June 5, 2013

Grand Teton National Park
PO Drawer 170
Moose, WY 83012-0170

RE: Comments on Snake River Headwaters CRMP/EA

Dear Superintendent Mary Gibson Scott:

The American Packrafting Association (APA) would like to thank the joint agencies for their work on the Snake River Headwaters Comprehensive River Management Plan and Environmental Assessment (CRMP/EA), producing a thorough document, and drafting a preferred alternative that preserves these magnificent rivers. We also appreciate the opportunity to comment on the plan.

Because APA is a new organization, we first would like to introduce ourselves. A group of avid packrafters from across America founded APA in the fall of 2012 to educate the growing number of enthusiasts about safe packrafting practices and minimizing our impacts on other users and river ecosystems. Our hope is that through increased education, we can create partnerships with public land managers to increase opportunities for packrafters on public lands where appropriate. Our top priorities are human safety and protection of the river environment, most relevantly: wildlife, geothermal features, cultural sites, and riparian ecosystems. Access to wild rivers is a privilege that our 400 members trust will follow.

While packrafting has been a mainstream activity only since 2000, the concept of packrafting is as old as mankind’s earliest interactions with rivers and lakes. Essentially, packrafting is the integration of boat travel in overland expeditions. Lieutenant Gustavus Doane led Yellowstone and Grand Teton’s first recorded packrafting trip when he dragged a log raft over the continental divide in 1876 and floated the Heart and Snake rivers. He was preceded by an untold number of Native Americans and trappers who used makeshift rafts to assist in their travels and hunts.

In a similar way, today’s lightweight packrafts allow wilderness travelers to backpack over mountains to the next river valley and keep moving through the landscape by floating quietly downstream. Although a number of American manufacturers had been producing packrafts since the early 1980s, the packrafting revolution began in 2000 when Alpacka Raft LLC began manufacturing lightweight durable boats and successfully marketing them in Alaska, Europe, and
the Rockies. Today, six different companies in the U.S. manufacture and market packrafts. Modern packrafts deflate and stow to the size of a compressed sleeping bag and weigh between 3 and 10 pounds depending on the model. Materials, design, and construction have proven durable and functional in the biggest and most technical whitewater, as well as in arctic waters and rocky/woody creeks. Most paddlers agree that they are far more stable, maneuverable, and protective in whitewater than inflatable kayaks; and more stable, comfortable, and spacious for cargo than hard-shell kayaks. Modern packrafts are available with spray skirts, thigh straps, cargo bays, and high-tech hull shapes for handling challenging whitewater.

But what makes packrafts truly remarkable is their backpack-ability, which opens the door to rewarding itineraries that can combine backpacking, canyoneering, mountaineering, and river running. Much like backcountry skis allow remarkable low-impact winter adventures, no other tool allows such creative, intimate, and unobtrusive travels through summer landscapes as the packraft. With their large tracts of remote roadless backcountry, Yellowstone National Park and Grand Teton National Park hold some of the finest packrafting venues in the contiguous United States.

The American Packrafting Association is dedicated to promoting packrafting as a safe and low-impact way to enjoy and protect America's wild rivers and wild places. We welcome your visit to our website and Facebook page for more information about packrafting history, safety, news, and our work around the country on conservation, education, and access. Please see: www.packraft.org.

**APA Comments on the Snake River Headwaters CRMP/EA**

APA applauds the Snake River Headwaters Wild and Scenic designation and the permanent protection of the Snake River, its tributaries, and all of its Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORVs). APA appreciates the National Park Service’s stewardship of these world-class resources and the challenges of managing them. However, we were disappointed to read that planners elected not to include a thorough analysis of packrafting on the newly designated Wild and Scenic rivers in Yellowstone National Park, Grand Teton National Park, and the National Elk Refuge.

We will begin our comments by focusing on the section of the plan entitled, “Alternative Considered but Dismissed from Detailed Evaluation” on pages 58-60. With respect to the subsection entitled “Conflicts with Existing Regulations,” APA understands that the U.S. Code for the administration of Wild and Scenic Rivers {Chapter 28, 16 U.S.C. 1281(c)} gives precedence to “the more restrictive provisions” when there is a conflict between other “Acts” and the Wild and
Scenic Rivers Act. However, the paddling ban is the result of previous administrative rule making that is not specified in any other “Act.” We know of no “Act” that supports a blanket ban on boating. Therefore, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, which requires a full analysis of recreational uses, actually has precedence in this case. Federal rules and regulations must be consistent with all applicable federal laws in any given jurisdiction, not vice versa. If there are reasons for banning paddling in the Snake Headwaters in Yellowstone National Park (YNP) or Grand Teton National Park (GTNP), then those reasons should flow from an analysis of recreational user capacity in the CRMP/EA.

