

opinion

GAZETTE OPINION
State should lead river protection debate

The first written history of this state - the journals of Capts. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark - attempted to describe the Wild and Scenic stretch of the Missouri River.

gazette opinion

But how can words portray the beauty of white cliffs carved by thousands of years of

wind and water and ice to make them just so? How can words measure the wonder of a wall of basaltic rock, rising from the river bottom and marching straight as a string down the river?

How can words describe what it is to gather at a campsite and read those two great explorer's words describing an area that has gone almost unchanged in the past two centuries.

How can words describe standing amidst teepee rings on a bench overlooking the river, kneeling on a shale point to find shards of flint? To see

those chips is to see an ancient man making arrowheads and looking out over the broad vistas of the river, searching for buffalo and friendly hunters.

Years after Montana was discovered, the river



Gazette illustration/JOHN POTTER

remained a hidden treasure, a diamond in the rough - and rough it was. Rustlers made the river their home, driving cattle or horses into the rugged Missouri Breaks. Rustlers' cabins still stand, awaiting outlaws or vigilantes or gaping passersby.

Now, tourists have discovered the river.

Soon after its designation as a Wild and Scenic river, canoeists could float a hundred miles of river without seeing another person. There were no "amenities" on the river, save for a "toilet" at the Eye of the Needle.

Now there are concrete toilets, and last year the river registered 50,000 tourist days.

U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt touched off a storm of controversy when he asked that the area be studied for possible future designation, possibly as a park.

Ranchers think any change could jeopardize their grazing rights on public lands in the area. Some suggested that designating the area a park would ban legitimate users of the river. Others said the designation would make the river a tourist Mecca, and destroy the uniqueness of the area.

There is enough trepidation to wag tongues for years. We don't have years. The onslaught of the Lewis and Clark bicentennial celebration is almost upon us. Thousands will be lining up to experience the Missouri as Lewis and Clark did.

The Bureau of Land Management has expressed a desire to discuss possibilities with area residents. The Racicot administration must assume the leadership in this debate, move us toward a resolution that will allow access while preserving this national treasure. If Montanans don't do that, federal agencies will.

guest opinions

Wild Missouri buffeted by winds of change