

Young Guns

Sharing our hunting heritage with the next generation is every hunter's responsibility.

Amid the prophecies of doom and gloom that seem to surround the future of hunting, it can be easy to miss the many good things that are going on to further our sport. Dedicated people and organizations all over North America and beyond are working hard to ensure that new generations of hunters will continue to make hunting an integral part of wildlife conservation efforts around the world.

One of the newest and most innovative of these programs is the Pass It On Outdoor Mentors Program, a partnership between the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) and Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA). The program

matches outdoorsy RMEF volunteers with youth between the ages of 8 and 18 who are interested in shooting, hunting, fishing, and other outdoor activities.

The idea began three years ago in Wichita, Kansas, where the Kansas Wildlife and Parks Department and several conservation groups teamed up to match volunteers with boys and girls from at-risk backgrounds. The initial program expanded statewide in the fall of 2002, and with help from RMEF and a grant from the National Shooting Sports Foundation, will expand to four more states this year. BBBSA expects it to go nationwide within three years.

"Many people have recognized the need to engage at-risk kids who wouldn't otherwise have a chance to


experience the outdoors," said Tony Schoonen, senior vice president of marketing and communications for RMEF. "Big Brothers Big Sisters opened that door for us, and we're extremely proud to help get this program off the ground on a national scale."

Spearheading the project is Mike Christiansen, Director of Outdoor Mentoring Projects with BBBSA. He says BBBSA is looking to enroll 1 million kids in its programs by 2010. To do this, it needs more male volunteers to expand its mentoring programs, and the organization believes that the Outdoor Mentors Program is one way to reach out to people who might not otherwise get involved in BBBSA.

The interest is there among the kids, too, despite the fact that most of us think of BBBSA as an urban-centered organization.

"In Wichita, a city of 400,000 where we have 900 to 1,000 kids on waiting lists for mentors, we noticed that 60 percent of the kids put down on their enrollment forms that they were interested in hunting or fishing," Christiansen said. "When we saw that, this program seemed like a natural."

Pilot programs are forming this year in Pennsylvania, Montana, Texas, and an as-yet-unnamed West Coast state.

If an organization as respected as BBBSA is willing to ally itself with our cause, there is a great deal of hope for the future of hunting and shooting. RMEF aims to reach 400,000 youth and women in the next three years through its Pass It On outreach initiative, which encompasses several programs. To find out how you can get involved, call 800/CALL-ELK or visit www.rmef.org. 



Big Brothers Big Sisters of America has formed a partnership with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation to help match kids with volunteers who will introduce them to outdoor activities.