

The Value of Trout In Montana

A long time resident outfitter tells the rest of the world of Montana's successes in making money from wild trout fisheries.

by Bud Lilly and Paul Schullery

These are not easy times for Montana. The railroad, the ranchers, and the miners, who represent three of the state's biggest traditional business interests, are all having hard times. There is a story circulating in Montana about the rancher who won a million dollars in some lottery, and when someone asked him what he planned to do with the money, he said, "Well, I'm just going to keep on ranching until it's gone." Here in Montana, when you tell people that story, they laugh, but at the same time they nod their heads yes, because they recognize its truth. Because I care about the state that has been my family's home for more than a century, I've looked for ways to help. I think I've found some that will help not only the state's economic status but the state's trout as well.

We Montanans have been slow to recognize the economic asset that flows through our valleys. We too often have gotten hung up on some outdated sense of our "rights." We claim that "It's our right to catch and eat those trout," but we don't look beyond the good feeling it gives us to make that statement. It's not our right to do anything that may harm the state or its resources.

We can no longer think of our fish as part of a subsistence economy. Sure, you can claim that special regulations take food out of the mouths of your kids, but if your kids eat all the trout, they take food out of the mouths of the kids of a growing number of businessmen who are turning those trout into tourist dollars that are worth much more to all of us than the protein value of trout. The trout's highest value is not as food; it is worth much more on the recreational market than in the meat market.

Just recently I was guiding a pair of fly fishermen from out of state. I had agreed to give a day's guided fishing to anyone who donated \$250 to the International Fly Fishing Center, and these two gentlemen had both done so. We were fishing the Yellowstone River a few miles downstream from Yankee Jim Canyon, and we were having a very good day. Both men had caught fish in the eighteen-inch range, and I felt like I'd given them the kind of day they would remember. While we were fishing along one bank, a man and a woman came drifting along the other bank in a rubber raft. The man was spin fishing, and he hooked a very big trout, probably weighing three or four pounds, which he finally beached on a long gravel bar across the river from us. One of my fishermen yelled over at him, "Let it go!" There was a little more hostility in the air than I would

have liked, and the man yelled back, "I gotta eat, y' know!" and mashed this beautiful big brown trout over the head. As long as we keep thinking of our trout streams as our personal pantries, we're not going to do justice to them. Unlike our big game and our game birds, we have a choice when we fish for trout. There is no reasonable alternative when we fish for trout. There is no reasonable alternative for a hunter but to shoot the elk; there is a reasonable alternative for the trout fisherman, who can have all the pleasure of the stalk and the take without killing the game.

I had always promoted conservation in the Trout Shop catalog, but in 1974 I introduced our Catch and Release Club. When you joined you got a pin that said you were a member of the club, and then there were additional pins that said you'd released various sizes of trout up to twenty-four inches. You could either buy a set of pins or buy them individually. It was because of the Catch and Release Club that our shop got some wonderful attention from Arnold Gingrich. In his book, *The Joys of Trout*, he gave the club some recognition that was helpful in boosting it to national attention. His remarks sum up our philosophy so well that I quote them below.

Catch and Release Club

Bud Lilly is a trout's best friend.

Fly-Fishing's legion of honor decoration is the lapel recognition button devised by Bud Lilly, which reads "Released 20 Trout" and carries the slogan "Support F.F.F.T.U." The club's purpose is to get fishermen familiar with the idea of releasing trout. Anybody can join. All that's needed is a dollar, and the simple statement that a trout of a certain size was returned to the water. The statement and the dollar can be sent to Bud Lilly, from November to May, Sourdough Road, Bozeman, Montana 59715, or to Bud Lilly, from May to November, in care of the Trout Shop, West Yellowstone, Montana 59758. Bud's pragmatic philosophy on keeping the membership requirement this simple reflects the belief that all fly fishermen are naturally honest and that any who are not will at least be publicizing the principle.

The principle of trout release, first and best stated by Lee Wulff, has since had many genial variations, one of the nicest of which is the Klamath Country Fly Caster's motto, "Keep your lines tight and your creels empty." But however it's codified it couldn't be better propagandized than by the general adoption and use of the Bud Lilly Catch and Release Club lapel buttons. Bud Lilly donates the proceeds from the sale of the release recognition buttons to Trout Unlimited and the Federation of Fly Fishers.

