The National System

Wild and Scenic Rivers:

Signed into law on October 2, 1968 by President Lyndon B. Johnson, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act preserves the essence of rivers that surge, ramble, gush, wander and weave. The act became law when visionary outdoor enthusiasts and Congressional sponsors championed a system of free-flowing rivers to balance national policies of extensive dam building and water diversions. This monumental act of citizens who cared about the future of American rivers—the arteries connecting communities and public lands—brought an age of invigorated understanding, restoration and respect for public safety.

River segments are classified in three categories: wild, scenic and recreational. Each category is defined by its accessibility and level of surrounding development. Wild rivers are primitive without development and are generally only accessible by trail, while recreational rivers are accessible by road or rail and may have shoreline or watershed developments. Scenic rivers fall in between. Overall, 56 rivers such as the Owyhee in Idaho and Oregon and the Sheenjek in Alaska fall exclusively into the wild category. 24 rivers fall exclusively into the scenic category, like the Pere Marquette in Michigan and Big Piney Creek in Arkansas, while 21 rivers such as the Allegheny in Pennsylvania and the Mississquoi and Trout Rivers in Vermont are considered exclusively recreational.

The National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act defines rivers as deserving of legal protection because they are free-flowing and possess "outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values" or outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs).

What began with eight rivers has grown to include more than 12,700 miles legally-recognized wild, scenic and recreational rivers. In total, 209 rivers in 40 states and Puerto Rico are part of the National System.

The states with the most Wild and Scenic River miles are:

- Alaska 3,210 miles, 25 rivers
- Oregon 1,839 miles, 57 rivers
- California 1,714 miles, 23 rivers

Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Designations by Mileage
The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was enacted at a time when Americans were becoming more environmentally aware. During the 1960s and 1970s, this changing consciousness gave rise to national policies protecting air, water, wilderness and endangered species. The National System of Wild and Scenic Rivers, created by the Act, lists each river and the federal agency or state responsible for managing its designation protecting its associated ORVs.

Following detailed study to determine if a river is suitable and has the public support to be protected, a Wild and Scenic River is generally designated by an act of Congress. The 1980s represented a decade of significant growth to the Wild and Scenic Rivers System due to the passage of laws that designated all 25 rivers in Alaska and most rivers in Oregon. Increases in the 1990s and 2000s resulted from state-wide river designation bills in Michigan and Arkansas, as well as the designation of 32 new rivers under the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009. The most recent addition is East Rosebud Creek in Montana, designated in 2018.

Today, the Act continues to protect the special character of rivers while also balancing their role in economic growth, and encourages public participation in developing effective and long-term management strategies. Concerned citizens and river proponents collaborate with local industries on proposals like Washington’s Wild Olympics wilderness, which would protect nearly 500 miles of rivers and more than 160,000 acres of land.

As water usage and construction projects increase, grassroots efforts continue to call attention to other special free-flowing rivers and the need to consider additional protections for them. The National Wild and Scenic River System's design helps protect the quality of free-flowing American rivers for current and future generations.
Wild and Scenic Rivers: Water Quality

Why Clean Water?

Every living thing relies on clean water. Water quality is an important indicator of ecosystem health. Historically rivers have been the lifelines of civilizations, defining our settlements, providing sustenance, and enabling life.

1 out of 10 people in the U.S.A. can trace their drinking water source back to a wild and scenic river.

The Role of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

Congress created a policy to "preserve...selected rivers or sections thereof in their free-flowing condition to protect the water quality of such rivers and to fulfill other vital national conservation purposes."

WSR Act, Section 1(b)

Both water quality and quantity along with special river values for wild and scenic rivers are to be protected and improved according to law.
Get Involved

**Designated Uses**

Designated uses dictate the water quality standards for that particular waterway. These uses are determined based on how clean the water body should be to fully support the use.

All 209 wild and scenic rivers have both fishable and swimmable uses.

Here is the breakdown of the number of wild and scenic rivers with a respective designated use:

- **Fish Consumption**: 209
- **Recreation**: 209
- **Fish/Wildlife**: 168
- **Agriculture**: 80
- **Drinking Water**: 58
- **Industrial**: 32

**An Interconnected System**

What happens upstream matters. Rivers are not isolated resources. Population growth, development, and pollution can affect your river and drinking water. Even though you may not feel close to a wild and scenic river, you are very much connected to the system.

