



BATTLE ON THE BIGHORN





YELLOWTAIL DAM BY CAROL POLICH

Montana state and federal officials were outraged when the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) announced, on April 9, it would restrict water flows from Yellowtail Dam to levels substantially below what the federal agency had agreed to just three weeks earlier. Though reduced dam releases will mean more water in Bighorn Lake for boaters in Wyoming, low flows below the dam will harm the trout population on the Bighorn River downstream in Montana. “We are particularly frustrated by the Bureau’s lack of accountability to the public,” wrote Montana Senators Max Baucus and Jon Tester, Representative Dennis Rehberg, and Governor Brian Schweitzer in a joint letter

HOLDING BACK WATER FOR BIGHORN LAKE RECREATION COULD DOOM THE WORLD-CLASS TROUT FISHERY DOWNSTREAM BY BRIAN MAFFLY



RAINBOW TROUT BY ERIC ENGBRETSON

to BOR commissioner Robert Johnson. The Montana officials called the reverse decision “a complete surprise” and “a wholesale disregard for traditional federal agency–state channels of communication.”

The controversy centers on the Yellowtail Dam, a 525-foot-high concrete plug built at the mouth of Bighorn Canyon by the BOR in the mid-1960s to create hydropower, irrigation water, and flood control. As it turned out, however, a major economic benefit of the dam, 40 miles south of Hardin, was to produce a world-renowned trout fishery. Rainbow and brown trout thrive in the consistently cool, clear water released from the dam’s base. Rich in calcium from the limestone mountains where it originates, the

water supports a thick stew of freshwater insects and other aquatic life that fatten trout. “It’s essentially a huge spring creek,” says Ken Frazer, the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist who works on the river. During the late 1990s, the Bighorn River trout fishery below the dam was one of the most productive 20-mile stretches of trout river in North America. Up to 11,000 catchable rainbow and brown trout per mile crowded the river’s braided channels, drawing anglers from around the world who spent an average of \$13 million in the area each year.

The Bighorn’s trout fishing industry has suffered during the past eight years of drought. With less water flowing into Bighorn Lake from rain and snowmelt in Wyoming, the

BOR has reduced dam releases. That means less water downstream for river side channels, habitat that is crucial for trout spawning and especially young trout survival.

Making the problem even worse are upstream interests—supported by Wyoming state and federal officials—lobbying the BOR to keep more of the Bighorn’s water behind the dam. Those 1.5 million cubic yards of concrete form the 55-mile lake, part of a national recreation area straddling the Montana–Wyoming state line, which is vital to the economy of Lovell, Wyoming. The town suffered a financial blow when the reservoir was created, drowning 30,000 acres of productive farmlands. Over the past few decades, Lovell has tried to offset its lost agricultural base by becoming a haven for pleasure boating and lake fishing. But tourist traffic has been far lower than expected—or promised, as Lovell community leaders contend. With drought-induced lake levels too low for boats to reach an important boat ramp at Horseshoe Bend, Lovell boosters have insisted that the BOR reduce water releases. “We gave up things. We want some things in return,” says Representative Elaine Harvey, a Wyoming state

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lawmaker representing the Lovell area.

