

Spring Newsletter **May 2016**

The State of the Bighorn

Anne Marie Emery

The Bighorn River is one of the most famous and economically important blue-ribbon trout fisheries in the state of Montana. Each year thousands of anglers make the journey to the small town of Fort Smith, Montana, to enjoy a truly unique fishing experience offered only by the waters of the Bighorn River.

Located on the Crow Indian Tribal Reservation, the Bighorn is devoid of the heavy development and housing complexes that mark the banks of so many western water ways, making it a paradise of solitude graced with heavy wild trout abundances.

However, the setting of the Bighorn creates uncommon conservation challenges that are equally unique as the river itself. Tribal jurisdiction boundaries prevent state agencies from monitoring stream parameters that assess water quality and habitat, tribal lands limit public access, and unpredictable river flows from Yellowtail Dam affect river health and trout recruitment and distribution.

It was from recognition of these challenges that *your* Bighorn River Alliance was born and actions began taking place that gave rise to a Bighorn River voice.

Since 1995, the Alliance has worked successfully to secure public access to the Bighorn, advocate for trout friendly flow releases, and conduct solid research to improve the fisheries.

Today, with milder winters, increased reservoir sedimentation, lake recreation vs. river recreation concerns, and inconsistent river release flows, the Bighorn needs the Alliance and your support more than ever. Updated projects that record current river conditions, such as water quality monitoring, are essential in moving forward.

This past year the Alliance has restructured internally to better address issues and projects on the Bighorn



Photo by John Sindland

that will scientifically direct us moving forward.

Working closely with the board of directors and BHRA advisory committee, we have developed a strategic plan to guide us in our efforts to serve and protect this great river and to keep you, our membership, better informed.

Understanding how the unique geographical placement of the river affects its protection, it is our priority to work closely with the Crow Tribe and agency partners to create programs that not only advocate for the fishery, but unite all parties together for its protection. We look forward to a great 2016 and appreciate your support moving forward. There is only one Bighorn.

Current Bighorn Stats

- ▶ Trout Per Mile: 4,504
- ▶ River Flow: 4,000 cfs
- ▶ Reservoir Level: 79% full
- ▶ Snowpack: 92% of average

BHRA Awarded Water Quality Grant from IFFF

The Alliance understands that a healthy wild trout fishery begins with healthy water. However, until recently, water quality on the Bighorn tailwater fishery through the Crow Tribal Reservation has remained relatively unmonitored, leaving the current state of the river unknown. Over the years, anglers have noted concerning trends on the Bighorn ranging from increased algae/macrophyte growth to observed gas bubble disease on resident trout. While some of these concerns are by-products of river life below a dam, they may also be indicative of changing river processes that need to be monitored and recorded.

Last summer, BHRA with guidance from Montana's Department of Environmental Quality, initiated a water quality monitoring program to determine the current baseline river health of the Bighorn during months of run-off and high irrigation demand. Results from that data did show elevated levels of phosphorus and nitrogen, but more data is needed to identify pollutant sources. For 2016, the Alliance has received funds from the International Federation of Fly Fishers (IFFF) Small Grant Conservation Program to continue monitoring on the Bighorn. These funds (as well as support from our membership) will allow the Alliance to continue its monitoring as well as develop a sampling analysis plan that will guide our efforts moving forward.

River Cleanup a Success

The 2016 Bighorn River Alliance Cleanup stewardship day was a smashing success, with over 150 anglers participating in the day to help remove an estimated 500 lbs. of trash from the Bighorn River and its banks this past April. The Alliance partnered with American Rivers to host the day which encouraged volunteers, anglers and guides to incorporate cleaning up the river into their day of fishing. The Alliance distributed over 250 river cleanup bags (provided by American Rivers) to participating anglers and volunteers. The Bighorn River remains one of the cleanest trout streams in Montana because of this annual event.



BHRA Teams with Patagonia to Engage Tribal Youth

The Bighorn trout fishery, which lies within Crow Tribal Reservation boundaries, is a historic resource and landmark for the Crow Indian tribe. Recognizing this history, and wanting to engage local youth in this sport of fishing, the Alliance has partnered with Patagonia to host a weekend on the water engaging local native tribal youth with the recreational benefits of their local Bighorn River this summer. Youth will spend a day learning about the Alliance, the river and Tenkara fishing from Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard.

Afterbay Boat Ramp Improvements

The concrete boat ramp at the Afterbay river access site is set to be replaced early this late spring/early summer as reported from John Bundy, National Park Service (NPS) superintendent. The ramp, which was improved in 2011, has become broken and eroded due to increased use and inconsistent river release flows. Anglers have expressed concern launching boats at the ramp especially during specific river flows, leading the Alliance to temporarily fix the problem by adding gravel to the problem area last year. NPS is looking at replacing the eroded section of the boat ramp with pre-formed concrete slabs that are about a foot wide by ten feet long. Since the concrete slabs are already formed, NPS states that the access will remain open to anglers and boats during installation, although delays may occur at specific ramp sections. Construction is estimated to be completed by June 2016.



