

Conservation Partner Spotlight:

Our River's Keeper: A Portrait of the Clark Fork Coalition

by Matt Hart

Spend an hour beside the Clark Fork River in Missoula and you're likely to see everything from fly fishermen to kayakers to great blue herons. If they all have one thing in common, beyond their ties to the river itself, it's a debt to the organization that has spent more than 30 years looking out for the waterway.

Since 1985, the Clark Fork Coalition (CFC) has been protecting and restoring the Clark Fork Watershed. Its work continues thanks to ongoing support from partners like the Cinnabar Foundation, with whom the CFC shares a long relationship.

"It's all connected, we're all connected," says Karen Knudsen, the Coalition's executive director, who has served the organization in many roles for 23 years. "What happens upstream impacts people's lives and wildlife and connections downstream. To the extent that people can carry that fundamental



Milltown dam before and after: The Clark Fork Coalition led the way in removing the 100 year-old dam east of Missoula, which had displaced the historic confluence of the Blackfoot and Clark Fork rivers and was the source of high levels of arsenic in local drinking water. The dam also prevented native fish, such as the threatened bull trout, from spawning and migrating. Today, this vibrant confluence and floodplain is a state park.

truth about rivers into their lives, I think we can make some good headway and solve some big issues."

Community Catalysts

The Coalition was born from need. In 1984, the state of Montana issued a permit allowing Champion International Paper to expand production at its pulp and paper mill just west of Missoula and to increase polluted wastewater discharges to the Clark Fork in the process. From sportsmen in Anaconda to citizens in Missoula to business owners in Sandpoint, Idaho, concerned

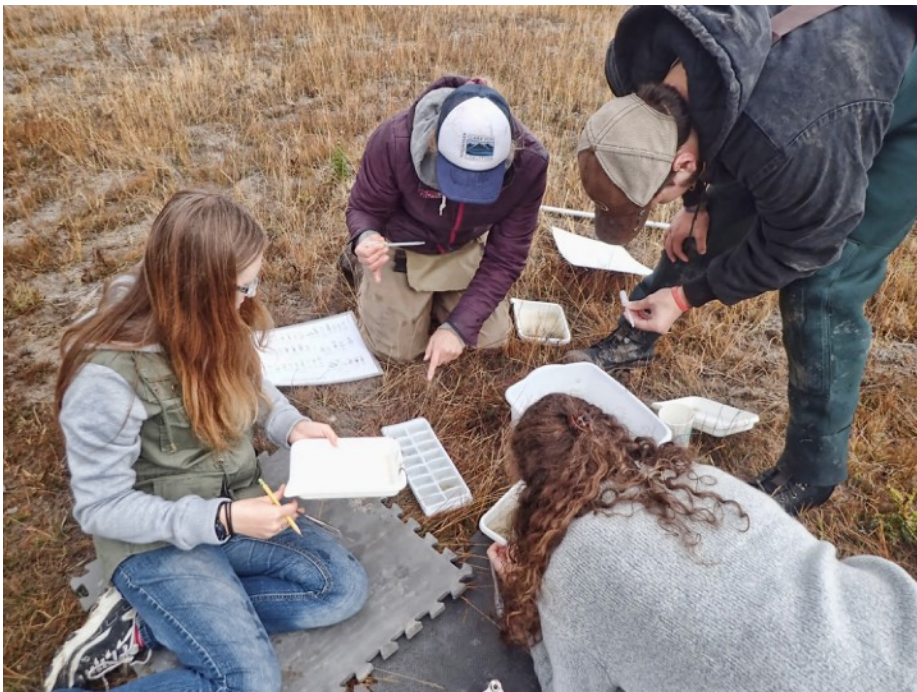
stakeholders up and down the Clark Fork recognized the need for an organized defense.

"It was a major public outcry," Knudsen recounts. "It seemed to be a flashpoint that catalyzed a lot of interest from folks who cared about the river."

In 1985, members of the newly-minted Clark Fork Coalition sat down with state and mill representatives and successfully stopped the permit from raising discharge limits. But the work was just beginning.

