



**NATIONAL EXPOSURE**  
 The December 1978 issue of *Life* included a 10-page photo essay on the Yellowstone River. Nationwide, public sentiment weighed heavily against impounding the river. Wrote *Life*'s editors: "Paradise Valley could well become a 30-mile-long storage tank for water users far down the river." Soon after publication, a state board ruled against dam proposals.

# Why the Paradise Valley isn't underwater

By Nick Bergmann

If not for the golden age of Montana conservation, there likely would be no upper Yellowstone River for fisheries biologists to manage.

As post-World War II urban economic growth fueled increasing energy consumption, coal-generated electricity gained regional and national importance. Despite substantial industrial coal development across the Colorado Plateau during the 1950s and '60s, such activity in southeastern Montana, northeastern Wyoming, and the western Dakotas remained quiet. Rumbblings of change began when the Montana Power Company proposed building two power plants in the small mining town of Colstrip.

What especially alarmed many Montanans was the U.S. Department of the Interior's grandiose plan in the early 1970s to turn the Northern Plains into a "national sacrifice area." Containing 42 coal-fired power plants that would produce the energy equivalent of 30 Grand Coulee Dams, the federal plan outlined a dizzying network of transmission lines and water projects. On the Yellowstone, the plan called for a series of dams, reservoirs, and aqueducts to divert 30 percent of the river's annual flow. This included a proposed 380-foot-

high dam at Allenspur Gap—a few miles south of Livingston (see map, page 33)—that would flood 20,000 acres along a 30-mile stretch of the Paradise Valley.

Opposition to rapid development of Montana's coal at the expense of the state's agricultural heritage and environmental integrity proved fierce. Local ranchers in the Bull Mountains banded together and formed the Northern Plains Resource Council. Residents of Park County mobilized to fight the Paradise Valley impoundment by forming the Allenspur Committee to Save the Upper Yellowstone. Grass-roots activism remained important throughout the struggle. Yet one of the most potent forces advocating Yellowstone River protection emerged from the Montana Department of Fish and Game, as the agency was then called. Empowered by a flurry of progressive legislation and a new, environmentally conscious state constitution, Jim Posewitz led the charge.

As head of the agency's Environment and Information Division during the 1970s, Posewitz coordinated a sustained effort to secure instream river flows for the benefit of fish, wildlife, and recreation. He found himself in an extraordinary position of managing teams of scientists gathering critical information about

the river's biological systems and publicizing the agency's conservation ethic through its media resources. Specifically, he oversaw production of an eloquent 32-minute film titled *The Yellowstone Concerto* and release of an influential special issue of *Montana Outdoors* dedicated to conserving the Yellowstone. Posewitz, working with a public relations firm, invited writers and photographers from across the United States on a scenic float down the Yellowstone River. Results of the public relations endeavor included a 10-page color photo essay of the trip published in *Life* magazine.

While the media blitz helped build public support, the department's scientific studies became indispensable to the Yellowstone's future during an intensive two-month public hearing in the summer of 1977. After years of inaction, the Montana Board of Natural Resources and Conservation finally issued a decision in December 1978 prioritizing the protection of the Yellowstone River Basin's economy and environment. Fish and Game and its conservation allies had prevailed in preventing a major hydroelectric dam on the upper Yellowstone River.

As the upper Yellowstone faces new and different challenges, ranging from increasing residential development to warming temperatures, it is worth revisiting the river's history. Digitized copies of *The Yellowstone Concerto*, the *Montana Outdoors* special Yellowstone issue, and a collection of scientific reports known as the Yellowstone Impact Study are publicly available at <http://www.arlis.org/docs/vol1/Susitna/41/APA4147.html> ■

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LEFT TO RIGHT: LIFE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS; ROWAN NYMAN