

# Access: Its Importance to Montana and the West

Ted Schwinden

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## *An overview of the access issue yesterday, today, and tomorrow.*

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Back in the 1940s, Joseph Kinsey Howard's "high, wide, and handsome" captured in print something Montanans have long considered essential to our Western lifestyle. In Montana, Howard wrote, I have "... room to swing my arms and to swing my mind." His notion that here "We have room ... We can be individuals," still shapes our identity today. It's one of the things that sets us apart and makes us Montanans.

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### *Our ability to "swing our arms and minds" has become newly important.*

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And yet times change. Were Howard here today, he could still find room to swing his mind, but I have a hunch he'd feel the room to swing his arms restricted by a circle of fence posts liberally doused in orange. Access is important to Montana and the West for a good many reasons to do with management and finances, but none of those more practical concerns are any more important than what access means to us as a people.

Neighborliness in the past meant that owners freely opened their lands to others. That sentiment is no less important today but, in the 1980's, with an agricultural recession and the tendency for some access points to look suspiciously like parking lots for four-wheel drives, neighborliness may well come to rest more heavily on the recreating public. As participants in the Governor's Forum on Montanans Outdoors recognized, it is no longer reasonable to

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expect private landowners or public land managing agencies to subsidize the public's recreational activities.

In the midst of hunting season is a particularly appropriate time to hold a forum on access. By now, some of the enthusiasm and impatience of opening day have worn off. But during this month, other frustrations will no doubt peak. Ranchers will be riled by locks cut and gates left open; hunters will be outraged to find the road to their favorite area barred and posted.

After a century of relying on common sense and common courtesy, access is suddenly 'an issue'—one about which almost everyone has very definite opinions. Landowners who have traditionally allowed whole communities to enjoy their land are understandably beginning to question whether continuing that practice is inviting a lawsuit. When it comes to public land that, because it is surrounded by private holdings is virtually 'locked up' as a private preserve, emotions run particularly high.

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### *Pressure on Montana's recreational resources will increase dramatically in the years ahead.*

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The theory that whoever buys land bordering large tracts of public land is really buying the whole chunk has certainly been well used by some in the real estate industry. Some less scrupulous folks in this and other states have even tried to "buffalo" the public by illegally posting legitimate access to public lands.

But that is by no means the only important or controversial concern. Access issues in Montana range from those associated

with recreational activities to transmission and pipeline rights of way to the development of minerals that lie beneath private or public land surfaces. Restricted access may be based on management decisions related to wildlife, to the potential for forest fires, or to an area's designation as roadless or wilderness. The increasing contribution that diverse use of our public lands makes to local and regional economies cannot be ignored.

Today, our ability to "swing our arms and minds" has become newly important as a valuable and limited commodity; a potentially significant financial consideration, especially in states like Montana where abundant public lands boast equally abundant attractions.

Increasing demand for access to Montana's public lands is playing an important role in shaping the future management of these lands. With state and local budgets straining to deal with economic recession and federal spending cuts, access to public lands may be eroded simply because the funding necessary to maintain existing roads is not there. Federal agencies are today struggling to implement management plans based upon fiercely competing needs for access to the resources our public lands offer. Access for timber harvest, recreation, mining, oil and gas, grazing, and a myriad of other activities must all be dealt with in a fair manner.

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### *There are a number of encouraging joint efforts underway.*

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Clearly, access is a complicated problem, one that bears out the philosophy that "For every problem there is one solution which is simple, neat, and wrong." It is naive to hope that, if we stick our heads in the sand for long enough, we can somehow magically return to the "good old days." The growing popularity of outdoor recreation coupled with demographic trends and decreasing opportunities in other states guarantee that pressure on Montana's recreational resources will increase dramatically in the years ahead. Nor is it realistic to hope that folks back in Washington, D.C. will devise a formula capable of solving all of our problems. If we want a solution that will benefit all Montanans—landowners, fishermen, weekend hunters, outfitters, and birdwatchers—it's up to us to find it.

Montanans are clearly ready to take on that responsibility. Early this year, a thousand people from across the state attended

the Outdoors Forum. One thousand respondents may not impress folks on the Potomac, but in January in Montana, that ain't bad. The point Montanans came to the forums to make was that they take their recreational opportunities very seriously and that they want greater local involvement in the decisions that affect those opportunities.

As Max Edgar, President of the Flathead County Parks and Recreation Board testified, "The key is cooperation and coordination in an overall recreation plan for a given area. Grassroots management is often much more effective than a large bureaucracy." "However," Edgar acknowledged, "standards must be insured and therefore federal and state organizations are necessary." The state recreational council I recommended to the President's Commission meets both those requirements. Greater cooperation would be encouraged by involving each state's governor and chief federal land managers in the council. Decisions concerning outdoor recreation priorities would no longer be made in Washington, D.C. or in state capitols. Instead, each state council would be responsible for developing a mechanism to involve the public in its decision making process.