Moreover, we believe that the existing regulations with respect to paddling restrictions are based on obsolete and flawed policies stemming from outdated reports published between 1950 and 1988 – at least 25 years ago. APA understands that the comment periods on those old documents have long since passed. However, some background is necessary to show that the Park Service wrongfully dismissed packrafting from detailed evaluation within the Snake Headwaters CRMP/EA. Apparently, river boating was banned initially to relieve fishing pressure and perceived conflicts with bank fishermen on the Yellowstone National Park’s more popular angling rivers, such as the Madison, Firehole, and Yellowstone rivers. Yet, neither YNP nor GTNP have ever conducted any empirical studies to verify that the paddling ban has reduced fishing pressure, nor have the Parks ever evaluated any fisheries impacts from paddlers who paddle the area’s rivers without fishing. Moreover, the Park Service has not shown that conflicts indeed exist between paddlers and anglers (many recreational users participate in both activities), nor has any attempt ever been made to strike a balance between uses to alleviate any perceived conflicts. Instead, YNP instituted an all-out river boating ban and these half-century-old policies remain strictly-enforced traditions in both National Parks, despite changing technology, an embrace of low-impact backcountry travel ethics, and a growing public interest in such activities and venues.

Subsequently, during the 1980s, YNP released a report (“Boating on Yellowstone’s Rivers; An Analysis and Assessment”) that provided an appraisal of paddling with regard to nine resource and management concerns on 18 river stretches in Yellowstone Park. Not only was it mostly subjective rather than scientific, but also the report used a flawed statistical analysis, and saddled the burden of the nine concerns squarely on the shoulders of paddlers, when the impacts cited could apply just as readily to other visitors to the river corridors, such as anglers, hikers, sight-seers, birders, swimmers, and other users. Acting on this flawed analysis, YNP recommended a continuation of the paddling ban in 1988. GTNP, resting solely on unsubstantiated rulings in 1962 and 1971, has never studied the impacts paddling might have on rivers in that Park.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires a supplemental environmental analysis whenever there is a continuing federal agency action and "[t]here are significant new circumstances of information relevant to environmental concerns and bearing on the proposed action or its impacts." \(\{40\text{ CFR } 1502.9(c)(1)(ii)\}\). The 1988 report “Boating on Yellowstone’s Rivers; An Analysis and Assessment” based its findings in part on five species that were listed as endangered or threatened at that time. Since then, three of those five have been delisted. That alone is a “significant new circumstance.” With regard to demographics, packrafting has become a mainstream activity since the 1988 plan. The Park Service could not have adequately

As long as there are young men with the light of adventure in their eyes or a touch of wildness in their souls, rapids will be run.

- Sigurd Olson
considered the merits and impacts of packrafting at that time. We therefore request that the NPS and USFWS include a provision in the CRMP to revisit these analyses and consider the impacts of packrafting in the Snake River headwaters.

Second, with regard to the section in the CRMP entitled “Existing Restrictions Contribute To The Protection Of Values For Which Rivers Were Designated,” Section 10(a) states “Each component will be managed to protect and enhance the values for which the river was designated, while providing for public recreation and resource uses which do not adversely impact or degrade those values... Studies will be made during preparation of the management plan and periodically thereafter to determine the quantity and mixture of recreation and other public use which can be permitted without adverse impact on the resource values of the river area. Management of the river area can then be planned accordingly.” By dismissing a thorough evaluation of packrafting, the Park Service is clearly in violation of this provision of the statute because the law requires the study of recreational uses. Moreover, to imply that existing Wild and Scenic ORVs are even partially the result of the paddling ban is both unsubstantiated and illogical.

APA understands that all uses allowed on a designated river should be consistent with the values that caused it to be designated. However, if the Park Service has never performed an adequate analysis of packrafting, how can it objectively claim that packrafting is inconsistent with those values? Packrafting has been found to be consistent with Wild and Scenic values on nearly all other designated rivers across the country. We believe packrafting is consistent with those values in YNP and GTNP, and implore the Park Service to prove otherwise through a transparent study.

It is important to note at this point that packrafting is somewhat different than other forms of paddling and rafting. Packrafters require no boat launches, access roads, parking areas, or developed facilities of any kind. Packrafters can move freely and easily in and out of river corridors for many purposes including portaging, camping, and embarking on an overland leg of their trip. Packrafters have developed lightweight “Leave No Trace” ethics and techniques, which allow them to move quickly and quietly, as well as keep their impacts to a bare minimum. Packrafting is easily managed because it can fit within current regulations for backpacking through the backcountry permit system. We believe that other forms of paddling and rafting may also be appropriate activities in the Parks, but because of packrafting’s dramatic differences and its particular suitability to the remote river reaches in the Parks, APA requests that packrafting be considered specifically.