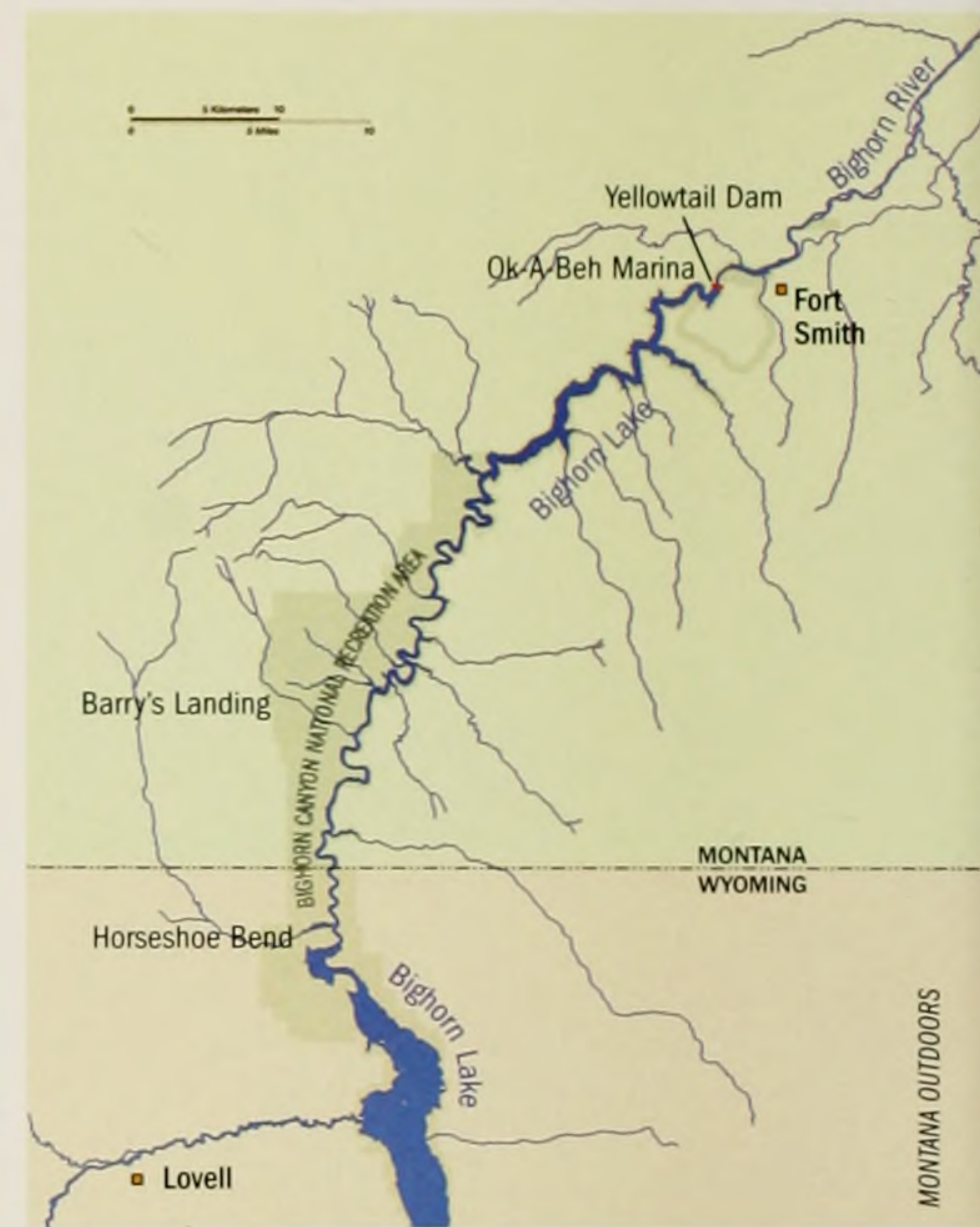
Montanans argue that it’s not fair to prevent the water from flowing downstream. “You can’t shut down an existing multimillion-dollar river trout fishing industry based on a pipe dream of turning Bighorn Lake into a national fishing or power boating destination,” says Matt McMeans, one of 49 trout fishing outfitters working the Bighorn River.

FWP biologists maintain that for the trout fishery to stay strong, the dam must release at least 2,500 cubic feet per second (cfs). Lake supporters in Wyoming say they need the lake’s surface elevation to be at least 3,615 feet above sea level in order to launch boats from the ramp at Horseshoe Bend, a silt-plagued marina near Lovell. In the past, when rain and snow were more abundant, both states had the water they needed.

