

# Strangling the Last Best River

By Hal Herring

High Country News - April 12, 1999

Montana statesman Mike Mansfield, summing up the highlights of his career in the U.S. Senate, claimed to be most proud that he “had saved the Yellowstone River from the Corps of Engineers.” But while the Yellowstone is still the longest undammed river in the Lower 48, it is now a long way from “saved.”

A half-dozen diversion dams interrupt its flow. Trucks have dumped rock, or riprap, along miles of river bank, locking what was once a migrating and healthy river system into a single channel that effectively moves the vast runoff from the high Rockies but performs less and less like the mighty river that meandered and eddied its way through the mountains and across the high plains. Even without dams, this last free-flowing river is beginning to resemble its tamed counterparts across the West.

Last summer, fisheries biologist Joel Tohtz studied trout species in the river near Livingston, Mont., and discovered a disturbing absence. Trout populations were down 60 percent from a previous survey, and the decline was a general one - there were simply very few fish, of any age class, in this traditionally very productive stretch of the river.

“I would have to guess that the number of stabilization projects in that area is responsible for the decline,” Tohtz says. “It is an unstable and heavily populated part of the river, and we have confined it for those very reasons. In confining it, we have made it a downspout.”

