

2-1-06 "\$155 Million Mansion Sad Sign of Changing Times"

It wasn't all that long ago, perhaps mid-summer, that I wrote a column addressing a unique bit of news that had reached the front page. Indeed, this was the story of the infamous ten pound trout that had been caught by a local legend and kept to be mounted. As a columnist and angler, I took issue with the fact that this spectacular fish hadn't been released. In part, I'd voiced my opinion as a result of certain principles I've attempted to adhere to with wild trout. More than anything, I seized an opportunity to stir the pot in hopes of provoking and rejuvenating local discussion on the concept of catch and release. In that short reflection on the great leviathan, I mentioned briefly that if nothing else, it was refreshing to see a fish story as front page news - in some way it seemed to symbolize a perfect vision of down home Montana and the way it once was when news of a big a trout was the talk of the town.

This past weekend, as I brewed some coffee and settled in for a few minutes of local news and headlines at the kitchen counter, I was once again taken by a front page story. Slightly different than the report of a trophy catch, this article presented to us all the concept of "the world's most expensive home." Unlike the fish story, which I had merely a conflict of opinion, the news of this goliath structure to be built at the Yellowstone Club in Big Sky was simply nauseating.

For several days now, I've considered the topic and attempted to come to grips with my utter disgust with all that this future piece of real estate represents. Obviously, a 53,000 square foot home is absurd - there's no debating that. Of course a 155 million dollar price tag is equally ridiculous considering that it buys little more than a big old house and a spot in the record book.

Like many others, I'm not exactly thrilled with the fact that this home is to be built here in Montana either, though I can't think of anywhere it would make sense either.

Regardless of location, the homes will be built and one big one or several smaller ones will likely have the same ill impact on what was once pristine wilderness.

Supposedly the ultra wealthy just want the best. That's fine. If someone wants a private gondola to run from the living room straight to the ski hill that's their own lazy choice. Maybe they could hire an Olympic skier to do their runs for them as well. And if they want an indoor pool, home cinema or whatever else then have at it - who really cares what's inside that thing.

What alarms me most is that news of the mammoth home managed to reach the front page. It has gained national media attention and is supposed to gather even more notoriety on some morning show as well. Given the local and world issues that one might assume at least slightly important, it's a sad statement that complete nonsense ranks higher or is given any credit at all. There are more worthwhile records to pursue.

Like many others, I moved to Montana more than a decade ago in hopes of finding serenity, outdoor opportunity and perhaps an escape from a shallow world where bigger is considered better and money is everything. And while this move has proven a wise decision in many respects, I've watched as the region has been swallowed by the dramatic impact of rapid growth.

Though Bozeman remains a phenomenal town with numerous sound residents and great outdoor opportunity, our mentality and simple way of life is in jeopardy. Montana is a unique place - it can stay that way if we use our heads and attempt to be smart.

Unfortunately, the money generated from our recent gold rush mentality won't buy back our open spaces or wildlife once they're gone.

This record breaking home and all that it stands for offers a prime example of where we could be headed if we haven't crossed that line already. The desire to make such a statement, demonstrates a complete disregard for the potential impact and trends it could create on our fragile ecosystems. Regardless of my opinion on the developer, I have to think the home wouldn't be built unless there was a market for it. Obviously there is, and that's the root of the problem. The quest for power and status often overshadows reason and responsibility.

Honestly, I have full respect for the right to own property, to build a home and to prosper in business. I have no issue with the great wealth or even the concept of inevitable growth. But must we lose sight of our values and the character of Montana in the process? With a record at stake, it seems that insanity has set in.

So what about that Madison River brown trout anyway? It's about time to start thinking about the mystery of ten pound wild fish, of why we live here and the simple fact that if we don't get our priorities straight, it's all going to go right down the drain.