



Youth Recruitment Falls Way Short

By Howard Vincent, Pheasants Forever President & CEO

Wildlife conservation started with hunters. That's an indisputable fact. Teddy Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold, Ding Darling, John James Audubon - if there were a Mount Rushmore of hunter-conservationists, you can bet they'd all have their busts carved in that mountain. They created the foundation upon which Pheasants Forever and our conservation partners stand. Imagine the state of our land without their passion and leadership for conservation. Our society owes them a debt of gratitude for the wild places and wildlife we enjoy today.

hunter-conservation mentors a great deal.

I recently received a report on youth hunting commissioned by the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) that was quite alarming. The report, which is available on-line at www.nssf.org, paints a pretty dark picture of the future of our hunting heritage. According to NSSF research, there will be less than 10 million hunters in the U.S. by 2025. That's less than 4 percent of the entire population, down from 10 percent of the population only 20 short years ago in 1985. While the report

decide it's cool to go for a walk in the woods with dad on a Saturday afternoon? While I don't see anything wrong with limiting independent hunting till the teenage years, I do have a problem with limiting an adult mentor's ability to take a son, daughter, grandchild, niece, nephew, or mentee out for a small game hunt just because they aren't 13. With proper hunter education training and an adult mentor, youth hunting is a joy for both the teacher and student. As a father of two boys, I can tell you that molding them as ethical hunters has been one of the most enjoyable, entertaining, and rewarding experiences of fatherhood.

At the crux of this issue is the omnipresent fear of guns. By and large, kids that participate in hunter education and hunting are more respectful of firearms than the uninitiated. In fact, being injured or killed by a lightning strike is statistically similar to your chance to being injured or killed in a hunting-related incident.

However more important than the 2nd Amendment issue is what we lose as a society by the loss of millions of hunters - millions of active conservationists and our voice as such. Led by the likes of Roosevelt and Darling, hunters have always made a difference on the ground for wildlife and the environment. We back up our passions for hunting with sound conservation decisions and leadership. However, the NSSF study clearly shows that we are a dying breed unless we change our ways and return to active recruitment of youth hunters. The good news is the tools are in place to start making a difference today.

As a PF member, you've taken that all-important first step. You've made the commitment to conservation. At PF National, we've taken steps to forge partnerships with organizations to make a difference on the grand scale. Recently, PF became the first conservation organization to contribute to the International Hunter Education Association's initia-



However, there is a connection often overlooked in the growth of these icons - their hunter-conservation mentors.

We owe a great deal of recognition to these men's fathers, mothers, uncles, grandparents, brothers, and friends who introduced them to the passion of hunting. We owe that first mentor who taught them to treat every gun as if it were loaded. We owe that first mentor who explained why we only shoot roosters and only harvest what we need. We owe that first mentor that instilled the values, appreciation, and ethics of hunting that grew like wildfire into profound conservation brainstorms. Yes, we owe their

acknowledges diminishing access to land, increased urbanization, and other barriers to the growth of hunting, it prominently cites our downfalls in the recruitment of youth hunters.

The report targets state hunting regulations and laws for youth participation as being too restrictive. Essentially, our youth hunting guidelines have taken the decision of what age is the right age for our children to hunt away from us as parents. In fact, over 20 states are so restrictive that a 12 year old child can't even go small game hunting WITH a parent. At 13, that child is virtually a high schooler. How many high schoolers



tive to create an on-line hunter education portal where kids interested in hunting can find a hunter education class in their area simply with the click of a mouse. PF has also partnered with the National Wildlife Federation to help bring our habitat mission to schools across the nation. Our youth Ringnecks program is growing stronger with over 15,000 youth members enrolled and now receiving their quarterly magazine. And, our Leopold Education Project continues to train conservation educators through the writings of a conservation giant.

Our corporate partners have also joined the effort. Matthews Bows is leading the way with their archery in the schools program. Bass Pro Shop has created the amazing Wonders of Wildlife National Fish & Wildlife Museum & Zooquarium in Springfield, Missouri where thousands of students learn about conservation and PF each year.

The next step is for each of us as individuals to pass along that conservation tra-

dition and hunting heritage to the next generation. Here are a few ways you can make a difference in the life of a child and for the future of hunting and conservation.

- **Youth Mentor Program**—If your chapter doesn't currently hold a youth mentor hunt for kids interested in learning about hunting, then consider putting an event together for this fall. If your chapter does already hold a youth mentor hunt, the odds are high that they could use your help.

- **Hunter Education**—One of the best ways to pass along the ethics of being a hunter-conservationist is to become a hunter education teacher. There is a shortage of volunteers willing to give of their time to this noble cause in every community across the country.

- **Big Brothers Big Sisters**—We live in an age of broken families. Make a huge difference in the life of a child and become a Big. PF and BBBS have a formal partnership in place. You and your chapter

can get involved. For more information, contact Michael Christensen, Kansas Big Brothers Big Sisters, at (316) 290-8883.

At the end of the day, I don't think Leopold's dad accomplished any great heroic feat by teaching a young Aldo how to hunt. In their day, it was the norm. Fathers taught their kids how to hunt, fish, pick morel mushrooms, and plant crops. Aldo's dad went even further as he mentored Aldo on how to hunt ethically in his pursuit. It was all a part of what Aldo would later come to term a Land Ethic. Today, unfortunately, mentoring like this is not the norm. The world has changed. We live in a time of broken families, restrictive age limitations on youth hunting, and diminishing access to hunting land. Yes, the world of hunting is not the same world of the Leopold's. Today, I do view every hunter-conservation mentor as a hero. We need more busts on that conservation Mount Rushmore, but we can't get their without a few more mentor heroes.



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