Third, the sub-section on “Existing Restrictions” makes the point that 351 miles of the total 410 miles (86%) of designated rivers are open to non-motorized boating, and that the remaining 14% provide opportunities to experience the river environment without recreational watercraft.” We appreciate the balance the Park Service is trying to strike here, but will argue several points:
1. Fairness: In its rebuff of packrafting within its boundaries, Yellowstone National Park has not struck a balance at all. Instead, it has arbitrarily favored some uses over another without considering the impacts of each. Packrafting is a noble and valid pursuit that allows a deep connection to wild rivers with little resource impact. APA believes that packrafting is just as worthy of a place within the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park and Grand Teton National Park alongside the many other uses currently allowed.

2. With regard to the 410 miles of newly designated watercourses in the entire Snake River Headwaters, in our estimation approximately 67 miles of river (16%) are not navigable, an additional 121 miles of river (30%) either follow a road or are accessible by road, and an additional 45 miles of river (11%) are currently closed to paddling. That is a total of 57% of the newly designated river miles that are not ideal for packrafting (the ideal territory for packrafting is remote and away from roads). Of the remaining 176 miles of river (43%), only 5 miles are available for remote wilderness packraft trips on Park lands.

3. In our estimation, the 67 miles of newly designated rivers (16%) mentioned above that are not navigable provide ample opportunity for visitors to experience a river corridor without encountering recreational watercraft. Moreover, there currently are hundreds of other non-designated streams in Yellowstone and Grand Teton where visitors can experience boat-free rivers.

4. On page 22, the CRMP calls biased attention to comment letters received, and makes a point that not all letters were pro-paddling. Instead of allowing a few anti-paddling letters to support the argument for a complete ban of paddling in the Parks, perhaps the ratio of letters from anti-paddling visitors relative to letters from pro-paddling visitors should be considered in the analysis.

Fourth, with regard to the sub-section entitled “Recreational Boating would Conflict with the Mission of the National Elk Refuge and National Wildlife Refuge System,” APA appreciates that agency’s focus on wildlife. However, we would like to know how hunting and fishing in the river corridors are consistent with that mission. Hunting may serve a management function, but fishing is clearly recreational. How is bicycling on the bike path through the Refuge consistent with that mission? Bicycling is obviously a recreational use, implemented with a seasonal restriction.

No studies have ever been done that show how packrafting might impact species on the Refuge, nor has any consideration been given to seasonal paddling restrictions on the Gros Ventre River or Flat Creek to minimize impacts to wildlife during less sensitive times of the year. We would like to see the National Elk Refuge and Parks apply seasonal restrictions where paddling impacts to wildlife are a concern—a tool proven successful in management units across the country.
Fifth, with regard to the CRMP’s repeated reference to providing a wide range of recreational uses, APA feels that this has not been accomplished because venues for packrafting are not included within the Park segments of the newly designated rivers. Paddling bans are extremely unusual within the Park system and require additional justification, rather than a blunt dismissal. Most public land units fully support non-motorized, quiet, human-powered, wilderness-compliant forms of recreation like paddling. Of the over 300 National Park units, only three maintain blanket boating bans on all but one or two of their rivers—YNP, GTNP, and Yosemite National Park. Paddling is banned on only four Wild and Scenic Rivers outside of GTNP and YNP, all of which are currently being reconsidered by administrative and/or federal court proceedings.

Sixth, Goal #4 on page 30 of the CRMP reads, “Provide a diversity of opportunities and settings for visitors of varying abilities to experience, learn about, and have a direct connection with the rivers and their associated values.” By dismissing packrafting from inclusion in the CRMP, Goal #4 will not be realized because packrafters comprise a valid and nationally recognized and established user group falling well within a subset of diverse activities fostering a direct connection with rivers. While some packraft trips require a high level of visitor ability, this is not necessarily inherent in the sport. Packrafting trips for all abilities could be experienced within the areas of the Snake River headwaters overseen by the Department of the Interior.

Seventh, please see comments below about specific river segments within the Snake River Headwaters:

1. **Lewis Channel** (wild): Packrafts should continue to be a permissible craft on this stretch, just the same as canoes and kayaks.

