

It was a big trout. A good trout. A good, big trout.

By Eric Hansen

Ernest Hemingway was a globetrotting author, but he had deep roots in the Midwest experience. Raised in suburban Chicago, his short story “The Big Two Hearted River” is a classic description of healing and redemption in the wilds of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

Many readers believe it recounts the author’s own quest for harmony and suggest that Hemingway switched the names of the title river to protect his favorite UP fishing hole.

Hemingway’s tale is now 80 years old, but for many Midwest folks the theme still runs true. They’re willing to bet their next holiday weekend that the UP is still worth a long day’s drive.

This is God’s Country, a land of thundering waterfalls and sparkling cascades, where clear running streams rush to that greatest of inland waters, Lake Superior.

Along the banks of those rivers, and beside the shores of the big lake, vast swaths of forest protect the watershed’s pristine quality.

A certain aura permeates the UP, a feeling that the big wild begins here and runs, with little interruption, north to the Arctic. The coastline and epic storms of Lake Superior, our planet’s largest freshwater lake, seem not to be of the Midwest, but of the Canadian bush.

Thing is, change is in the air, and it may not be for the better.

Poorly planned development is never a good thing, but the UP may be facing something considerably more challenging: a land rush for mineral rights and a new mining era. Prospecting companies are active in the western UP, and Kennecott Mining Co. alone has bought up the mineral rights for nearly

a half-million acres in Marquette and Baraga Counties.

Up on the Yellow Dog Plains, a fabled back of beyond, Kennecott has plans for a significant mine project. Unfortunately, unlike the UP mines of the past, Kennecott’s proposal involves sulfide mining, a process with a heightened set of risks for water pollution.

Wisconsin has set a moratorium on this technique. This “show me” stance postpones any mining until there is proof there would be no harm.

The proposed mine site is 100 feet from a tiny brook that becomes the Salmon Trout River, and the irony of the connection to Hemingway’s love of the UP could not be greater. Hemingway had a high regard for the wily trout of the Upper Peninsula. The Salmon Trout River shelters a spawning run of coaster brook trout--fish that enter the big lake and grow to a size that dwarfs their creek-dwelling cousins before returning to their native stream to spawn.

Their sheer mass and brilliant color (dazzling scarlet bellies) would take any angler’s breath away.

A hundred years ago, these trout were so common that people on Superior’s south shore caught them by the barrel. Today, the few hundred coaster brook trout of the Salmon Trout River are quite special. They are the last known remnants of those native giant fish on the United States side of the lake except for remote Isle Royale. One tiny spill, one little belch of pollution from the proposed mine, and these fish, and their timeless migration, are history.

Kennecott's mine proposal, and the increased prospecting activity, caught the eye of many people who considered Michigan law ill equipped to handle the challenge. Concerned citizens organized a broad coalition of conservation clubs, environmentalists, and just plain common-sense neighbors into a campaign that persuaded the Michigan legislature to enact a sulfide mining code in November.

Don't doubt for one minute that the payoff for this kind of foresight can be huge. An incredible 1,700 bald eagles chose to raise their young in Wisconsin last spring. That success story relates directly to human willingness to change our use of the chemical DDT. In 1972 a ban on DDT use began in the United States, and the eagle numbers above reflect a tenfold increase since that year. The bottom line here is clear: Relatively minor adjustments on our part can provide vast benefits for wildlife and water quality. What is good for them can be good for us.

It wouldn't be the end of the world if the coaster brook trout of the Salmon Trout River die out. It wouldn't even mean extinction of a species or a subspecies. Like the grizzly bears of Yellowstone National Park, another remnant wild band of a race of giants, the coaster brook trout has abundant close relatives--north of the Canadian border.

But it would be the end of something else. A place we cherish would lose its most compelling and iconic wildlife story. A similar saga would still exist, but farther away, farther north. Just as Yellowstone's allure would dim if the grizzlies died out, the powerful aura of the Upper Peninsula would fade a bit if the Salmon Trout River went stale and its striking native trout vanished.

Hemingway's story and our love for this place today recognize a simple and time-tested truth. The land heals us all. Let's keep that magic around for the grandchildren.

Eric Hansen is the author of *Hiking Michigan's Upper Peninsula – A Guide to the Greatest Hiking Adventures in the U.P.* That project follows his earlier guidebook, *Hiking Wisconsin*. www.eric-hansen.com

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