**Rivers at Risk**

An impairment is when a water body does not meet the water quality standard for its designated use. Here is the breakdown of the number of rivers with a respective impairment:

- **Temperature**: 60
- **Mercury**: 32
- **Pathogens**: 29
- **Nutrients**: 28
- **Metals**: 23

**58% of wild and scenic rivers are impaired!**

**6 Actions You Can Take**

- Dispose of grease properly to avoid clogging drains
- Use native plants to support ecosystem functions
- Pick up your pet's poop to keep bacteria out of the water
- Wash your car on the grass to prevent soap runoff into streams
- Compost your grass clippings and leaves to reduce excess nutrients
- Apply fertilizers and pesticides wisely to reduce storm water pollution

Photo by CRAIG BLACKLOCK

Wild and Scenic Rivers 50th Anniversary Group

www.wildandscenicrivers50.us
Wild and Scenic Rivers and their immediate environments possess outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geological, fish and wildlife, historical, cultural, or other values that are unique or truly special.

Riparian areas are lands along rivers and other water bodies. While their appearance and boundaries vary, their soil and vegetation are unlike their neighboring ‘uplands’ due to the dominant influence of nearby water.

Did you know...

- The flow of water through riparian soils regenerates ground water.
- Shade provided by riparian vegetation optimizes the light and temperature for fish, aquatic plants, and resident animals.
- Although riparian ecosystems occupy only 7% of the country, they are more diverse and have more plant and animal species than adjacent upland areas.
- To illustrate how riparian vegetation supports water quality: One mature tree in a riparian area can filter out as much as 200 pounds of nitrate runoff per year.
- Of the more than 200 designated Wild and Scenic Rivers, 74% are protected for fish, 67% for wildlife, 22% for botany, and 17% for ecology.
- 80% of songbirds and 50% of threatened and endangered species depend on rivers and streams.
- Freshwater animals are disappearing five times faster than land animals.
- Estimates indicate that 70% of the riparian habitat in the United States has been lost or altered.

Photo by Tim Palmer
Wildlife
Wild and Scenic Rivers and their immediate environments are important for wildlife. They provide:
- habitat
- connectivity
- wildlife viewing
- wildlife interpretative and educational opportunities

*Salmon Wild and Scenic River, Oregon*
The entire river provides optimal summer and winter habitat for big game from both sides of the Cascades, and the upper meadows supports diverse wildlife habitat. The northernmost breeding population of endangered Sandhill Cranes also lives here.

Fish
Wild and Scenic Rivers may be judged by fish populations, diversity, habitat, or a combination of these river-related conditions. Some Wild and Scenic Rivers are protected for the fish that make the river their home. Protection of free-flowing water is critical to fish habitat and life for these fish. Some Wild and Scenic Rivers are integral producers of resident or migratory fish, including federally listed species.

*Lamprey Wild and Scenic River, New Hampshire*
The Lamprey River’s shoreline, natural floodplain, and wetlands support the largest quantity of freshwater fish in the Great Bay watershed and numerous freshwater mussel species.

Botany
Areas near Wild and Scenic River corridors include upland, riparian, and wetland habitats and a rich variety of plant communities. Plants in riparian areas support pollinator insects and seed dispersers.

*Snake Wild and Scenic River, Idaho*
Hells Canyon, carved by the Snake River, is one of the deepest and most imposing river gorges in the West. Few locations equal this canyon in the concentration and number of rare or endemic plant species, such as the Snake River Goldenweed, found only in the canyon and on its adjacent slopes.
Overall, 81% of all Wild and Scenic Rivers have recreational value. Access to Wild and Scenic Rivers is a delicate balance between ensuring enjoyment and preventing damage from overuse.

Management responsibilities are spread between four federal agencies and their state affiliates. Some tribes, like the Menominee Tribe near the Wolf River in Wisconsin, are also involved in management.

Recreation Opportunities Along Wild and Scenic Rivers

As a vital part of the outdoor recreation economy, rivers offer unique opportunities for Americans. Residents and visitors alike can enjoy activities ranging from day hikes and sightseeing to floating by day and camping at night on designated and eligible rivers. Below are a few of the many ways to enjoy nature on Wild and Scenic Rivers.

**Boating**
Raft, canoe, kayak and other watercraft travel is possible when rivers are free-flowing and unobstructed by dams or other artificial barriers. Some of the most popular rivers hold annual lotteries for float trips. In the western United States, 11 rivers host lotteries to distribute permits for launches. The Selway River in Idaho is the most exclusive of these lotteries. Only one public launch party per day is permitted during the season, so visitors can truly experience this wild wilderness river.