On March 21, at a meeting of groups representing both sides of the issue, the BOR announced its “final” proposal to release 2,000 cfs from May through October. Though less than what Montana had requested, FWP agreed to the flow as a compromise. At the meeting, the BOR said the flow would keep lake levels high enough to launch boats for the recreation season. Yet sometime during the following three weeks,

the agency changed its mind and retained flows at 1,500 cfs. Says Frazer: “A flow of 1,500 cfs will devastate this year’s trout production.”

Montana officials are especially disappointed by the surprise decision because they have sympathized with Wyoming’s stake in the lake and sought to collaborate on a solution benefitting as many people as possible. “We don’t see the



NOWHERE TO GO WHEN IT'S LOW The Bighorn River’s extraordinary trout population declines when water releases from Yellowtail Dam fall below 2,500 cubic feet per second (below and below right). This past spring, the Bureau of Reclamation agreed to a 2,000 cfs flow from May through October but reversed its decision three weeks later and released only 1,500 cfs. Montana biologists say low flows force small trout from side channels into the main channel, where they are eaten by larger trout. Far right: One of Montana’s top trout waters, the Bighorn has seen fishing pressure drop substantially in recent years due to low water.



issue as Wyoming's water versus Montana's water. We all rely on the water, and we all need to work together to manage it," says FWP regional fisheries manager Jim Darling. "We need to take a basinwide approach to managing water in the Bighorn system and stop pitting lake users against river users."

Like other Bighorn outfitters, McMeans says he's made sacrifices for Wyoming users. His Bighorn Country Outfitters employs seven guides and serves 600 to 700 visitors a year. He says that even though the river still supports a healthy population of 3,000 to 4,000 trout per mile—with a high proportion of large fish—business has declined 30 percent in recent years due to bad publicity about low water. As Montana conceded to lowered flows from Yellowtail Dam, Bighorn River use has dropped from a peak of 125,000 angler days in the late 1990s to roughly 70,000, according to FWP.

Known as a dam tailwater fishery, the Bighorn runs clear during spring runoff and remains ice-free during the winter, making it ideal for supporting an outfitting industry. (Undammed rivers such as the Yellowstone muddy up in late spring due to mountain runoff and then freeze in winter.) McMeans says he can stay busy from mid-March through

Thanksgiving without worrying about snowmelt or thunderstorms rendering the river unfishable. He and his wife, Keri, also owners of the Kingfisher Lodge, are emblematic of New West economies now found in out-of-the-way places like Fort Smith, Montana, a community of roughly 130 residents that owes its existence to Yellowtail Dam.

The Bighorn is among Montana's most heavily fished rivers, with nearly two-thirds of the pressure coming from nonresidents. One survey found that anglers representing 49 states and 11 countries had visited the river over a two-year period. Those anglers will go elsewhere if river levels get too low and the trout population can't sustain itself. Frazer says flows of 1,500 cfs dry up side channels, pushing smaller trout into the main channel, where they become meals for the river's famous lunkers. As a result, small trout die young, while the big trout get bigger—then die of old age. With not enough small fish to replace the older ones, it's only a matter of time before the trout population crashes, Frazer explains.

One hundred miles to the south, Wyoming's Lovell has its own problems. In the mid-1960s, Lovell had

a thriving Main Street with five restaurants, eight gas stations, and three hardware stores. Today, like so many farming-based communities, Lovell supports just a handful of shops. Though the town's demise can't be blamed entirely on the rising waters that drowned out much of the surrounding farmland, Representative Harvey says the dam cost the county 240 farm-related jobs and, in today's dollars, \$212,000 in annual property taxes.

Dam boosters won the county's support with rosy predictions of a water recreation-based economy. Some speculated that as many as two million boaters would use Bighorn Lake each year, generating millions of dollars in annual revenues for the town. Actual visitation has been much lower. Recreational use of the Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area peaked in the early 1980s at 481,000 visitors per year and has since fallen to fewer than 200,000, according to the National Park Service (NPS). Approximately one-third of the boaters use the south end of the lake, near Lovell. The rest head to the dam at Fort Smith and either launch at Ok-A-Beh Marina or put in at the river and head downstream. Wyoming interests say the lake needs to be at a level where potential boaters know in advance they will be able to



launch at Horseshoe Bend, one of two access points for the Wyoming side of the lake.