I quote that here not because it lets me show off how much attention the Trout Shop got, but because it reveals something about the attitudes of modern sportsmen, especially those who are willing to travel long distances to find good fishing for wild trout. Arnold, who was founding publisher of *Esquire* magazine, is typical of that group.

We have at least two choices in this issue. We can go on thinking of our local trout streams as the private larders of those of us who live nearby, or we can recognize what the rest of the world realized long ago, that these streams are a national treasure. I'm doing all I can to see to it that we take the latter course, and I'm doing it in ways that I am sure will benefit the state of Montana in the long run.

In 1976 a bunch of us — Dick McGuire, Ron Marcoux, Tom Morgan, Charlie Brooks, Dan Bailey, and others — got together and organized the Foundation for Montana Trout, a very specifically directed little institution whose purpose is to find ways to encourage the preservation of trout resources, especially but not exclusively in Montana. What we have done is raise enough money so that the interest from it can be used to fund worthy research projects related to wild trout management. It's a good cause, it's helping, and I recommend it to your attention as much as Trout Unlimited, the Federation of Fly Fishers, and the other organizations.

I hope to see more waters in the West regulated in a way that will allow the fish population to remain robust while providing a lot of sport. That may mean catch and release, or it may mean some other form of special regulations, but it will usually mean the elimination of bait fishing, which simply kills too many fish to be permitted in a wild trout fishery. The many studies that have been done prove beyond a doubt that you will lose more than fifty percent of all fish hooked on bait and then released, while you will lose less than ten percent of those hooked and released on lures that have only one hook or group of hooks, or on flies.

The big thrill for the modern angler is catching, not eating. It's like golf: you don't have to eat the balls to have fun. I know that many people still enjoy killing and eating trout, and there is nothing wrong with that in moderation. Many of our streams will probably always be able to sustain a certain harvest. I also know that bait fishing is one of the longest established sporting traditions in this country, and that there are some people for

whom it is the only way to fish. We will always have to have some bait fishing. But times must change. There were times when bear baiting, set guns, punt guns, and all sorts of other practices that we now regard as bad were perfectly acceptable. I'm proud of my education as a Montana sportsman, which started out with bait fishing as much as it did with fly fishing. But I learned that it is no longer possible to fish the way I did fifty or even thirty years ago. I used to kill as many fish as any other fisherman, probably more sometimes because I was pretty good at catching them. I hardly ever kill one any more, because I know that the fishing experience is in greater demand now, and we have to share this resource among a growing number of people.

It looks to me as if here in Montana more and more people are switching to fly fishing. The ranks of the bait fishermen are being thinned. There are still plenty of places where bait fishing is popular, and there is comparatively little water even now where bait fishing is prohibited. Bait fishermen do not yet have much to complain about.

But I'm not sure I believe that bait fishing is essential in modern sport fishing. I've heard all the traditional arguments like, "Here's old Joe, he's eighty, and he can't get around," or, "Here's little Johnny, he's only four," and these people have to fish with bait. If the fishing is well managed so that there are plenty of fish, those same people can take fish on artificial lures. Spinning rods and fly rods don't cost any more than casting rods, and anyone with even a little coordination, such as almost all eighty-year-olds and four-year-olds certainly have, can learn to cast those outfits. "Well," they say, "old Joe just wants to sit there with his line in the water. You can't do that with flies or spoons or spinners." And that's true, but I don't think that old Joe has to worry for a long time about not finding a place to do that. If I were pushed to the wire, I guess I'd say let's keep some places where old Joe can bait fish. Even Yellowstone Park has reserved some streams for kids to bait fish. But if we manage the water correctly, we can greatly reduce the need for that kind of fishing by making good fishing so common that fewer and fewer people will even want to use bait.

But let's be honest about this. Those very old and very young fishermen are always trotted out to defend bait fishing, but the people doing the justifying are healthy, adult fishermen who are really just using those small, special groups to defend their own preference for bait fishing.



This famous spring creek in Montana's Paradise Valley is typical of some of the great scenery flyfishermen enjoy when they visit. While it is beautiful, and still produces plenty of fish, this piece of water re-

quires careful management. So does every other piece of water in Montana and elsewhere. Photo by Valentine Atkinson of San Francisco.