**Hiking & Camping**
Camping is permitted in designated zones along riverways, since many Wild and Scenic Rivers flow through a mixture of private and public lands. Many first encounters and lasting memories of nature involve being near water. Without the added draw of the water, more than one-third of recreationists would decrease their overall outdoor activity.

**Fishing**
Anglers, along with boaters, engage most directly with the unique character of Wild and Scenic Rivers. Rivers offer critical habitat to many species of fish. These inhabitants display different ways of living and reproducing in the water. Anglers must adapt to the demands and habits of each species while practicing legal and ethical fishing. For many anglers, a Wild and Scenic River is defined by and inseparable from the fish that populate it.

**Wildlife Viewing & Hunting**
Not only do rivers draw animals to a plentiful source of fresh water, but many rivers are home to species that are seldom found elsewhere. Riparian habitats boast unique communities of species compared to other ecosystems and offer vastly different opportunities for observing wildlife on their terms. Seasoned hunters know the value of riparian habitats to game species.
Outdoor Recreation Economy

Outdoor recreation is a massive and growing industry supporting 7.6 million jobs. It saw a 37% increase in annual consumer spending from 2015 to 2016 from $646 billion to $887 billion. River recreation accounts for up to one-third of this spending, including activities both on and around waterways.

Idaho

With 22 designated Wild and Scenic Rivers, or 10.5% of all designations, Idaho encourages waterway recreation. Outdoor consumer spending totals $7.8 billion annually, and 78,000 jobs relate in some way to outdoor recreation. Wild and Scenic Rivers contribute significantly to these figures by providing a strong draw for local and out-of-state visitors.

Salmon River, Middle Fork

Floating on the Middle Fork Salmon Wild and Scenic River draws thousands of people during each annual season. The majority of launches take place in the middle five months of the year (May-September). In 2016, 11,528 people floated the river on 810 permits issued to the general public and commercial outfitters. Demand dwarfs access granted, as 45,000 applications were filed for less than 400 permits in 2017.

Ecosystem Services

Healthy rivers serve important functions beyond just recreation. Humans would otherwise need to pay for these “ecosystem services.” Services include access to water for irrigation, water table replenishment, water purification in wetlands, and erosion-resistant banksides that provide flood control. Nearly 84% of Wild and Scenic Rivers are designated for ecosystem services and other non-recreational benefits.

Oregon

Oregon has slightly more than 1,900 miles of its total river mileage designated as Wild and Scenic, spread across 59 different rivers [8]. Many of these rivers are protected for their recreational value as well as values such as hydrology, water quality, and traditional use. Oregon also shares the Columbia River Basin with Washington, which is estimated to provide $198 billion annually in water, habitat, flood reduction, food production, and other benefits.

Imnaha River

The Imnaha River, within the basin, is protected for a wide range of values, including its role in supporting recreation, traditional living, and historic agricultural practices. Farming and ranching continues today near the water the river provides for irrigation and drinking, alongside habitat for unique plant communities.
Wild and Scenic Rivers: Geology and Hydrology

Geology is the study of how the Earth changes through time. Hydrology is the study of water systems and water movement throughout the Earth.

Over 45% of designated Wild and Scenic Rivers have outstanding geologic or hydrologic resources. These rivers display features or processes that are unique, rare, or exemplary to their regions.

They may highlight unusual landscapes, represent textbook examples of earth processes, or have rare combinations of geologic features in the river corridor.

Geology and hydrology affect...

**Scenery**

Rivers constantly rearrange landscapes over time through weathering and erosion. Rivers carve through rock and soil, creating amazing canyons, gorges, and sloping mountains. The scenic values of these features often contribute to the case for Wild and Scenic River designation.

**Ecology**

When rivers flow over rocks, water mixes with air and oxygen is dissolved. Many fish and aquatic animals rely on water with high amounts of dissolved oxygen to live.

Some fish species, like American shad, need riffles to provide safe places for their young to mature. Riverbeds provide critical habitat for many plants and animals, including aquatic insects. Some of these species have only been found in designated rivers.

