

A Watershed Moment for River Conservation and Science

BY STEVE CHESTERTON and ALAN WATSON



We are in the midst of a wave of 50th anniversaries. Specifically, the wave consists of 50th anniversaries for legislative milestones in the United States. That's because the 1960s were a time of profound social and environmental change. The Civil Rights Act, the Wilderness Act, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act were all enacted in 1964. The Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965. The National Historic Preservation Act was in 1966, and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 was signed into law on the same day as the National Trails System Act. Other groundbreaking legislation will be commemorated with golden anniversaries in the next several years – the National Environmental Policy Act (1970), the Endangered Species Act (1973), and the Clean Air (1970) and Clean Water (1972) Acts, to name a few.

Among conservation legislation and national designations of natural areas, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act may have the largest chip on its shoulder. Wild and scenic rivers represent our nation's strongest form of protection for free-flowing rivers and streams. The act's passage in 1968 also marked a watershed moment when the nation acknowledged the importance of complementing efforts to manipulate, control, and harness the power of rivers with a focus on perpetually protecting and enhancing select free-flowing rivers for their range of natural, cultural, and recreational values in a manner that crossed political boundaries. And yet, for all that this legislation has done to guide our thinking about river protection since then, the significance of a wild and scenic river designation is largely either unknown or misunderstood. Even among river enthusiasts, the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System resides in relative obscurity. "Wild and scenic" – sounds nice, but what does it really mean?

Perhaps the most effective way to think about the significance of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is to imagine the United States without any clean, free-flowing waterways. To grasp that meaning likely requires consideration of the diverse values of these river ecosystems, including their integral connections to the lives of past, present, and future generations of people and communities. From rivers flowing through urban landscapes to creeks in the most remote wildernesses, the importance of healthy, meandering river systems is difficult to overstate.

This special issue of the *International Journal of Wilderness* focuses on the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to coincide with the 2018 50th anniversary year. Serving as the guest co-editors for this issue, we sought to rejuvenate efforts that began 17 years ago when *IJW* devoted two consecutive issues to wild rivers (December 2000 and April 2001). The hope at that time was that the series of articles in those issues would catalyze an increased emphasis on wild river science and stewardship. Although there is no doubt that much has been accomplished in the intervening years, a continued need exists to promote research and understanding about the importance and relevance of free-flowing rivers in our society.

The values of the waterways protected, and the spectrum of connections we have to the rivers impacted both directly and indirectly due to the passage of this legislation, come clearly into focus if we take the time to consider them. Encouraging that focus is the intent of this special issue. Articles here explore a range of themes, from the history of the act's passage to the stewardship challenges faced in managing wild and scenic rivers today.

Continued on page 9

- Bennett, D. B. 2002. *The Wilderness from Chamberlain Farm*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Craighead, J. 1957. Wild river. *Montana Wildlife*. June.
- Fosburgh, J., J., DiBello, and F. Akers. 2008. Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers. *The George Wright Forum* 25(2): 42.
- Interagency Wild and Scenic Rivers Coordinating Council. 1998. *Wild and Scenic Rivers Act 30th Anniversary Forum – Moving to Action*. Final Meeting Report.
- Palmer, T. 1986. *Endangered Rivers and the Conservation Movement*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- . 1992. *The Snake River: Window to the West*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- . 1993. *The Wild and Scenic Rivers of America*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Palmer, Tim, 2017. *Wild and Scenic Rivers: An American Legacy*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press.
- Stahl, G. 2015. Idaho Rivers United. Press release. Federal judge: Forest Service has authority to regulate megaloads.
- Thomas, C. 2014. *Evolution of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act: A History of Substantive Amendments, 1968–2013*. Interagency Wild and Scenic Rivers Coordinating Council, National Park Service, Anchorage, Alaska.
- US Congress. 1968. Public Law 90-542. October 2.
- US Council on Environmental Quality. 1980. *Interagency Consultation to Avoid or Mitigate Adverse Effects on Rivers in the Nationwide Inventory*. President's Directive, August 10, 1980.
- US Department of the Interior. 1982. *The Nationwide Rivers Inventory*. White paper.
- . 2016. *Nationwide Rivers Inventory*. National Park Service list of inventoried rivers. Retrieved from <http://www.nps.gov/ncrc/programs/rtrca/nri/index.html>.
- US Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture. 1965. *Wild Rivers*. Booklet.
- US Environmental Protection Agency. 2000. *National Water Quality Inventory*, ii. Retrieved from <https://www.epa.gov/waterdata/2004-national-water-quality-inventory-report-congress>.
- US House of Representatives. 1968. *Providing for a National Scenic Rivers System, and for Other Purposes*. Report 1623.
- Wild and Scenic Rivers Task Force. 2007. *Wild and Scenic Rivers: Charting the Course*. National Park Service. Retrieved from https://nature.nps.gov/water/assets/docs/WSR_ChartingTheCourse.pdf.

TIM PALMER has been involved with the Wild and Scenic Rivers System almost since its founding. His 1993 book, *The Wild and Scenic Rivers of America*, was updated and rewritten in 2017 as *Wild and Scenic Rivers. An American Legacy*. See his work at www.timpalmer.org.

Continued from A WATERSHED MOMENT FOR RIVER CONSERVATION AND SCIENCE, from page 3

Further, authors examine topics spanning from the diverse array of ecological and socioeconomic values of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System to the potential international applications of the cornerstone principles of the law that set the global standard for river conservation.

Going forward, we hope to cultivate a renewed community of scientific interest that expands upon the work of the authors here to develop a research agenda that looks ahead and informs the next 50 years of river conservation. In addition to the articles in this issue, three additional articles focused on international rivers topics will be published in the March 2018 issue. From this assemblage of papers, it is obvious there is potential for a strategic science program coordinated with allocation and stewardship to protect rivers into the future. These interdisciplinary scientists have

already helped us define seven categories of major science knowledge but with additional needs: (1) economic benefits (see Bowker and Bergstrom); (2) the advantages of evaluating outstandingly remarkable values in an ecosystem service provision framework (see Bowker and Bergstrom; Perry); (3) ways to accomplish better ecosystem and social representation (see Perry); (4) the critical need for sound research to support recreation management decisions (see Verbos et al.); (5) the importance of monitoring to determine positive and negative effects of restoration through dam removal and re-watering streams (see Gimblett et al.; Fredrickson and Lacroix); (6) ways to better link protected river designation and management to aquatic diversity (see Rothlisberger et al.; Křenová in *IJW* March 2018); (7) the importance of collaboration in worldwide assess-

ments of rivers to understand human health and environmental protection policies globally (see Carver in *IJW* March 2018); and (8) the importance of international collaboration to understand the contribution of river protection to quality of life and the environment (see Li – this issue and *IJW* March 2018). As we are inspired by these papers, we hope others are also inspired to collaborate on meeting these science needs to support the complex decisions of our legislative bodies, our managers, and people around the world engaged in river management and protection.

Happy anniversary, United States Wild and Scenic Rivers Act!

STEVE CHESTERTON is the U.S. Forest Service's Wild & Scenic Rivers National Program Manager and chairs the Interagency Wild & Scenic Rivers Coordinating Council; email: smchesterton@fs.fed.us