a boost, leaving other programs woefully underfunded. The bee and other pollinating creatures project are in grave danger of failing because of a lack of funds.

When we look at the historical hunting license data by state, the net change in hunting license sales has decreased in 21 states and increased in 29 states since 1960. That analysis is deceiving until you track it against population changes. Only four states (North Dakota, Alabama, Oklahoma and

Mississippi) have seen an increase in hunting license holders compared to population increase.

What it all boils down to is that we have to do a better job of getting new people involved in the sports we love. We must take the time to introduce our young people to the great outdoors, lest the sport and wildlife will be gone forever.

We need to go out of our way to spend as much time as possible with our kids and grandkids enjoying our wildlife, waters, woods and wild lands. It is a slow process and can be difficult at times. Prying the young ones away from their screens and teaching them to build memories from experiences is a long process. Personally, I think it takes four or five years to get a kid totally hooked on fishing and hunting.

Most people do not realize that revenues from hunting and fishing licenses pay for millions of dollars in wildlife management and habitat costs, or that sportspeople also support thousands and thousands of jobs in rural areas throughout our state.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) recognized this as a problem and established a Hug a hunter and Hug an angler program, in an effort to help non-hunters and non-anglers understand the role hunters and anglers play in public lands and wildlife.

We need to do our part and take the time to bring our young people into the sports we love so much. Our beloved wildlife and their future depend on what we do today.

I had an opportunity to discuss the problem with Joe Lewandowski, former Southwest Region public information officer for CPW. He had this to say: "CPW's hug a hunter and hug an angler advertising campaign is no longer running,

and we certainly don't recommend hugging strangers these days. The basic message those TV commercials conveyed still remains: Those who purchase hunting and fishing licenses are providing direct support for the conservation of wildlife in Colorado."

Joe also reminded us: "CPW does not fund from general state sales taxes, but is a self-supporting, enterprise agency. Funding from license sales goes to big game and small game management, habitat restoration and protection, education, research, law enforcement, hatcheries and aquatic management."

Colorado is fortunate to have not seen the steep decline in the number of hunters and anglers that some states have seen. We are fortunate that at present time, Colorado has millions of acres of public land that accommodate hunters and anglers, and most importantly, wildlife and habitat for wildlife.

I find myself in that upper age group, but I have no intention of ever giving up the hunting and fishing life. My grandmother believed that I had the attention span of a monkey chewing on a fly swatter; always daydreaming. I guess she may have been right because I still daydream about the woods when life gets too tedious. And it gets too tedious a lot these days.

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## Accessible outdoor adventures for kids

It's not easy growing up in a world that isn't always designed with your needs in mind. The challenges of everyday life can be considerable for kids with disabilities, and they also have to learn how to operate in a world that can be inaccessible while at the same time learning all of the other standard kid things that are part of becoming an adult. Time spent outdoors can bolster mental and physical health, build resiliency, provide educational opportunities, and contribute

Friends of Youth  
and Nature

By Anne Janik

to a kid's overall wellbeing, but finding ways to spend time in nature can be a challenge for those with limited mobility.

If your kid has trouble with balance and proprioception, or if they use crutches, a wheelchair, or another mobility aid to get around, there are a lot of opportunities to still get outside in safe and accessible ways here on the Western Slope.



See ADVENTURES page A11 Courtesy photo/Passionate People Team



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