

Building A Trust Account

by Jan Brown, Executive Director, Henry's Fork Foundation

In the beginning...

The Henry's Fork of the Snake River--a river revered by anglers throughout the world--is known for its extraordinary scenery, wildlife and recreational qualities. Its headwaters flow from countless natural springs just west of Yellowstone National Park, geothermally warmed and maintained at constant flows and temperatures. An abundance of nutrients in its high-quality waters provide an ideal environment for aquatic insects and vegetation. The result is the most productive fishery in Idaho, with trout unsurpassed in size and toughness.

The Henry's Fork watershed also is home to a number of rare, threatened and endangered species, and provides major migration corridors for big game and waterfowl. Elk, deer and moose winter there, and it is the most important winter refuge for trumpeter swans in the Rockies. Seventeen bald eagle nests have been identified in the Henry's Fork watershed, now considered the most important eagle nesting area in the region. The basin also provides recovery habitat for the peregrine falcon, grizzly bear and gray wolf.

One hundred years ago, the Henry's Fork and its tributaries were attracting homesteaders, ranchers and wealthy industrialists--a settlement pattern of agricultural and leisure interests that would inevitably conflict decades later. Fishermen's clubs were established at the turn of the century, and men like railroad magnate Edward H. Harriman began acquiring vast acres of prime wildlife and riverine habitats. With extension of the railroad to West Yellowstone, the Island Park area blossomed into a tourist community known nationally for its outstanding fisheries and scenic attractions.

Meanwhile, at lower elevations in the basin, more than 40 major irrigation canals were constructed to divert precious water from the Henry's Fork, Fall and Teton rivers, and minor tributaries. Some farmers even attempted to remove the southwest corner of Yellowstone National Park from Park Service jurisdiction in order to capitalize on its abundant water resources. In the 1920s and '30s, dams were built at Henry's Lake on the Henry's Fork to create storage reservoirs dedicated to expanding irrigated acreage in the Upper Snake River Valley. The deep, well-drained volcanic soils were ideally suited for growing potatoes and grains, although short growing seasons limited higher-elevation farms to seed-potato production. The communities of St. Anthony, Ashton and Driggs were among those benefiting from irrigated agriculture.

Not unlike other areas of resource abundance, the Henry's Fork Basin was viewed as having an unlimited supply of fish, wildlife, forests, soils and water. As long as human populations were small, there was relatively little impact to the watershed. As more babies were born and adults arrived, however, the limits to land, water, wood and recreation became more apparent and conflicts between agricultural and recreational users became more pronounced.

The river changes...

Streams devoid of overstory or riparian vegetation experience high water temperatures, more rapid spring runoff, high sediment loading and a reduction in woody debris and other vegetation necessary for trout and insect cover. For many years, land management in the basin promoted these changes.

One of the greatest impacts to the watershed was a decision made in the 1960s to harvest massive amounts of lodgepole pine on public land in the Targhee National Forest along the western boundary of Yellowstone National Park. The St. Anthony Stud Mill, built in the 1960s, was guaranteed a 25-year supply of timber from the watershed by the Moose Creek Plateau sale, one of the largest single timber sales ever offered by the U.S. Forest Service. In the late 1970s, an infestation of the mountain pine beetle occurred in the watershed, a natural response to 80-plus years of fire suppression. To use the beetle-killed trees and maximize profit before the mill closed in 1994, the harvest rate was accelerated to 80 to 100 million board feet a year in the late 1980s.

Clearcutting was found to be the least costly harvest technique, although it opened the overstory and created fragmentation within the forest communities. In places, poorly designed roads resulted in serious erosion of volcanic soils. The 1988 North Fork Fire left 10 percent of the Moose and Thirsty Creek drainages in severely eroded condition.

The Henry's Fork has received excessive sediment loads not only from intensive road building and fires, but also from historic overgrazing of cattle on public and private lands. Trampled streambanks allowed sediment to enter streams and accelerated stream degradation by removing essential riparian vegetation and silting in fish spawning and rearing habitat.

Since the waters in the basin are fully appropriated for irrigation and livestock use, the river is always subject to management decisions by agricultural interests. Reservoir operation in the Henry's Fork watershed historically has posed a genuine threat to trout, especially during drought years.

A time to act...

