

# OPINION

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## COMMENTARY

### Selling access sites would be a big step backwards

*Editor's note: Ellen Goodman, whose column normally appears on Tuesday, is on vacation.*

In October, a story in the Bozeman Chronicle caught my eye: "State looks at closing, selling off access sites." The article was referring to public fishing access sites. Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks is evaluating hundreds of them, it noted, to determine if some should be sold to help alleviate budgetary woes. As I personally worked for the establishment of many of these sites years ago, I was prompted to make inquiries to the department. The evaluation is simply part of a routine inventory, friends at Fish, Wildlife



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Guest columnist

and Parks said. The state of Montana has no intention of closing or selling any popular access sites, I was assured.

I have no doubt Fish, Wildlife and Parks personnel share my own conviction that maintaining access to Montana's rivers and streams is vital.

With 320 access sites serving 350,000 anglers, not to mention any number of others who enjoy picnicking, boating, hunting, wildlife viewing, birding, you name it, Montanans should be rightly proud to have one of America's best public fishing access systems. But the very idea that some access sites could be considered surplus spurred me to think about foresight.

Back in the 1960s and '70s, when the state was acquiring many of our fishing access sites, paid for with sportsmen's dollars, we were able to purchase them for next to nothing. This was before "The Last Best Place" and "A River Runs Through It." If we were to try to buy those same sites today, it would be an extremely expensive proposition. Indeed, the state would only be able to acquire a fraction of what we have now; given our current financial crunch, perhaps none of the sites. With ever more people coming to Montana to enjoy its natural offerings, imagine pressures on the Gallatin, Madison, Yellowstone, Big Hole, Blackfoot, or any other popular river if just a few places were open to anglers instead of our numerous dispersed fishing access opportunities.

So I'm grateful Montanans were looking ahead back then. I recall claims that we were wasting money, that the state had no business acquiring properties for sportsmen. I doubt anyone would say that today.

Anywhere you see those distinctive brown and white signs with the fish and hook symbol along Montana's highways and back roads, you'll see a well-used, often-full parking area (sometimes abused too, as litter occasionally attests — let's keep them clean). Last year alone, anglers and hunters spent more than \$550 million to pursue their sports in our state, according to a Fish, Wildlife and Parks' analysis. A little money, and foresight, in other words, has gone a long way, benefiting all of us.

The same thought carries far beyond fishing. As long as I've been promoting angling, I've tried to remind fellow Montanans about the importance of clean water and open space too. Fishing isn't much without those attributes. And we should be grateful for foresight embodied in federal legislation like the Clean Water Act, our state Constitution's call for a clean and healthful environment, or the Montana Environmental Policy Act. Even as some advocate weakening those standards, consider where we'd be without them today.

And if we cherish good fishing in a setting that's the envy of the nation, if not the world, think of how important those laws will be for generations to come. With regard to public access and environmental regulations alike, if we hope for a future with trout rising on clear sparkling waters amidst the natural splendor of big sky country, some things just shouldn't be for sale.

The access to public fishing and recreational use of Montana's fabulous rivers, creeks and lakes has been my lifelong pursuit. The program of FWP acquiring these valuable sites should continue for all to enjoy.

*Bud Lilly, who lives near Manhattan, was founder of Bud Lilly's Trout Shop in West Yellowstone in 1952 and is the coauthor of three books on flyfishing, the latest of which is "Bud Lilly's Guide to Flyfishing the New West," published by Frank Amato Publishing.*