

53 YEARS OF WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS

KELSEA HARRIS-CAPUANO | MISSOULA, MONTANA

Elizabeth Townley is a busy woman. As the only wilderness wild and scenic rivers planning specialist for the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), squeezing in time to talk between meetings is challenging.

"I was a raft guide and a fly-fishing guide through college, and I just I love rivers," said Townley.

Her love of rivers led her to become a river ranger for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) working on the Middle Fork and Main Stem sections of the Salmon River in Idaho for 10 years before she became a USFS planning specialist.

A few years ago, journalists with publications including USA Today, National Geographic and High Country News covered the 50th anniversary of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The National Park Service public relations team launched a social media campaign with the hashtag "#FindYourWay, which has marked more than 215,000 posts, dedicated to "exploring America's national scenic, recreational, and historic trails and wild and scenic rivers — and all rivers and trails in your neighborhood and beyond." Organizations celebrated with in-person events across the U.S. But Townley thinks that as far as managing and protecting wild and scenic rivers goes, people aren't paying enough attention.

For the USFS, Townley helps local management agencies create or update comprehensive river management plans. These plans give essential guidance for agencies managing rivers and are a requirement for wild and scenic rivers.

Passed by legislators in 1968, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act ([justice.gov/enrd/wild-and-scenic-rivers-act](https://www.justice.gov/enrd/wild-and-scenic-rivers-act)) is an iconic piece of legislation. The act solidified the first national system put in place to protect some of the country's most majestic,

pristine and unique free-flowing rivers. Its intent is to protect rivers from development and dams, sustain their pristine water and preserve rivers that, in Congress' words, "... possess outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural or other similar values."

Under the act, a state governor with the approval of the secretary of the interior, or most commonly, Congress, can designate rivers under three classifications: wild, scenic or recreational. These classifications determine what type of development can be near the river sections.

Sections designated "wild" are inaccessible except by foot. Both the water and surrounding area must receive very little human impact.

"Recreational" river areas are readily accessible by road or railroad and may have some development on their shorelines. Developers may have even had a dam or structure that altered river flow in the past in some "recreational" areas.

"Scenic" river areas fall in between wild and recreational. Their shorelines are largely undeveloped but accessible by roads in places. The task of managing and protecting wild and scenic rivers falls to four primary federal agencies: the National Park Service (NPS), the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the USFS. Today, 226 rivers in 41 states and Puerto Rico have wild and scenic status, according to a mapping project conducted in collaboration with the four federal agencies. This amounts to the protection of more than 13,000 river miles — less than one half of one percent of the nation's rivers.

Rivers are a small part of what managing agencies are responsible for, from wildfire suppression to tourism manage-

ment. Other pressing tasks can easily take precedence.

"There are very few people whose job it is to focus solely on wild and scenic," Townley said.

Townley is currently working with local management agencies to draft and update 39 different plans. She estimated that last year, about three-quarters of the wild and scenic rivers managed by the USFS either didn't have plans or had plans that were long out of date and not reflecting or addressing current conditions. For example, the Rogue River in Oregon, one of the first rivers designated wild and scenic, is on her list, as it is still managed with the original plan written in 1972.



ABOVE: The Green River in Utah, designated Wild and Scenic in 2019, winds its way through one of the largest roadless areas in the lower 48 states. Photo by Kelsea Harris-Capuan

Conditions change over time, including increases in pollution, changes in fisheries' health, climate change impacts, such as increases in wildfire activity and water temperatures, or massive increases in river use, which impacts local ecosystems.

Townley thinks that members of Congress won't continue designating new rivers for protection if plans aren't written or are irrelevant.

This national network of protected rivers has a lot of moving parts. On a local level, people in Plumas County, California, are seeing the effects of wild and scenic rivers being a lower priority by management agencies.

A CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY WORKS TO PROTECT ITS WILD AND SCENIC RIVER

Darla DeRuiter, environmental studies program director at Feather River College in Quincy, California, is a boater and hiker who loves the Middle Fork area of the Feather River. She thinks it needs to be better protected.

The Middle Fork of the Feather River is one of eight rivers written into the original Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The river's headwaters lie in the alpine basin of the Sierra Valley; many of its tributaries flow into the steep canyon via waterfall. The area is known for its challenging whitewater, wild trout fisheries and scenery that includes Bald Dome, a granite face much like the ones Yosemite is famous for.

"It's a huge wild watershed. It's just stunning, a really special place just a few miles from where we live," DeRuiter said. DeRuiter said that colleagues and friends who have lived in the area a long time have noticed a decline in the health of its fisheries.

Managers of the local Trout Unlimited chapter released a report in 2018 saying that warming water temperatures have and will continue to impact local fish species that favor colder water, such as the rainbow trout, steelhead and chinook salmon (frtu.org/basinwide-assessment-blog). Lower flows due to drought and agricultural also impact water temperature and fisheries' health.

In the report, managers also discussed wildfire as one of the primary influences on watershed condition. Wildfires have

been more frequent and severe in recent years, including the North Complex Fire that burned close to 320,000 acres in the nearby Plumas National Forest in August 2020. Wildfires increase debris and sediment, creating runoff and erosion that destroy habitat and impact water quality.

Through an environmental policy class at Feather River College, DeRuiter is working with her students to draft an updated river management plan — a plan they hope to give USFS managers who steward the Middle Fork of the Feather River.

Normally such a task — developing a comprehensive river management plan — would be done by the management agency, but DeRuiter hopes a collaborative process will be the push the USFS needs to complete an updated plan. She also thinks the project is a good way to engage her students and the local community. Part of the planning process includes a public comment period, and DeRuiter thinks that the more public involvement, the better.

These plans are typically prepared within a period of a few years after a river or section is designated wild and scenic, and management agencies address how those rivers will be protected.

To be designated for wild and scenic status, a river must, along with being free-flowing, have at least one significant attribute or outstandingly remarkable value (ORV) that makes it uniquely special.

DEFINING A WILD AND SCENIC RIVER

USFS managers have never updated the original plan for the Middle Fork of the Feather River, making it nearly 50 years old. The river was originally listed for having remarkable scenery, wild fisheries and recreational opportunities.

In a river's management plan, USFS agency staff must address how the enumerated values of that river will be managed and protected.

DeRuiter said that the Middle Fork of the Feather River hasn't gotten the attention it needs. Flowing from the Sierra Nevada Mountains into the Sacramento River Basin, it drains through an area with a long history of timber extraction, which has more of the Forest Service's focus than protecting the river corridor. DeRuiter thinks there are a number of reasons the river plan needs to be updated, such as supporting the increase in recreational use over the years, but also climate change-related issues like warming temperatures and managing for wildfires — important topics that weren't on managers' radar 50 years ago.

"I believe in planning," DeRuiter said. "Funding, enforcement and agency presence often accompany that planning. Right now, it feels like a free-for-all."

The Middle Fork of the Feather is one of a number of rivers with a decades-old plan. During a 2018 symposium about river plans hosted by all four federal agencies involved with the Wild and Scenic



Rivers program, hosts delivered a PowerPoint presentation depicting ranges of age for all river plans. The results indicate it's high time for updates.

CHALLENGES IN OREGON

The Rogue River in Oregon is another river operating with a plan that has never been updated. According to Katie Gregory, a BLM river ranger, one of the biggest complaints recreational users on the Rogue River have is the scarcity of campsites relative to its continued growing popularity.

Gregory said that knowing and meeting the needs of river users is an important part of protecting the river, as that information helps the agency reduce and manage human impact. The USFS estimates that the Rogue sees half a million visitors a year.

The Rogue River, like the Middle Fork of the Feather River, is one of the original eight rivers designated wild and scenic. The other six are spread across the country in Missouri, Idaho, New Mexico, Wisconsin and Minnesota.