By the early 1980s, those intimately familiar with the Henry's Fork began to see changes that indicated deteriorating watershed health. Distress signals included low

winter stream flows, fewer fish, vegetation changes, irregular or reduced insect hatches and more sediment embedded in the gravelly stream bottom. In addition to these symptoms of long-term damage, a new threat appeared. Hydroelectric projects were being proposed throughout the basin in response to federal incentives, threatening to dewater several river stretches.

A small group of local residents and summer home owners organized the Henry's Fork Foundation (HFF) in 1984 in response to hydroelectric plans and a precipitous decline in river productivity. Its first step was to begin a comprehensive program of fencing cattle away from fragile streambanks. Ultimately, HFF installed 21 miles of solar powered riparian fence costing more than \$100,000. The group's successful opposition to hydroelectric projects led to a Congressional ban of new hydroelectric dams or diversions on 91 miles of the Henry's Fork and Warm River, down to Ashton. The Foundation also made sure numerous amendments to protect the environment were added to the license of the Island Park Hydroelectric Project at Island Park Dam.

Beginning in 1986, the Foundation began to sponsor independent university research into the declining wild trout fishery. Between 1978 and 1991, it had suffered an 84 percent population decline in the Box Canyon reach. Graduate students from Idaho State University studied the wintering habits of Henry's Fork rainbow trout and made important observations about fish behavior on various river stretches. Based on their findings, the Fish and Game Commission followed HFF's recommendation to change fishing regulations. In 1988, it instituted catch-and-release rules from Island Park Dam to Riverside Campground.

The roots of collaboration...

By 1991, it had become clear that despite the Foundation's and Idaho Department of Fish and Game's best efforts, the fishery was still in decline. That fall, HFF hired its first executive director, just in time to enter a two-year struggle to pass state laws to protect the river. After failing by a narrow margin in 1992 to protect outstanding stream stretches under Idaho's Natural and Recreational River System Act, HFF pulled together a 13-group coalition to help pass the Idaho Water Resource Board's Henry's Fork Basin Plan the next year. With key adjustments in the final plan, 195 miles of the Henry's Fork and major tributaries are now protected from new hydroprojects, dams, diversions and damaging channel alteration.

Meanwhile, greater awareness was evolving nationwide of how important a river's entire watershed is in maintaining its overall health and functioning. HFF, too, broadened its perspective from the river alone to the watershed. Looking around the basin, the board of directors saw serious fragmentations of philosophy, policies and management objectives.

It recognized the Foundation would have to take a watershed approach, help reconcile those conflicts and build a scientific basis for sustainable river management in order to preserve the river's outstanding fishery and habitat.

The Henry's Fork Watershed Initiative...

In the summer of 1992, sediment incidents plagued the watershed. In June, more than 17,000 tons of material entered Fall River due to a construction accident at the Marysville Hydroproject. Then in September, an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 tons entered the Henry's Fork below Island Park Dam during the reservoirs lowest- ever drawdown.

These events demanded that more attention be paid to agency coordination within the entire watershed, precipitating this HFF Board of Directors resolution in June 1993:

"The Henry's Fork Foundation has determined that agencies with stewardship responsibilities in the Henry's Fork watershed have failed to develop and implement sound resource management policies for their jurisdictions. Therefore, the Foundation resolves to assume a leadership role in directing research and formulating policy to improve resource management decisions made by federal, state and local agencies which affect the watershed.

"The Foundation intends to facilitate coordinated research and collaborative policy-making that will ensure the preservation of the Henry's Fork of the Snake River, its fishery, wildlife habitat and recreational values. The Foundation believes its goals and philosophy are broader than those of the individual agencies, and that our involvement will help protect the rights and privileges of all water users, whether they are irrigators, fishermen or wildlife enthusiasts."

This Henry's Fork Watershed Initiative, funded by two successive challenge grants from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, carefully integrates applied research with policy development through nonconfrontational means.

The Initiative's three primary objectives are to 1) sponsor applied research to collect needed data on the basin's aquatic resources, 2) integrate the data with existing knowledge to build a scientific understanding of the river system and its fundamental ecology, and 3) cooperatively implement a stewardship program that uses improved management policies based on results of scientific studies and monitoring. A major part of the stewardship objective is building trust among varied interests and enhancing public understanding of the watershed.

The Henry's Fork Watershed Council...