That coordinated, cooperative, and essentially local approach makes sense, especially on issues such as access. Montanans have the advantage of knowing all of the players and of understanding the background necessary to implement workable, case-by-case solutions. We also have the decided advantage of having federal counterparts in Montana who are equally committed to working with—not against—us.

Although confrontational access situations are more likely to make the newspapers, there are a number of encouraging joint efforts underway. This fall, a map showing open and closed roads in the Swan Valley was published by the Forest Service, Plum Creek Timber Company, and the Montana Departments of State Lands and Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (DFWP). Cooperative agreements between private landowners and DFWP have opened 29 miles of the Blackfoot River and 50 sections of largely private land north of Garrison as walk-in areas.

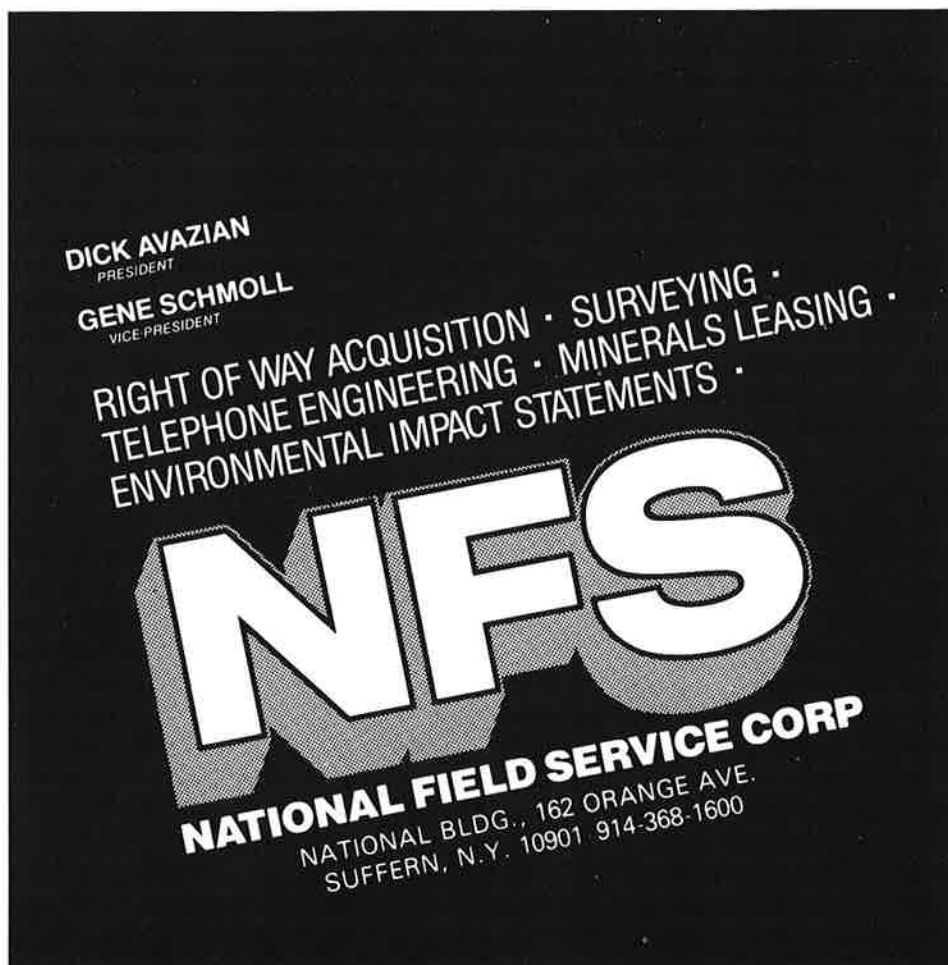
In another agreement, landowners in southeastern Montana have "pooled" private holdings and public hunting access for ¾ million acres. DFWP administers permission grants and enforces landowner requirements. One block north of Rosebud

includes guaranteed public hunting access to 288,000 acres of land, including public lands which would otherwise be "land-locked" by private holdings.

We cannot go back to the "good old days" of a handshake and a promise, but that does not bar us from taking the qualities we value from the past and using them to shape the future. Montanans have the tools we need to successfully address the access issue—land ownership adjustments, purchases, easements, leases, and the like. Unfortunately, a box full of first-class tools does not automatically produce a master craftsman.

If we are to arrive at a workable Montana solution—one that assures access to public lands, recognizes local customs and respects private property rights—we need to proceed with skill and patience. Our ability to take the information obtained from this and other access-related forums and shape it into responsive administrative and legislative solutions will determine whether our state remains true to Howard's description, "high, wide, and handsome." 

*These remarks were presented at the "Access in Montana" Conference in Helena, MT in November, 1986.*



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