To keep it going, the new Coalition needed partners that shared their vision for a vibrant, interconnected western Montana. In 1986, the CFC first approached Cinnabar, which itself was only three years old, and in just its second year of grant-making. Cinnabar has funded the Coalition every year since 1986, typically with general operating support. That means that while Cinnabar shares in the CFC's many landmark successes, it can also take pride in an essential behind-the-scenes role. A flashy new project may attract support from many sides, but it is consistent general funding like Cinnabar's that kept the heat on — sometimes literally — for the CFC.

"Cinnabar has been with us through an amazing run," reflected Pat Ortmeier, communications and development director for the CFC. Their first investment came when the river was still orange and the thought of removing a dam wasn't even a glimmer in the eyes of the Coalition."



Deer Lodge Valley students ID-ing macro-invertebrates from Modesty Creek.

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Poison and Politics

Backed by its first grant from Cinnabar, the CFC began its magnum opus in 1986, sending delegates to Washington, D.C., to urge the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to include the Upper Clark Fork River in its Superfund program, an initiative created in 1980 to clean up the country's worst hazardous waste sites.

The effort was based on a basic truth of ecology — a healthy river cannot be divided. While the Berkeley Pit, site of a former Butte copper mine, and the Milltown Dam 140 miles downstream received Superfund designations in 1981, the basin between them had no protection, despite a century of mining pollution impacting its fish, wildlife and human communities. While it could not achieve full protection of the Upper Clark Fork, the CFC achieved Superfund designation — and the resultant promise of federal cleanup efforts — for a 56-mile stretch of the river, a monumental achievement given Superfund's typical role of cleaning up small, specific sites of pollution.

The Coalition's vision was even larger, however. Throughout the 1990s, it spearheaded studies, organized rallies and recruited more than 10,000 public comments calling for outright removal of Milltown Dam, the key step in allowing the watershed to flush its dirty history and heal. Finally, in 2003, the EPA approved removal and reservoir cleanup, and after another four years of preparation, the dam came down in 2008.

"It required tons of science, tons of policy work, tons of outreach and community education," Knudsen recalls of the long dam-removal fight. "We were sharpening all of those approaches."

Restoration and Renewal

Dam removal opened a new channel of service to the Coalition: restoration of the polluted Upper Clark Fork. Beyond watchdogging the federal Superfund cleanup, the CFC launched its own campaign to rewater, reconnect, and restore the Upper Clark Fork's tributaries.



Volunteers at annual Clark Fork cleanup.

The strategy utilizes staff, student interns and community volunteers who plan and execute riparian habitat improvement projects. Behind the scenes, it relies on negotiating new water leases with landowners, seeking critical compromises that conserve irrigation water and add flows to dry or disconnected creeks. The results are tangible.

"Some bull trout or cutthroat that's swimming through Missoula is making its way back up to a tiny creek in the Deer Lodge Valley, and if things are working right, can come all the way back down," says Ortmeyer. "We're past the point where this river could ever run red again, and that's something. That's huge."

The Coalition is looking out for the region's future as well. At its Cottonwood Creek Ranch property in the Deer Lodge Valley, the CFC tests new restoration techniques and teaches the importance of river health to school groups from up and down the watershed. It also remains an organizing leader, teaming with like-minded groups to oppose mine expansion proposals in both the Cabinet Mountains and the Blackfoot Valley.

Through it all, Cinnabar has steadily backed the Coalition's diverse efforts. The organizations' 32-year partnership shows no sign of slowing, either, as a changing

climate and growing population foretell new challenges ahead.

"Rivers are dynamic systems," Knudsen says. "Even if we'd like to think that at one point we'd become irrelevant, that we could put ourselves out of business, it's not going to happen. We need to make sure growth and development take place in a way that's sensitive to the needs of the river, that takes people and water into account. We can't just put that on automatic pilot, even in Missoula."

Still, the Missoula community provides generous bedrock for the Coalition, thanks to a thriving membership of individuals. These supporters contribute in myriad ways, from end-of-the-year checks to public cleanup days with the Coalition's Volunteer River Corps. It's this on-the-ground presence, supported by partners like Cinnabar, that leaves the CFC equipped for the long haul.

"People go to rivers for renewal," says Knudsen. "Every community needs that, and this region really appreciates that about the Clark Fork. It allows us to take a really optimistic approach to work every day."