**Recreation**

A river's slope and rocky bottom can create rapids, making boating fun and challenging! Rivers with high water quality often have exceptional recreational fishing opportunities. For recreation out of the water, trails along rivers provide hikers with spectacular views.
Wild and Scenic Rivers with outstanding geology and hydrology

**River Styx, OR**
The River Styx is the only Wild and Scenic River that flows entirely underground. The river flows through a marble cave, which formed over time as groundwater dissolved through the carbonate bedrock. The River Styx flows through a cave with many fossils.

Photo: National Park Service

**Fossil Creek, AZ**
Fossil Creek’s travertine terraces create a series of natural dams and pools. Travertine forms when spring water rich in calcium carbonate deposits minerals.

Photo: Thomas O’Keefe

**Merced River, CA**
The Merced River flows through canyons carved by glaciers, over sheer cliffs, and down steep cascades. The stretch of river known as “Giant Staircase” provides an outstanding example of a stair-step river formation.

Photo: Tim Palmer

**Crooked River, OR**
The Lower Crooked River basin was created over thousands of years by a number of volcanic eruptions. Colorful layers of basalt and sedimentary rock form the canyon walls and create incredible scenery.

Photo: Bob Wick

**Niobrara River, NE**
The Niobrara River is the only river in Nebraska that carves down into the bedrock. Springwater falls down steep riverbanks; a rare sight in this region. A mix of geology, soil, and terrain types helps support the diverse ecology within the river corridor.

Photo: Kristen Maxfield

**Upper Delaware River, PA & NY**
The Upper Delaware River’s steep and narrow valley was formed over thousands of years as water cut through ancient glacial sediments. At Skinners Falls, exposed bedrock creates rapids that are popular with river users.

Photo: Kelleen Lanagan
Wild and Scenic Rivers: History, Culture, and Paleontology

Cultural, historic, and paleontological resources found along certain Wild and Scenic Rivers tell stories about our human and Earth’s evolutionary past. While over 31% of Wild and Scenic Rivers have outstanding cultural resources, paleontological features are much rarer.

Our Human Past

We can learn a lot about the people that lived along rivers based on what they left behind. These cultural resources are important to understanding the different uses of rivers. Some examples of cultural and historic resources include structures, artifacts, and evidence of important historic events and past land use.

Rivers with Outstanding Cultural Values

**Rio Icacos, Puerto Rico**
Pre-1490 petroglyphs as well as ceramic shards from the time of Spanish occupation have been found along the Rio Icacos. In the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps built trails, bridges, and other structures around the river.

**St. Croix River, MN & WI**
People have lived along the St. Croix River for more than 12,000 years. Native Americans harvested wild rice and fish from the river, and later settlers used the St. Croix to transport timber, furs, and other goods. Starting in the 1800s, river recreation increased in popularity. Conservation efforts started in the 1890s when nearby state parks were created.

**Noatak River, AK**
Arrowheads, tools, and carvings came from the people that crossed into North America from Asia thousands of years ago. Groups living in the area fished for salmon and used other resources of the river valley. Today, Native Alaskan tribes still use salmon from the Noatak as a primary food source.

**Upper Delaware River, PA & NY**
The Roebling Bridge opened in 1849 as an aqueduct for canal boats to cross the Delaware River. Later, the bridge was restored for vehicles and pedestrians. Today, the Roebling Bridge remains one of the oldest surviving suspension bridges. It was designed by John Roebling who is best known for his design of the Brooklyn Bridge.

**Wilson Creek, NC**
Historic settlements built along Wilson Creek were part of the logging industry. In the 1930s and 1940s, the town of Mortimore hosted the Camp Grandfather Mountain Civilian Conservation Corps.
Wild and Scenic Rivers: 
History, Culture, and Paleontology

Sudbury, Assabet, and Concord Rivers, MA
The Sudbury, Assabet, and Concord Rivers are important in American history and literature. The first battle of the Revolutionary War took place on the Old North Bridge in Concord. In the 1800s, the three rivers were featured in the works of famous authors including Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau.

Sudbury, Assabet, and Concord Rivers, MA

Owyhee River, ID & OR
Canyons surrounding the Owyhee River gave shelter to the Shoshone and Paiute tribes. Petroglyphs and shrines give insights into their uses of the river. Members of these tribes still use the area for hunting, fishing, praying, and ceremonies.

Owyhee River, ID & OR

Earth's Evolutionary Past
Paleontology is the study of fossilized plants and animals. Fossils help us understand the history of life on Earth. A few Wild and Scenic Rivers have remarkable fossils that tell the story about life millions of years ago.