The Rogue is characterized by its steep mountainous terrain, as the headwaters of the Rogue flow from the Cascade Mountains 215 miles to the Pacific Ocean, and the area is known for cold, clear green water, diverse wildlife, fishing opportunities and a remote feel.

One of the reasons Gregory became a river ranger is because, like Townley, she loves rivers. As an avid boater who kayaks and rafts on her days off, she wants the rivers she enjoys to be protected.

“We need the Wild and Scenic Act, but without proper direction to implement it, it’s not going to protect our rivers,” she said.

Kevin Colburn, national stewardship director at American Whitewater, a nonprofit river conservation organization, thinks that in general, management agencies have dropped the ball in regards to management plans.

“It’s crazy to think that a 50-year-old plan can describe how to protect a river in today’s world,” Colburn said. “Management will become less relevant to people and make less sense over time.”

According to Colburn, one reason the plans are important is because they’re so specific to each river. The rivers are designated based on certain specific values, and their individual plans essentially capture what makes each river stand out and what should be done to enhance and protect those qualities.

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One big change for the Wild and Scenic Act was technology and public access to more information. Management plans and information on wild and scenic rivers can be found on rivers.gov, which is co-managed by the NPS, USFWS, USFS and BLM.

According to Colburn, American Whitewater was the first organization to digitize and put management plans online, making them accessible in one location.

Colburn said that staff at American Whitewater formally started putting together a more comprehensive list online around 2004.

The River Management Society, a nonprofit focused on studying and protecting North America’s rivers, helped them encourage the federal agencies to add the plans to a central website.

Colburn thinks that before that project, the plans were being used very little. “It was a great thing, because before that, the plans were sitting in a filing cabinet somewhere, and a lot of them didn’t exist in an electronic format,” Colburn said.

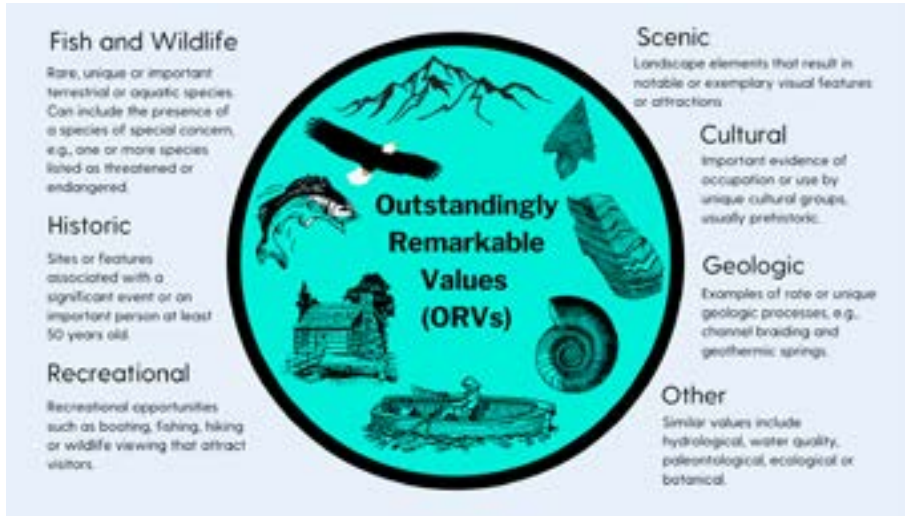
Colburn said that making them more accessible is also a great way for the public to find information and learn about wild and scenic rivers, whether they want to look up a local river near their hometown or find information on a vacation destination for boaters, anglers or hikers.

According to Edward Sherman, the zone recreation manager for the Mark Twain National Forest in Missouri, another positive change over the years has been collaboration among management agencies.

Urging from conservation organizations led to the creation of the Interagency Wild and Scenic Rivers Coordinating Council. The interagency council includes representatives from all four federal agencies involved in managing wild and scenic rivers and was developed in the 1990s to help communicate and administer the mandates of the Wild and Scenic Act to “protect and enhance.”