Even if we have to take care of the needs of some special groups, that doesn't justify bait fishing by the rest of the people. We can find good fishing places for old Joe, and we can teach little Johnny how to spin fish or fly fish by the time he's six or seven. We shouldn't confuse our desire to protect the needs of these special cases with our greater need to maintain good sport fisheries, and we shouldn't sacrifice the opportunities to develop those good sport fisheries out of some misplaced sense of loyalty to a tiny minority of the fishermen who may need special attention.

Besides an increase in special regulations, there are two other areas that I see getting additional management attention in Montana's future. The first is lake fishing. Managers are taking lakes more seriously. Flathead Lake, for example, has been polluted with all kinds of fish. So many lakes are managed as if they're big holding tanks where the state dumps in fish one day and people yank them out the next. Lakes can be managed by the same kinds of ecological principles as rivers, and they can produce fabulous fisheries. Many will never support natural populations of fish, but many others can. We have a long way to go in Montana before we really are doing justice to our lakes.

The other area getting more management attention is spring creeks. Montana has a fabulous collection of spring creeks, more

than seventy of them, and according to a recent report by the American Fisheries Society in cooperation with the state of Montana, almost all of them are in degraded condition. There is no excuse for this. Again, the most compelling argument is probably the economic one. Spring-creek fishing is a treasured experience among anglers all over the world, and it is hard to come by. Montana may have more of these creeks than any other state, and it has a great opportunity to benefit fisheries while generating an influx of tourist dollars. There are many directions to be explored, including conservation easements for landowners, state purchase of fishing rights or outright purchase of property, tax incentives for stream restoration, and so on. All we need to do is recognize the values, both esthetic and economic, of these marvelous little aquatic ecosystems.

Access is a growing problem. Things are going to get more crowded, and so it's going to be more important that we take care of every mile of fishable stream. The Clark's Fork is being cleaned up. I foresee a day in the future when the Yellowstone River will be a good trout fishery as far downstream as Billings. It's good now as far as Big Timber, which hasn't always been true. Like the spring creeks, Montana's big rivers give us an opportunity few other states have. We can actually increase the number of miles of good fishing rivers, and we are doing it right now.

But still we will have a growing access problem, and recent court battles over access have introduced a lot of hard feelings. I hope that the day comes when we consider some arrangement of tax incentives or even supplemental payments to encourage people to permit public fishing on their property.

This is a challenging problem, and it is going to get more challenging. We have been through a period of considerable animosity between sportsmen and landowners, and until we get into a more communicative and cooperative mood, access issues are going to make more headlines than progress.

One answer, or partial answer, that I am pursuing actively is the purchase of good fishing, either by government agencies, or by organizations, or by private individuals. All of these approaches have been tried with some success in Montana and in other states, but there is much more that can be done. Through my Western Rivers Club, and through my wife's real estate connections, we are attempting to get the right lands into the right hands. It won't solve all problems, but it is a part of the process we must go through in Montana to get our good fishing sorted out.

I was visiting a ranch in the Madison Valley recently, talking to the old-timer who owned the place. I noticed a small stream meandering across a brush field. When I asked the owner about it, he told me it was a spring creek.

Of course, the discovery of a new spring creek is always exciting, so I asked the rancher about it.

"Jack, are there any fish in that little creek?"

"Oh, yeah, there were a bunch of brook trout in it. We finally got rid of 'em. Had a hell of a time getting them out of there." Brook trout were so unimportant to these people that they actually poisoned them, as if they were rats.

Jack and his family are good people, working a ranch that is losing money badly. He knows nothing about fishing or its potential in the economic future of today's West. He knows ranching, and cattle, and a way of life that is tragically disappearing. We all should mourn its passing, for it produced strong and self-reliant people who made Montana a great state in which to live. But it is passing, and we have a chance to replace it with things that will keep Montana a great place in which to live. Those things include a system of rivers and lakes that are getting the respect they deserve, and are giving back to us the pleasure and fulfillment we need.

BUD LILLY ran a fly shop and guide service in West Yellowstone, Montana for over 30 years. His comments here come from the last chapter of a new book he co-authored with Paul Schullery entitled A Trout's Best Friend, by Pruett Publishing.