Photo by Ellyn Nadeau

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Spring Fishing Report *Hale Harris, Bighorn Trout Shop*

Nymph fishing has been fair to good. Boat fishing is only fair because of cold water temperatures and algae. Fish are eating midge pupa, Baetis nymphs, and sowbugs. Primary pupa colors are black, brown, and light olive. Our Baetis nymphs are dark olive, appearing almost black in the hand.

Dry fly fishing has been outstanding at times! Midges are hatching throughout the day, with the best action in early to mid-afternoon. Baetis Mayflies hatch in the afternoon. Anglers have been doing best on emerger patterns like Smoke Jumper (midges) and the Student (Baetis). There are times when the fish are eating midge clusters and one can fish the Griffith's Gnat or other cluster patterns. Start watching for Baetis spinner falls in the morning, as they will sometimes upstage the midges. A rusty/olive spinner pattern will work.

Streamer fishing has been productive on cloudy days. Sunny days have been tough. Anglers with the longer sink-tips or full-sink fly lines have been doing the best, especially if they target the deeper water. Smaller streamers like the Squirrel Leeches (various colors) or small Wooley Buggers have been effective.

Spring storms can cause feeder streams to rise and affect river clarity, so call the local shops to ask about the condition of the lower float sections. Drifting algae can be a problem down there as well.

Recommended Flies:

Nymphs: #18 Zebra Midge; #18 Young's Midge; #18 JuJu Baetis; #20 JuJu Midge; #16, #18 Grey Ray Charles; #18 Soft Hackle Sowbug; #16 Tan Scud; #16 Orange Scud; #16 Pink Scud.

Dry Flies: #20 Griffith's Gnat; #20 Sipper Midge; #20 CDC Baetis Sparkle Dun; #20 Parachute Adams; #20 Student; #20 Smoke Jumper.

Streamers: #8, #10 Squirrel Leech (various colors); #6 Thin Mint Wooley Bugger; #4 Grey Zonker; #4, #6 Bighorn Wooley Bugger (brown & yellow); #4 Dirty Hippy (brown).

Spring Flow Forecast

Although the new year started unseasonably dry with near record low snow pack in the Bighorn Basin, Spring precipitation has helped conditions get almost back to normal. However, when water is managed too conservatively and inadequate storage is available to handle both runoff and sporadic weather events, reactions to wet events must, unfortunately, be made quick and often. This May, after receiving a large, wet storm, the Bureau of Reclamation had to do just that. The average lake elevation for this time of year is usually 8-10 feet lower than it is at present (3,6126.67 ft). To make room for late spring precipitation, the BOR will be increasing river flows below Afterbay Dam to at least 4,000 cfs in May.

In Memoriam



Two longtime Bighorn River guides passed away last February. Kurt Olson and Dan Stein had over 50 years of guiding experience between them.

Kurt Olson grew up in Billings and served on the board of FOAM (Fishing Outfitters Association of Montana) as a Bighorn Valley representative. He also worked as his own outfitter, and most recently, as a guide and shop manager for Bighorn Trout Shop in Fort Smith. He was 57.

Dan Stein, 62 years old and a native of Miles City, worked as his own outfitter and also as a guide for several fly shops in the Bighorn Valley. He was one of the hardest working guides on the river, and a great steward of the fishery.

The Bighorn River Alliance and the guide community is saddened by the loss of these two men. They will be greatly missed.



Photo by FWP Biologist Mike Ruggles



Kurt Olson



Dan Stein

Bighorn River Days *Carp Classic and Alliance Benefit*

July 15 & 16



Friday, July 15 - Big Lips Carp Tournament

8:30 am - Registration at Ok-A-Beh Marina

9:00 am - 4:00 pm – Big Lips Carp Tournament (\$30 per team)

6:30 pm - Participant & rep BBQ, awards and social

**Pre-register your team at bighornriveralliance.org*

Saturday, July 16 - Alliance Fundraiser

9:00 am - Go fish the Bighorn River!

4:00 pm - Silent auction and raffle opens

5:00 pm - Live band - *Wesley and the Revolving*

6:00 pm - Benefit dinner: \$25 per person; \$250 per table
(Table seats 10)

7:00 pm - Boat drawing, award ceremony, silent & raffle auction
close

SIMMS



WIN A NEW DRIFTBOAT!

Buy a raffle ticket that puts you in the drawing to walk away with a brand new Adipose driftboat and trailer! Limited tickets (only 150) available for \$100 each at the following locations or by calling the Alliance at number below.

- Bighorn Angler
- Bighorn Trout Shop
- Cottonwood Camp
- Bighorn River Lodge
- Absaraka Cabins



Call the Alliance today at
406-201-3182

1:150 Odds!