

On the cusp of an outdoors reawakening?

Montana conservation giant Jim “Poz” Posewitz, who died in July at age 85, used to say of our state’s abundant and healthy fish, wildlife, and wildlands: “It didn’t happen by accident.”

Poz’s point was that it has taken years of dedication and collective work by individuals, groups, and public agencies to maintain public access to land and water and protect the integrity of fish and wildlife populations and habitat. And that our ability to pass along that access and those resources to future generations will require continued attention and action.

America’s public trust resources—the waters, fish, wildlife, and public lands that belong to everyone—are under siege. Climate change threatens to alter Montana’s fish populations and reduce water supplies. Diseases like West Nile virus and chronic wasting disease are spreading among wildlife across the state. Wildlife and fisheries habitat is increasingly degraded by spotted knapweed, Eurasian watermilfoil, and other invasive plants.

But the biggest threat of all may be public indifference.

Too few people understand Poz’s essential point about the need for public dedication and involvement to maintain clean water, accessible lands, and healthy wildlife. It’s not that *nobody* gets it. People still show

up at rallies demanding that public lands remain in public hands. They attend meetings and legislative hearings. They sign petitions requesting protections for fish and wildlife habitat. But not enough people are doing that essential conservation advocacy.

There’s also no question that people use and enjoy public trust resources. Montana’s trails, rivers, reservoirs, and parks are packed, especially this year. Yet it’s become increasingly rare for people to understand what it takes to build and maintain trails, keep rivers healthy, secure wildlife habitat, and staff parks so visitors can have fun and be safe. Far too many take public trust resources for granted.

You see that same indifference in recent decisions by the federal government to weaken protections for clean water, endangered species, migratory birds, wetlands, and tributary streams. Most recently, the current administration took aim at public trust resources by weakening the National Environmental Policy Act.

Add to this the persistent effort across the West to transfer federal lands to states, a backhanded effort to ultimately privatize the lands,

as cash-strapped states would be forced to sell them off, thus eliminating public access.

Sadly, not enough people seem to care that all this is taking place.

It hasn’t always been so. In the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s, hunters and anglers brought game species back from the brink of extinction and protected fish stocks by agreeing to tax their own hunting and fishing equipment purchases to pay for management and conservation. That essential funding mechanism continues to this day. Half a century ago, conservationists pushed for and got federal legislation protecting air, water, wilderness, and endangered species.

Those were great, well-fought successes. But because smog no longer blocks the sun, deer and other wildlife populations have grown tremendously, and rivers no longer sicken those who swim there, people have become complacent.

Fortunately, I see signs of renewed interest in public trust resources and their stewardship.

The recent coronavirus pandemic has been tragic for our public health and economy. Yet it has spurred an unprecedented interest in the outdoors. Across the United States, millions more people, many for the first time, are sitting around a campfire, fighting a fish, visiting a city park, and hiking through forests. These and other activities that connect people to the natural

world are what ignite a passion for public trust resources, inspiring people to care for and work to protect land, water, and wildlife.

Also encouraging is recent passage of the Great American Outdoors Act, one of the most important conservation bills of the past half century (see page 9). The act’s wide bipartisan support makes clear that public trust resources are important to Americans both rural and urban and require continued public investment.

All this gives me hope that we are on the cusp of a public trust reawakening. That we may be entering a new era in which more people rise to Jim Posewitz’s challenge to not only get out and enjoy the natural world, but also to advocate for its stewardship.

In my next column, I’ll explain how all of us in the conservation community can prepare for and take advantage of what I believe to be a major shift in public attitudes toward our treasured public trust resources.

—Martha Williams, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



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