The Brainerd Foundation

Endangered Ecosystems Grantees

< profile list

Trout Unlimited:
Angling for a New Constituency

More than 50 million people hunt and fish in this country. As a group, they are a potentially powerful force that could shape policy on conservation issues. After all, hunters have a stake in habitat conservation, just as fishers have a vested interest in water quality. The "hook and bullet" crowd, however, hasn't been heavily engaged in decisions like the one, announced October 10, 2003, that removed limitations on the amount of toxic mining waste that can be dumped into rivers and streams.

That may be because they tend not to join organized groups, or because they are being lured away by misleading information. A recent poll of Idaho hunters and anglers examined attitudes toward wilderness areas. "Thirty-nine percent believed you couldn't hunt or fish in wilderness areas, or didn't know that you can," notes Chris Wood, vice president of conservation programs for Trout Unlimited (TU). "That's just bad information."

Wood is trying to change all that. Back when he was policy and communications director for the Department of the Interior during the Clinton administration, he was involved in developing and promoting policies like the limit on mine waste dumping and protections for roadless areas. Now, he and the conservation staff at TU, with funding from several sources including the Brainerd Foundation, are working to get hunters and anglers engaged in shaping public lands policy. Wood wants the hook and bullet crowd to make itself known to the rulebook and ballot crowd.

The first task Wood faced when he joined TU was to build a team. He hired three organizers-one to work on energy development, one to work on wilderness areas, and one to work on mining policy. They joined another person already working on roadless areas.

Wood's strategy has been to follow a basic three-step process. The first step: conduct research to understand the impacts of resource development activities on hunters and anglers. The second step: develop a package of information that is interesting and accessible to sportspeople and likely to attract media attention. The third step: deploy that information. Primarily, that means going out to rod and gun clubs and other local, small-town venues. It also means sending out electronic newsletters, purchasing advertising, and working in coalitions with industry groups, environmental groups, and government agencies.

Furthest along in this process as of this writing is energy organizer Dave Stalling, the first of the new hires. During the research phase he has taken data on kills and catches from Western fish and game departments and created a geographical map that highlights the areas of greatest hunting and angling success. The notion is that those areas with the greatest success are likely to be the areas with the highest quality habitat. He has also mapped areas where the federal government wants to develop oil and gas resources. Overlay those two maps and you find that many of the areas used most frequently and successfully by hunters and anglers are the same areas at risk for new energy development.

Next, Stalling packaged the information as a report-the development stage. As of this writing, TU is preparing to release the report and implement a comprehensive communications strategy to promote its findings.

Next comes deployment-or "preaching the gospel" in Wood's words-which will be the true test of TU's strategy. "Generally speaking, the goals of hunters and anglers are generally that same as conservationists-recreation, good habitat, clean water," says Wood. "If we can speak to hunters and anglers and arm them with good information, if we demonstrate the linkages between their interests and protecting the quality of habitats on public lands, then I think they'll re-engage."

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