Yet even if boat ramps are covered by water, they may also be covered with too much silt to be usable. Washing in from the surrounding countryside, soil that previously flushed down the Bighorn River now fills the reservoir at a rate of 4,000 tons a day. The sediment is up to 50 feet deep at Horseshoe Bend. Long before the drought began lowering water levels, NPS officials were predicting the demise of the Horseshoe Bend marina due to increased siltation. The boat ramp there has been unusable since 2001 (except for the 2005 recreation season). The area could be dredged, but the costly process would have to be ongoing.

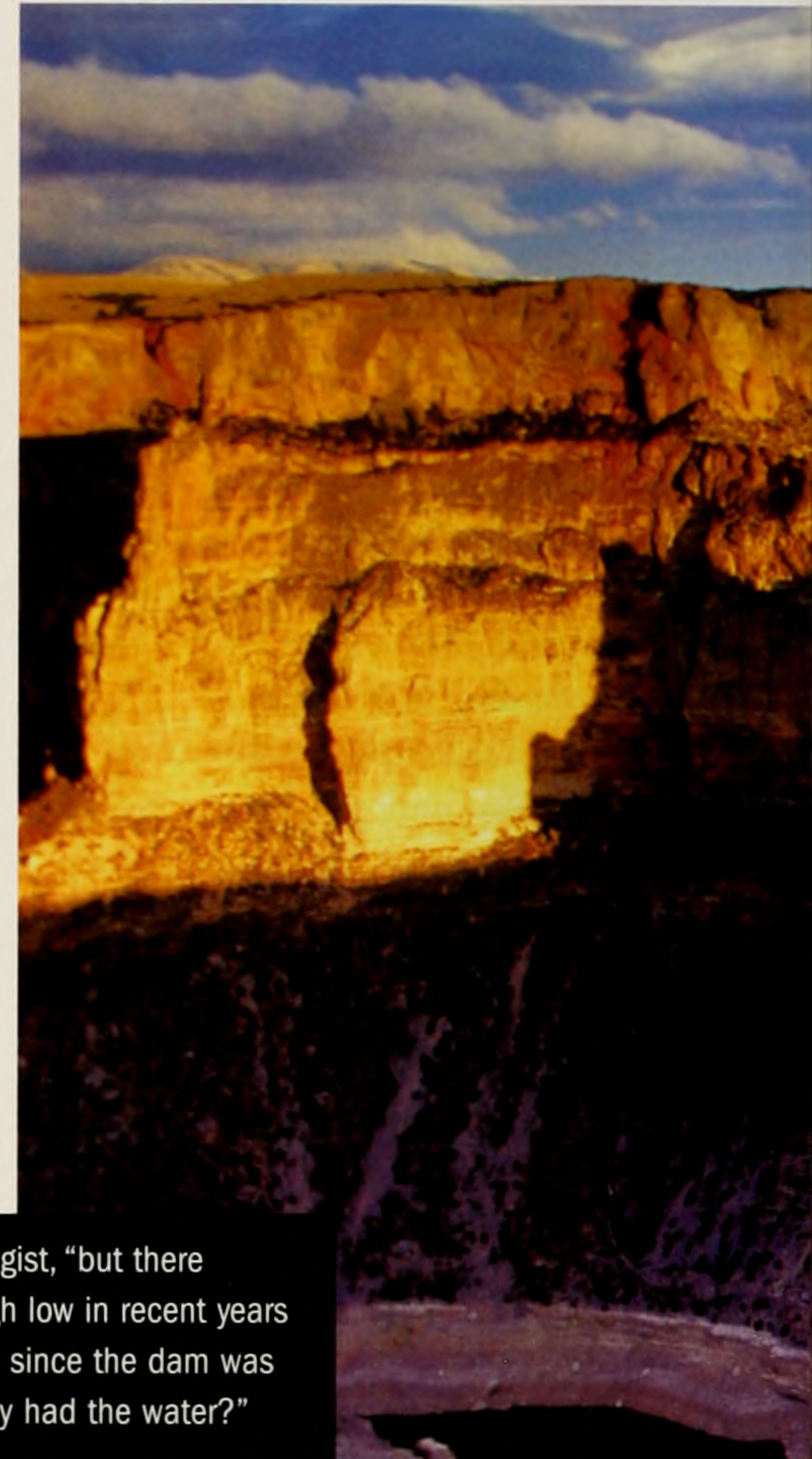
Montana interests point out that boaters wishing to use the south end of Bighorn Lake during low water can do so at Barry's Landing, just 12 miles north of Horseshoe Bend. "The park service has extended the boat ramp there, and the area also has better fishing," says Frazer. Lovell supporters say Barry's Landing lacks the recreational amenities found at Horseshoe Bend, such as a marina and swimming beach.

