



Foundation Document Overview

St. Croix National Scenic Riverway

Minnesota and Wisconsin



Contact Information

For more information about the *St. Croix National Scenic Riverway Foundation Document*, contact: sacn_superintendent@nps.gov or (715) 483-2274 or write to:
Superintendent, St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, 401 North Hamilton Street, St. Croix Falls, WI 54024

Purpose



The purpose of the ST. CROIX NATIONAL SCENIC RIVERWAY is to preserve, protect, and enhance the values of the St. Croix and Namekagon Rivers and their immediate environment for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. The values for which the Riverway has been designated as a wild and scenic river are its free-flowing character, exceptional water quality, and the aquatic, riparian, recreational, cultural/historic, geologic, scenic, and aesthetic values present in the rivers.



Significance

Significance statements express why St. Croix National Scenic Riverway resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- **Water Quality.** The St. Croix and Namekagon Rivers have excellent water quality throughout their reaches. They have been recognized as national wild and scenic rivers and receive the distinction of “Outstanding Resource Waters” in both Wisconsin and Minnesota, a rare triple designation. The water quality of the rivers is an important contributing factor to their inclusion into the national wild and scenic rivers system and is the critical medium that sustains the essential habitats the park provides for its aquatic species.
- **Free Flow.** The Riverway protects one of the last undeveloped, large floodplain rivers in the upper Mississippi River system. The Namekagon and the St. Croix function unimpeded for considerable distances as they have for millennia, influenced by natural processes as they meander, flood, and migrate through the river corridor. Few dams, diversions, channelizations, or other modifications encumber the rivers, allowing for excellent connectivity between upstream and downstream reaches, and creating stable substrates for aquatic life. As they grow and change in character from their headwaters to their confluence with the Mississippi, the Namekagon and St. Croix Rivers are superlative examples of how rivers are meant to function.
- **Mussel Diversity.** The Riverway is home to more than 40 species of freshwater mussels—one of the greatest assemblages of these fascinating and sensitive aquatic organisms in the United States. A rare example of an intact river-dependent group of animals, all of the mussel species that existed in the corridor before European settlement are present there today. The sheer abundance of mussels in the Riverway plays a critical role in maintaining the excellent water quality of the St. Croix-Namekagon river system by filtering water and cycling aquatic nutrients. The exceptional diversity of mussels in the Riverway provides invaluable opportunities to learn more about these important and declining organisms.

Significance

- **Ecological Corridor.** The St. Croix and Namekagon Rivers serve as an uncommon, nearly completely protected north-south corridor that supports large populations of diverse flora and fauna. The richness of wet and dry habitats that are protected by the park, ranging from wetlands to forests to prairies, provides critical aquatic and terrestrial habitats for fish, insects, birds, and mammals. An important component of the Mississippi River flyway, the river transitions from a cold-water river to a warm-water river before ending in a glacially formed riverine lake. The linear connectivity and dramatic changes in condition along the Riverway further sustain its impressive aquatic, terrestrial, and transitional resources and values.
- **Human History.** It is possible to witness centuries of history related to river use throughout the Riverway. More than 200 American Indian and European American cultural sites have been identified within the boundary. Of particular significance are sites related to prehistoric peoples, the history of the Ojibwe (1670–present), recreational history, and structures in the river related to logging and navigation history. The resources of the river and its connection to the north woods have made it economically and culturally important to humans for thousands of years, and it continues to appeal to people in the present.
- **Recreational Opportunities.** The Riverway offers exceptional primitive camping experiences along its 255 miles, including the opportunity for multiday and even multiweek float trips that are not common in the United States. There are many places on the river where visitors can be immersed in a scenic and aesthetic landscape for days at a time with few indications of the modern world. It provides an important opportunity to experience natural quiet and a sense of solitude. The Riverway remains one of the few truly wild and scenic rivers located within an hour's drive of a major urban center. With paddling challenges appropriate for beginners as well as experts in remote settings, the Riverway is one of the most accessible primitive riverine experiences in the nation.
- **River Conservation History.** The protected Riverway embodies the history of river conservation efforts in the United States. It was one of the original eight rivers designated under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and remains a place where legal precedents related to river protection and management are set. Prime examples of the Riverway's past and present significance to river conservation policy include court decisions that established that recreation is a valid public use of a river system and that scenic beauty is a statutory right. This was the first instance of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act being used to halt a construction process. The first interstate state park in the country was also established along the St. Croix in 1895, setting a model for multijurisdictional riverine cooperation and protection.
- **Geology.** The geologic story of the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway is rich. Evidence of the Midcontinent Rift and the Cambrian, Ordovician, and Pleistocene periods can be seen. The Midcontinent Rift occurred about one billion years ago when the North American continent began to split apart. Lava flowed from the rift and cooled, forming basalt, an igneous rock. Sedimentary rock, including Cambrian sandstones and Ordovician carbonate, was laid down when the area was covered by a vast inland sea 500 million years ago. The torrential outflow from Glacial Lake Duluth about 10,000 years ago at the end of the Pleistocene ice ages exposed the basalt formed during the Midcontinent Rift and the sandstones formed during the Cambrian and Ordovician periods. Potholes and moraines were formed by the retreat of the glaciers.
- **Scenery.** Most of the Riverway is classified as scenic under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act for its minimally developed landscape and primitive riverine environment. The upper reaches provide an intimate experience. Much of the upper rivers are a series of riffles and pools. Hillsides supporting pine and oak or low-lying marshes border the river. The river is much wider in the lower reaches and provides panoramic views of the St. Croix Valley and dramatic high bluffs. Historic river towns contribute to the exceptional visual experiences here.



Description

