Subject: : Conservation
Topic: : Chicken Farm on Big Spring Creek
Re: Chicken Farm on Big Spring Creek
Author: : barbless
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Fish, I resoundingly applaud everyone who IS actually doing something about this. But it doesn't seem as if there's nearly enough of you yet.

I also think that you're under-estimating the number of allies that you can enlist in this fight.

I often hesitate to get involved in matters that get decided by local governments or State governments in places where I don't personally reside, or have some deep personal connection. But I make more exceptions in the case of environmental issues. Especially pollution of the air and water, which ultimately is not a local issue at all. Especially in the case of fresh water, which is ls than 1/200 of the water supply on the planet. The supply of fresh water held as groundwater in aquifers is much smaller than that. And it's by far the most difficult to purify, once it's polluted.

Furthermore, I think there's a strong argument to be made that Big Spring at Newville, PA is a world-class natural treasure. The limestone springs ecologies of the Cumberland Valley are all jewels, but Big Spring is like the crown jewel of them all, because it still hosts a wild native population of Eastern brook charr. It's also emblematic of the verdant beauty of the Eastern countryside. Western spring creeks may have a more spectacular backdrop. They're larger- often much larger, like the Missouri. But as a rule, they're comparatively austere. They don't run through shaded glades of hardwoods and moss.

There's one exception to that rule that I can think of, offhand: the Metolius River, in Oregon. The Metolius is a freestone spring creek, and one with such a ferocious flow that it generates Class IV rapids within 3-4 miles of its source. The Metolius doesn't run through high plains meadows or cottonwoods; it's located in a unique ecological niche, in the only grove of Ponderosa pines found for many miles around. It's unique in the world. And the private landowners there and government of the State of Oregon have put the entire upper half of it into public trust, preserving it for posterity. Even though Oregon is not a wealthy state.

(Ironically, trout are not particularly plentiful in the Metolius- and since the water stays at a constant 49 degrees, it isn't as rich with insect life and vegetation as limestone spring creeks. One of the major feeder tribs is more like a constant 44 degrees, literally too cold to host rainbow trout. It's the main spawning stream for the 10-15 lb. bull trout that enter the river from the reservoir that was built some miles downstream from the headwaters.)

I think that Big Springs/Falling Springs/Letort Spring Run are in the same class of natural wonder as the Metolius, in the ecological sense. And just as unique. And like the Metolius, they deserve something like a permanent cordon of protection. They're found in a completely different setting than rural Oregon, of course- and I'm not advocating that Cumberland county be declared a wilderness preserve. But the limestone streams of the region deserve much, much more protection than death by a thousand cuts from the continual stress of development.

Especially Big Spring.

The place certainly deserves better than the ignominy of having a poultry farm of 35,000 chickens- or even 10,000 chickens, or 3500 chickens- located only 350 yards from it's porous, marly banks and its limestone geology. Or a truck depot for 300 trucks- or even for 30 trucks.

How does this problem get solved, once and for all?

I'm not wedded to an ideology on this. I just want to do what works best. But as a citizen with a personal interest in responsible stewardship of a place as rare and fragile as Big Spring, I'm not interested in compromise, as far as the ultimate result that I'm after. Those spring creeks pay with every compromise. If that pattern continues, they're done for.

There are three basic ways to accomplish the goal of preserving the natural integrity of these streams:

1) The government uses its powers to regulate on issues of development, pollution, and environmental protection to permanently forbid private landowners from using their property in any way that risks degrading the priceless public resource of Big Spring, which is not only a natural wonder of rarity and beauty, but also the water supply for the residents of Newville.

2) Some person, group, organization, institution, or government department buys out all of the private landowners along the banks, and everywhere else in the watershed, and puts the land into permanent trust. Whether public or private. (In Oregon, the largest landowner in the Metolius region pretty much granted the land for preservation. But that family was in the fortunate position of being able to afford to do that.)

3) Permanent easements are negotiated with the unanimous consent of all of the landowners, to compensate them in return for pursuing ecologically friendly land use. Including doing things like refraining from fertilizing their lawns, leaving ample riparian barriers, planting more trees and less turf, no-till agriculture, and preserving all of the land from more development, either commercial or residential.

Those methods can all be used by themselves, or combined. I don't personally care exactly how it's accomplished.

In fact, I'd rather see, say, the Donny Beaver Consortium buy Newville and turn it into a private angling resort than witness it getting trashed by the runoff from a chicken farm or a truck depot.

I realize that the underlying issue in all of this is $$$- funding. And that tends to immediately get a lot of folks to throw up their hands in despair. Many of them immediately go into reactive mode- "there's a recession, the government is broke", etc. And turning their pockets out.

Bollocks.

I refuse to see how it would be a prohibitive expense to preserve Big Spring. And I'm not talking about tax dollars. I'm talking about fly fisher dollars.

This isn't like buying Yellowstone Park. I can't believe that there isn't enough money out there to make a landowner an offer he can't refuse, to stand down from turning his place into a 9 acre chicken farm.

Option #1: There are some fabulously wealthy and/or well-connected fly fishermen out there. People like Yvon Chouinard. Perk Perkins. Paul Volcker. Norm Schwartzkopf (I'm almost sure I ran into him one windy day on

~~Falling Springs a few years ago, fwiw). Movie actors and rock stars. Or multibillionaire Jon Huntsman, Sr., who~~ could buy the city of Newville with pocket change. Who's to say one of them, or maybe a group of them, wouldn't be interested in providing the philanthropy to preserve Big Spring in perpetuity? Has anybody asked?

Option #2: Never mind the rich folks. It's plain and obvious that there are thousands of trout anglers out there who, while not billionaires or multimillionaires, still have enough disposable income to spend on expensive fishing tackle and vacations, year in and year out. Are people priorities really so skewed that they'd prefer to buy another $500 fly rod, rather than donating it to a land trust fund to purchase the Big Spring watershed?

Am I wrong in estimating that if every trout fishing fanatic on the Eastern seaboard chipped in the price of a new fly line to preserve Big Spring, enough money would be raised to- at minimum- ease the would-be Pennsboro chicken farmer into retirement?

I get the viewpoint that many people have, that these days the government can't afford to use taxpayer money to fund projects like preserving Big Spring. I don't agree with it, but I see where it's coming from.

But if that shouldn't be the job of the government, that leaves it to people like US. Private stakeholders with a particular vested interest in protecting the resource as a wildlands preserve.

And, to whom it may concern: if you're going to cop out on that, preferring to do something like adding another fly rod to your stash, I think you have a hole in your bucket.

I have enough fly rods, personally. I'd sell every one of them except one at a loss and give all of the money to preserve Big Spring- if I only knew for sure that enough other people felt the same way that enough funds would be raised to do the job.