2. **Lewis River** (scenic): This would be a world-class high-level river run for kayakers and packrafters. There are several good rapids and one or two portages around un-runnable waterfalls. Seasonal paddling restrictions should be considered for elk calving. Some visitors viewing the canyon from the Park road overlooks may not appreciate seeing paddlers in this canyon, but we believe most would rush for a closer look, and wish they had the opportunity to try. If the visual impact of paddlers to bystanders is an issue, Park planners also should consider that lines of RVs and crowds of people just above a riverbank might comprise a visual and noise disturbance to paddlers and other users of the river corridor (hikers and anglers, for instance). Fortunately for paddlers it is a non-issue, because we are so engrossed in the moment that we neither care nor fuss.

3. **Snake River** (wild): The upper Snake River would be an ideal venue for packrafting. The area was recommended as Wilderness in 1972, so it presumably is appropriate for such types of “primitive and unconfined recreation.” While packrafters enjoy paddling popular road stretches such as the recreational and scenic portions of the Snake for training and scenic outings just like any other boater, it is the remote wilderness stretches such as this wild section of the Snake that most interest packrafters. Yet, backpacking into this remote river would be very difficult and the river run would be challenging. This trip is not for every packrafter, and will never become a venue with high demand. Nor will it ever be crowded with paddlers if it is managed appropriately. Very few other visitors make it to the upper Snake, so

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**When you go into country by pack train, the streams are only for crossing, or to camp beside. To know a stream you travel on it, struggle with it, live with it hour-by-hour and day-by-day.**

-Olaus Murie, *Wapiti Wilderness*
encounters would be rare. Packrafters can carry boats into the headwaters from various trailheads for a remote landscape adventure. One waterfall, one perennial log jam, and a number of class 3 and 4 rapids could be safely run or portaged with packrafts. Camping could be restricted to designated sites because packrafters can easily carry gear away from the river corridor to reach the sites. A permit system could easily keep the numbers of packrafters to a sustainable level. Packrafters could be educated about proper behaviors at hot spring locations.

4. Pacific Creek (scenic): This stretch of river would make a spectacular finish to an extended packraft trip that exits the mountains by way of upper Pacific Creek within the BTNDF. It also would be a fun one-day outing for paddlers of all kinds. Except for an easily-portaged log jam or two, this stretch has few obstacles. In areas of wildlife concern, the river is recessed well below the level of the willows allowing packrafters to pass through with minimal impact on nearby moose or bears. There is a short section where the river comes close to Pacific Creek Road, and another place where it crosses under the Park highway. The chance for visual encounters with motorists is very small.

5. Buffalo Fork (scenic): The lower reaches of the Buffalo River would give paddlers of all kinds an intimate look at the riparian ecosystem, and its gentle waters make this stretch accessible to all levels of ability.

6. Snake River (scenic): Because of its direct road access and popularity for raft trips, the stretch from Jackson Lake to Moose is less appealing for packrafting than the more remote segments. However, this stretch is a good place for packrafters to fine-tune their paddling skills and enjoy a relaxing scenic float.

7. Gros Ventre River (scenic): The stretch of river along the boundary of GTNP and the National Elk Refuge above Kelly, WY would make a fine training stretch for packrafting, as well as a fun scenic outing. It has some fun easy rapids and although you could put-in and take-out at roads, the stretch is secluded in a remote and pristine canyon. This is an ideal river run. We see no reason that it should not be open to all paddlers.

In closing, APA requests that the National Park Service follow the letter of the law and include packrafting among the mix of recreational uses analyzed on all of the newly designated Wild and Scenic river segments in the CRMP. We cannot currently support any of the alternatives, because they do not include a provision for the analysis of packrafting. APA requests that packrafting be considered, allowed, and managed similarly to how other wilderness-compliant human-powered forms of recreation are managed (e.g. backpacking and backcountry skiing). Under this scenario, visitors could choose whether they wish to paddle, fish, hike along, or simply view the rivers so long as the capacities for river visitation are not approached or exceeded, required permits are acquired, and all uses prove environmentally sustainable.

The Snake River Headwaters CRMP/EA is a fantastic opportunity for the National Park Service to find out if allowing visitors a deeper connection with the rivers of YNP and GTNP is a sustainable activity. We are looking for the Parks to go in a new direction, embracing the increasing need of the American public to interact on an intimate and kinesthetic level with our parklands. Rather than shutting out human-powered recreation, we are asking the Parks to manage human activities in the safest and most sustainable way. Please no longer withhold without justification appropriate paddling opportunities for the American public in Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks.
Again, we appreciate the opportunity to comment on the CRMP and look forward to working with the Department of the Interior to revisit the analysis and management of packrafting in the Parks and National Elk Refuge in the near future.

Sincerely,

Brad Meiklejohn, President
American Packrafting Association

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