To achieve this end, in 1993 the Foundation entered into a cofacilitating arrangement with the farmers of the Fremont- Madison Irrigation District to

launch the Henry's Fork Watershed Council. The nonprofit District represents 1,700 farmers who rely on water stored in Island Park and other reservoirs. As part of Idaho Water District #1, it represents the oldest irrigation interests in Idaho.

This multi-interest forum has attempted to build policy consensus among some 24 government agencies and all types of water users. The Council provides the means for improved self-education, encourages voluntary efforts to protect the resource and supports well-coordinated resource stewardship projects. The citizen leadership that has evolved through the Council has developed into mutual respect between conservation and agricultural leaders, thus providing unprecedented opportunities to work toward a healthier, more sustainable watershed.

Implicit in the Council's commitment to collaborate is the belief that scientific information, public education and improved communication will go further in achieving long-term management goals than will application of adversarial methods, and that although the latter will always be available alternatives, this investment in building trust is likely to yield greater dividends.

To support the Watershed Council and its other activities, the Foundation opened the Henry's Fork Watershed Center in May 1995, to serve as a collaborative research office, data clearinghouse and source of public information for a broad constituency. Staffed with two Ph.D. scientists, the Center houses a complete Geographic Information System for the basin, a watershed library and research facilities. This summer, Dr. Rob Van Kirk, HFF Research Director, will supervise at least eight student interns and graduate students out of the Watershed Center. They will engage in a range of projects, all sponsored under the umbrella of the Watershed Initiative. Among the most exciting is a complete habitat assessment of the entire Henry's Fork and its tributaries above Island Park Reservoir, involving a five-person crew and six months of field work. Other students will conduct hydrologic analyses, study trout population dynamics and research the historic Henry's Fork fishery.

Two high-priority stewardship projects for 1996 are remediation on the Sheridan Creek drainage and establishing fish passage at the Buffalo Hydro project. A Stewardship Director has been hired to coordinate the Foundation's ongoing restoration work, fencing and monitoring projects and all educational outreach programs. A new college scholarship supported by the Don C. Byers Memorial Endowment will be launched in 1997 to assist local students from watershed counties in pursuing degrees in watershed or related natural sciences.

HOW THE HENRY'S FORK WATERSHED COUNCIL WORKS

Each meeting has three parts. At the beginning and end, the Council meets as a whole to reflect on meeting objectives and the overall Council mission. In between, three component groups meet concurrently. To start, 40 to 60 people from across

the basin sit in a large circle and share three minutes of silence. The component groups and their tasks are:

Citizen's Advisory Group (representing 30-plus commodity, community and conservation interests)

- reviews agency proposals and plans. Are they relevant to local needs? Are all interest treated equitably?**
- gives watershed residents a chance to get acquainted and establish trust where little has existed, thus building a sense of community and reducing the potential for agencies to play off conflicting interests against one another.**
- builds credibility for the idea that the best course for the watershed emerges from neighbors who care about their common welfare.**

Agency Roundtable (more than 20 federal, state, local and tribal entities, equally represented)

- helps align policies to watershed resource realities and current public needs.**
- gives federal agencies that advocate a "bottom-up" local approach to resource issues an opportunity to demonstrate it.**

Technical Team (independent, university and agency scientists)

- act as the resource conscience of the Council, ensuring good science is made available to participating agencies.**
- avoids duplication of agency research.**
- integrates research results into Council discussions.**

As for the future...

As the 1996 fishing season draws near, cooperation among diverse neighbors and agencies has never been better, thanks to the ongoing work of the Henry's Fork Watershed Council. As a community, we are learning more about the watershed, its resources and riverine processes. Greater commitment to restoring damaged drainages is being demonstrated throughout the upper Henry's Fork basin. It is a hopeful time for trout and for those of us committed to sustaining their aquatic habitats.

For several years, the Henry's Fork Watershed Council has willingly labored at learning what the collaborative process means and how we can use it to the advantage of all. Collaboration implies cooperation, coordination and working for common goals. It does not imply compromising fundamental beliefs or objectives, but rather finding creative and innovative ways of accommodating the greatest number of needs. It involves respect for others, regardless of their attitudes or position on issues, and it requires a civil approach to problem-solving. Finally it acknowledges that while tension will undoubtedly be present, there is no way to walk the tightrope unless the wire is taut, as psychologist M. Scott Peck says. And that takes collaboration.

