Treasure has changed on Encampment

In 1897, people were piling into the communities of Encampment and Riverside. Seemingly rich veins of copper and gold had been discovered, and there was wide speculation that the famed El Dorado had at last been found. Within a short time, investors built a 16-mile-long aerial tram to carry ore from the mountains to a smelter outside town. By 1908, the frenzy was over.

Miners bent on instant fortune weren't the only ones living and working along the Encampment River. Railroads were expanding about the same time, and between 1888 and 1940, an estimated half-million railroad ties, hauled from roots on the forested mountain, were floated downriver to aid in their construction. Like all of the many tie-driven streams in the state, this practice significantly impacted fish habitat. Even today, the Encampment River has more shallow ripples and fewer deep plunge pools than you find in similar-sized streams that escaped the scouring effects of tie drivers. Though full recovery is still decades away, most anglers find the stream and fishery a wild and incredibly scenic resource full of its own brand of treasure.

The Fishery

Except during snow-melt runoff that extends from mid-May through early July, the water in the Encampment is remarkably clear and cool. Near the bottom end of the instream flow reach (about a mile south and west of the town of Encampment), the fishery is dominated by brown trout, some of which can exceed 18 inches. Farther upstream, the river produces more rainbow trout and even larger, brook trout make up a significant part of the fish in the stream. No hatchery fish are stocked here, as the amount of flow and quality of gravels in riffles is adequate to provide all the fish needed to meet angler expectations.

A variety of dry flies work well in late summer and fall as do bead-head nymphs. Because the water is generally cooler in this stream than in other streams that are more open to sunlight, fishing can extend almost all day in the summer.

Though the area was hard-hit by copper and gold miners in the late 1900s and the bed was scoured by railroad ties in later years, the Encampment River is still a wild and scenic place to drop a line. Photo by Tom Annear

To get more information about instream flow, visit the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's website at http://gfd.state.wy.us/ish/instreamflow

The Instream Flow

Permit Number: Temporary filing 26-51299
Priority Date: August 4, 1999
Status of the filing: A public hearing was held in the Saratoga Library on September 27, 1991. The state Engineer has not yet issued (approved) the water right, and as a consequence, the Board of Control has not adjudicated the water right.
Quantity: 54 cubic feet per second (cfs) year round
Location and length: The approximately 13.6-mile-long reach extends downstream from the mouth of Hog Park Creek, to the downstream boundary of BLM-administered lands about a mile south and west of the town of Encampment.
Landownership: With the exception of two small segments of stream within the segment, all of the lands through which the instream flow segment pass are owned and administered by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. Public access is not provided to the private lands as a function of the instream flow right.
Rationale: The amount of water filed for was based on detailed studies done by the department in 1981. The primary purposes of the filing were to 1) maintain adequate spawning habitat for rainbow and brown trout, 2) ensure adequate winter habitat for all life stages of trout and 3) provide enough water in the summer to maintain existing levels of productivity for adult and juvenile trout of all species.
Related details: After subtracting potential demands of all other existing water rights, whether or not they are actively used, a Water Development Commission feasibility study found that the recommended instream flow amounts were naturally available on average 100 percent of the time from April through October. The requested flow slightly exceeds the average natural flow in winter months. This filing does not protect channel maintenance flow levels that will sustain long-term physical habitat characteristics, nor are recommendations adequate to flush sediment from the gravel. At present, natural flow patterns are adequate to provide these functions, but the proposed instream flow water right would not prevent the diversion of those higher flows.