

# Minefields in Paradise

*essay by Myers Reece*

INEVITABLY, SOMEBODY WILL SHOUT something about job growth, and a few listeners will nod their heads: Let's go home, boys, the economy is fixed. But in searching for solutions to the increasingly complicated riddles of global capitalism, if mining in Paradise Valley is the answer, I'm not sure I ever understood the question.

More likely, my reasoning is clouded by blue skies and clear water. It's hard to see the dollar signs when I'm staring at native cutthroats rising to my fly, a sight that is no less exhilarating now than it was two decades ago when I first experienced it as a boy violently swinging a hand-me-down fly rod at the fragile waters of the Yellowstone River.

I was born and raised in Livingston. Given my parents' stable of artist and writer friends, it was a lot like

growing up in a zoo, only more literate and stinkier. Some of these animals became mentors, and they had the audacity to value silly trivialities like good books and fine cuisine and untarnished mountains—you know, things like happiness. My parents harbored similarly outrageous notions, and I developed an early inkling that life had more to offer than money. It was a terrible training ground for Wall Street, but it's worked out for my writing career.

When I think of Livingston, the institutions that first come to mind are streams and forests, followed distantly by those built by man. Undoubtedly, I learned plenty in school, but my memory drifts far more easily to the lessons absorbed outside those walls. River rocks were the brick-and-mortar foundation of my youth, and they still keep me stable. I have a new baby, and I want to be able to walk along those same wet stones with my kid, listen to the same whoosh of water, and watch the same cutthroats dart to the surface, without wading through arsenic or hearing the distant boom of industry carving gaping holes in the views that framed my childhood.

The Crevice Mountain mine proposed near Jardine, within sight of the northern entrance to Yellowstone National Park, and the Lucky Minerals operation closer to Chico Hot Springs both seek gold in the spirit of

Montana's gold rush in the 1860s and 1870s, though with far more destructive tools and markets. Sure, I get caught up in the whimsy of nostalgia just like the next person, but I enjoy reading about the gold rush in the same way that I like a good book about the Civil War: discovering our history helps us know who we are and how we got here, even if it's ugly.

But our past also provides clues to where we're going and how we should, and shouldn't, get there. Too many examples—Berkeley Pit, Libby's asbestos Superfund site, and Milltown Dam come to mind—offer working templates for the lasting consequences of industry without foresight. History books tell us about the people and decisions that brought forth the environmental damage; it's our responsibility to learn enough from them to both repair the damage and prevent it in the future. We shouldn't take that duty lightly.

I'll admit that I'm not an expert on aesthetics or fashion. Typically, if I dress myself without my wife's help she'll run me down before I get to the door, having identified an egregious violation of the sacred color-coordination commandments. But I do know that Butte's Berkeley Pit is neither pretty nor fashionable in an age of growing environmental consciousness, which is to say that a substantially larger open-pit mine at the doorstep to Yellowstone National Park will be unwell-

comed by anybody who is not profiting off the landscape disfigurement. That includes the 4 million people who visit Yellowstone each year. Nor will the warm waters of Chico Hot Springs have the same appeal if you're worried about them poisoning you.

Come to think of it, when I peer into those dark trout eyes as it considers my fly, I'm actually looking at the dollar signs. That's where the real money is, the kind that lasts generations, the kind that's just as fun for our children as for us. People pay a lot to glimpse these treasures. Some build homes and careers here. Others come for the memories. And they'll keep coming, while the rest of us will stay, unless heavy machinery bulldozes the incentive. A gold mine lasts forever, too, but only in its scars and public debt. When the mine taps out, and the river flows dirty, who will come then? I suppose somebody in a future generation will tout environmental cleanup crews as job growth, but is that the way we want to grow?