Sherman has been working for the USFS for 17 years and spent the last seven years working in the Mark Twain National Forest area, where he developed a new appreciation for wild and scenic rivers. He is now working to update another 50-year-old plan, this one for the Eleven Point River, another river of the original eight. Sherman thinks managers know a lot more today about river plans and working together across agencies.

“It has taken a really long time to really wrap our brains around what a river plan should look like, and we know a lot more than we did 40 and 50 years ago,” he said.



A number of amendments have been made to the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act over the years, including a 1986 provision that more clearly defined river management plans and what they should entail.

Some of those components include: descriptions of existing conditions like fisheries’ health, water quality and amount of development like roads and structures; specific information about the river’s designated remarkable values; goals to protect those conditions and values; a monitoring strategy to help track the river’s conditions, visitor numbers and water flows; and recognition of regulatory authorities and their responsibilities.

While the structure for a river plan has become more streamlined over the years, due to the unique nature of each river, management plans vary widely in length and content. If management issues are more complex, it’s going to take more time and require more resources to write up a thorough plan.

UPDATING THE FLATHEAD RIVER PLAN IN MONTANA

USFS staff like Colter Pence are working on the river plan for the Flathead River in Montana. Designated in 1976, the stretch of river includes 219 miles of sections with wild, scenic and recreational classifications. This means some areas have fewer users with trail access while others have roads, buildings and facilities nearby and will have a lot more users. This also means areas will be impacted differently and require a variety of management strategies, which have to be detailed in the plan.

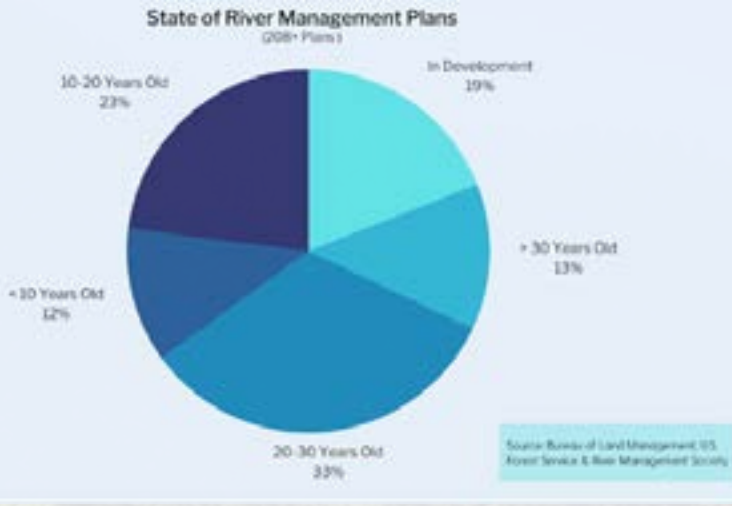
Pence, the wilderness and wild and scenic river trails manager, has been working on updating the plan for the Flathead for the last four years. She said that a lot of river plans written before the 1986 amendment, including the one for the Flathead, did not address the newer requirements. She estimates they’re probably a year or so away from finishing.

Back in her office, Townley said that while a river plan for the Flathead may take five years to finish, in contrast, a plan for the Franklin River in Oregon, which only includes a 4.5-mile stretch of river designated as wild, took one year to complete.

Townley is working on a side project to help streamline the planning process even more by creating a template. She wants to make the process less arduous. She said that given the difference between rivers, there’s no one size fits all, but there are ways to make the process easier and more approachable, which may help put rivers higher on the list of priorities for managing agencies.

“It’s a difficult feeling, like we’re not moving the needle on protecting a resource that I’m super passionate about and love,” she said. “I know that we can do better.”

—Kelsea Harris-Capuanio is a writer, outdoor adventurer, educator and former OWAA journalism intern.



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