PROPOSED

MISSOURI BREAKS

NATIONAL RIVER • MONTANA

ON MICROFILM
A SUMMARY

From Coal Banks Landing in north-central Montana, through a ribbon of eroded land, to the western border of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Range, the Missouri flows in its most natural, unspoiled state. Lewis and Clark would have seen it this way, and this hundred-mile stretch remains the last significant, essentially undisturbed segment of this great river. Here the Missouri has cut a gorge-like valley to a depth of 500 to 1000 feet below the average level of the plains; and the tributary drainages have shaped the adjoining lands into a harsh area of badlands and breaks, possessing weathered forms of unusual interest and beauty.

Upstream from Coal Banks Landing to the old river town of Fort Benton, the Missouri's course is dotted with picturesque islands and sandbars. Downstream from the landing, the scenery gradually changes. The flood plain narrows, the valley becomes canyon-like, and the river moves more rapidly. Few evidences of man are seen from Coal Banks Landing to the mouth of the Judith River. But nature provides spectacular vistas, for here is located the White Rocks section of the Missouri, where glistening sandstone masses - some 200 to 300 feet high - compose the wild landscape. The green of pine and juniper nestled among the rocks adds color to the otherwise stark scene. The valley widens substantially just before the Missouri is joined by the Judith River.

The rapids become swifter, the badlands harsher. But farther downstream, from Cow Island to the wildlife range, the topography changes from the rugged badlands to more open terrain. The flood plain broadens. The bluffs are lower. More vegetation grows on the islands and along the banks. Wildlife sightings are more numerous. Events important in the growth of the Nation took place along this reaches of the Missouri. Every bend in the river contains features which are reminders of incidents of the great Lewis and Clark journey of discovery. Names such as Kips and Clark's River recall the brief but violent era of the Missouri fur trade. The flatlands opposite the mouth of the Judith provided the meeting place for two important Indian peace councils during the waning days of the fur trade. Gold was found near Bannack City and Virginia City in the early 1860's, precipitating a frantic rush to Montana; and the Missouri River became a major transportation route to the gold fields, with the amazing shallow-draft paddle-wheel steamboat the principal mode of travel. For a time, Fort Benton was the commercial capital of Montana - the riverbank retains the character it had in the heyday of the steamboat - and much of the old town is admirably preserved. During the steamboat era, as Indians became increasingly hostile to the more rapid encroachments of westward expansion, Camp Cooke and Fort Cigliett were established to maintain the Missouri River line of communication. When the Indians were finally subdued, settlement became more intense. Fortunately, these historic events may be commemorated and interpreted in their still unspoiled setting.

To preserve the river in its present free-flowing state and to prevent damage to its important geological features, to its excellent wildlife habitat, or to its significant historical and archeological sites, the Park Service urges that Missouri Breaks be designated a national river. To make these resources of the Missouri Breaks available to the public, the Service recommends that this section of the river and its environs be administered as a recreation area in the National Park System.

Without question, the recreation values of the proposed national river are of primary importance. Within the area, a hundred-mile stretch of the river passes through a land of semi-wilderness. Numerous rapids, more choppy than swift, while not hazardous, add to the excitement of floating down the river. Upstream navigation by motorboat is also possible. Fishing can increase the pleasure for the river travelers. The varied and plentiful wildlife affords exceptionally fine hunting. Scattered cottonwood groves on the river's banks provide sites for camping and picnicking.
Missouri Breaks will offer a somewhat different type of recreation than normally associated with reservoirs and seashores. Here the quality of the dominant recreational activity, river boating, is based on the area's great historical significance and outstanding scenery. A traveler on the river will be treated to a semi-wilderness experience as he floats through the canyon, for he will be unable to see the major agricultural operations on the flatlands above.

A complex management situation exists because of the long and narrow shape of the proposed national river, the existence of privately owned base properties, and the administration of adjoining lands by State and other Federal agencies. Of the total acreage, 68 percent is federally owned - administered by the Bureau of Land Management - 25 percent is privately owned, and 7 percent is State-owned. Specific cooperative programs with private landowners, the State, and other Federal agencies must be worked out if the resources are to be employed and administered properly.

Missouri Breaks National River will help to satisfy the Nation's ever-increasing demands for more and varied recreational opportunities. Designating this segment of the Missouri as a national river will attract thousands of visitors to the area, thus benefiting the region economically.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR / NATIONAL PARK SERVICE