

GUEST VIEW

## Seeing it from both sides: Bringing hunters and landowners together

**KATHY HADLEY and CRAIG JOURDONNAIS**

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Thom Bridge

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**H**unter success for elk on public land gets tougher each year. So does finding spots on private land to chase elk that have been pushed off of public land. Elk exhibit an incredible skill for adapting to the imbalance of hunting pressure on private vs. public lands. They seek out areas with fewer hunters. Extended hunting

seasons aimed at increasing harvest only seem to exacerbate this dynamic. As longtime hunters, conservationists, landowners and game managers, we are eager to find solutions by working with folks to chart a more effective course.

Just as hunters desire access to elk, most landowners want effective hunters whose priority is harvest over recreation. It is important that hunters understand the principles and obligations of accessing private lands. Private lands often represent the soul of a farming or ranching family and these lands represent home. Farms and ranches are businesses that provide the owners' livelihood. Every hunting season impacts their ranch work, creates serious inconveniences and challenges. Imagine hunters knock on your doors during dinner or calling you at random hours seeking permission to hunt while you are trying to run your business. Some landowners choose to deal with too many elk rather than deal with hordes of hunters. We can improve this situation.

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One time-honored solution to the time and energy drain on landowners was established in 1996 when the statewide Block Management Program was launched by Fish, Wildlife & Parks. This program has proven to be of huge benefit to landowners and hunters alike and has opened up 6 to 7 million acres of private land a year to public hunting. During Kathy's ranch participation in the program, hunters were able to sign up at a sign-in box adjacent to her driveway to request ranch access without struggling with how to approach her or her husband, and they no longer had to answer the door, field phone calls or manage hunters. It was a huge timesaver.

Furthermore, Kathy found that hunters who came to them through the Block Management program were good, responsible hunters who treated the privilege to use their land with respect. Block Management paid an impact fee which covered any damage to fences or gates from hunters and helped defray the cost of weed treatments for the land. It's a great program for both landowners and hunters.

Block Management improved relations between hunters and landowners. There are a couple of new enhanced hunter education programs that lend some excellent tools to improve Block Management and potentially provide a way to access more private lands. Hunters develop a way to raise the bar on their skills, ethics and proficiency. That's welcomed news to private landowners.

Craig is a wildlife management instructor for the Master Hunter Program created by One Montana ([onemontana.org](http://onemontana.org)). This is an excellent resource for seasoned hunters to refine their knowledge and skills in a diversity of classes, from wildlife management to landowner relations to proficient shooting. Graduates from this rigorous program, over 60 hours of instruction, become ambassadors for the sport of hunting as they emerge with invaluable understanding of wildlife and management of private lands. Similarly, Craig and George Bettas of the Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association ([rcfwa.org/](http://rcfwa.org/)) developed a hunter education program called the Next Level Hunter Camp. It's a two-day course which improves hunters' firearm proficiency, understanding of wildlife management, and their understanding of the challenges and operations of landowners. Increasing access to private lands is complex. However, landowners are begging for more skilled hunters. Enhanced hunter education programs that are easily replicable may be a tool that will increase hunting opportunities and help move us toward long-term solutions to this decades-old challenge of managing elk on private and public lands. It's not the magic pill to make all of our issues go away, but it's a good start on helping connect ethical, thoughtful hunters with community-minded landowners who are looking to be part of the solution to elk management.

Craig Jourdonnais is a 30-year veteran of Fish, Wildlife & Parks, a noted wildlife researcher and the current research manager and hunt coordinator for the MPG Ranch in Ravalli County. He also serves on the board of the Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association.

Kathy Hadley lives in the Upper Clark Fork valley near Deer Lodge, is a former Block Management co-operator and was instrumental in getting both Block Management and Habitat Montana established in the 1980s and 1990s. She is a lifelong hunter and angler.