In 2006, after low water again put the Horseshoe Bend ramp in a sea of muck,

Lovell's civic leaders formed the Friends of Bighorn Lake. They got help from Wyoming state officials and hired a Missoula-based consultant to assemble a study making an economic case for protecting lake recreation. A meeting was convened in Lovell's fire hall in August 2006, where the Lovell folks vented their frustration to BOR water managers. Outside in the street, signs propped against cars read: "Keep Wyoming Water in Wyoming." Inside, lake boosters demanded that outflows be cut to 1,000 cfs. "That got my blood up," says Doug Haacke, a Billings angler and member of the recently formed Friends of the Bighorn River, who attended the meeting. "Lovell was well prepared. Montanans were completely outgunned. I was surprised they would do something like that without talking to their neighbor. Montana anglers were late to wake up to the threat. We thought: Why would someone destroy a blue-ribbon trout fishery to protect boating on Bighorn Lake?"

Senator Baucus soon stepped into the fray and sponsored the Bighorn River Protection Act, which would set preferred outflows at 2,500 cfs and an absolute floor at 1,500 cfs during emergencies. It is

unclear whether the federal legislation will pass, but Montana made its point. This past March, the BOR announced that due to higher-than-expected snowpack levels, it would increase the Yellowtail outflow to 2,000 cfs from May until the fall. Members of Friends of Bighorn Lake responded by say-



NO LAKE POWELL "I agree the reservoir is a wonderful place people should visit," says Ken Frazer, FWP biologist, "but there aren't enough people who will drive to Lovell, with a boat, to develop it into a big recreational facility." Though low in recent years (below), the reservoir has been at or above the 3,615-foot elevation during the summer for most of the time since the dam was built in 1967. Says Frazer: "If Wyoming wanted to make it a recreational area, why didn't they do it when they had the water?"



GEORGE ROBBINS



BIGHORN CANYON NATIONAL RECREATION AREA BY CHUCKHAILEY.COM

ing they would contest the 2,000 cfs release schedule. “They will just drain the lake again like they did last year,” said group co-founder Keith Grant. Apparently the group succeeded in getting the BOR to change its mind.

Montanans vow to fight back, noting their strong economic and personal ties to the Big-

horn. “Three of my friends’ ashes are in the river, and I’ll be there too someday,” says longtime outfitter Michael Mastrangelo. In the meantime, he and other Bighorn supporters say that if it doesn’t get the water it deserves, the famous trout fishery and the economy it supports could soon be left high and dry. 🐻

As Montana Outdoors went to press, Yellowtail Dam was still releasing 1,500 cfs. FWP biologist Ken Frazer says department officials have met several times with the BOR: “They told us that if we get normal levels of precipitation, they might increase flows to 2,000 cfs from June through the fall brown trout spawn and into next spring.”