John Day River, OR
The rocks around the John Day River are a chronology of life over the last 44 million years. This area is rich with plant and animal fossils including the remains of palm and banana trees as well as crocodiles, early horses, and rodents. Many fossils are on display at the Thomas Condon Paleontology Center.

John Day River, OR

Niobrara River, NE
Fossils around the Niobrara River that are between 2 million and 23 million years old help scientists understand the history of the Great Plains. Mastodons and North American rhinos (fossil shown above) are just two amazing species whose fossils are found here.

Niobrara River, NE

Verde River, AZ
Over time, humans changed the way they used the Verde River floodplains. The oldest sites were used by hunter-gatherer societies thousands of years ago. Other sites show evidence of groups that raised and drove livestock through the area.

Verde River, AZ

Rivers with Outstanding Paleontology

Photo: Tim Palmer

Photo: OARS

Photo: Bureau of Land Management

Photo: Bureau of Land Management

Photo: National Park Service

Photo by Craig Blacklock
Rivers, lakes and oceans—our blue spaces—benefit our physical and mental well-being. We rely on rivers for clean drinking water and as places of spiritual rejuvenation. Blue spaces have historically been used for healing. Even the sound of moving water can have a calming and restoring effect on the mind. Whether you are looking for a peaceful picnic spot by a babbling brook, a scenic river-front hike, or a place to paddle, you can find activities along Wild and Scenic Rivers that contribute to your good health.

**Healthy Water and Healthy People**

65% of our nation’s drinking water comes from rivers and streams. Toxins that contaminate water can harm the human body, meaning that good health starts with good water chemistry.

Many plants and some animals, such as freshwater mussels, can filter water by removing harmful chemical compounds. Since humans need assistance making sure the water we ingest is clean, protect your own health by understanding the ecosystems responsible for your clean water and helping your local watershed group clean up litter and remove water pollutants.

**Get Active!**

Exercise helps prevent and alleviate health issues including obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes. Recreating on and near rivers increases physical activity in the outdoors, which can help your body process vitamin D and produce endorphins—a hormone that makes you feel good. Paddling, in particular, is a low impact form of exercise for upper or whole body. River recreation is also a refreshing and proven way to relax, and recreating with others can improve social health by providing opportunities to build long-lasting friendships and engage in team building.

Photo: Bob Wick, Bureau of Land Management
Rivers are powerful forces in nature and demand respect. Drownings have accounted for the most fatalities in National Parks between 2007 and 2013, and most of those occurred in rivers. Rivers have strong currents that can be very dangerous, even for skilled swimmers. Before you get out on a river, make sure you take the appropriate actions.

**Plan Your Trip**

**Know Before You Go:**
- Visit the park’s website to learn about the river including river conditions, potential hazards (e.g. underwater terrain) and allowed water activities.
- Know your limits and pick an appropriate activity for your group’s size and ability.
- Check that everyone has a U.S. Coast Guard approved life jacket and that each person’s life jacket fits properly.
- Develop a Plan B in case things change and you can’t do your planned activity.
- Complete and share your Trip Plan with someone who is not going on the trip.
- Develop a plan of action so you know what to do if there is an emergency (e.g. you go overboard, your boat flips, hazardous river conditions).

**When You Arrive:**
- Check in with a Park Ranger and ask about river and weather conditions, park alerts and closures.
- Check your food, water and equipment and that everyone has a life jacket.
- Put Plan B into action if necessary.

**On the River:**
- Always wear your life jacket!
- Stick to your intended route.
- Keep an eye on environmental changes (weather, wildlife, water conditions etc) and your group to assess if you should continue your trip or turn back.

For more general trip planning tips look up "Trip Planning Guide" and "Water Safety Article" on nps.gov.

**Always Wear a Life Jacket**

Life jackets are essential for any kind of river recreation. Make sure you are wearing the appropriate life jacket for the activity you are doing. Whether you are boating, swimming, fishing, wading, tubing, or participating in an activity on the river or along river banks, wearing a properly-fitted life jacket can save your life.

**Pick the Right Life Jacket. It should be:**
- Approved by the U.S. Coast Guard (check the label).
- In good condition. Does it float? Get a new one if it has tears, missing straps, broken buckle or zippers, etc.
- The right type of life jacket for your activity.
- The right size for you.

**Test the Fit of the Life Jacket:**
- Fasten and secure all of the straps and raise your arms.
- Your vest should stay and not ride up.
- Have someone lift the jacket up at your shoulders; it should not move.