

TESTIMONY OF AARON PRUZAN
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION
HEARING ON H.R. 3492
RIVER PADDLING PROTECTION ACT
ROB BISHOP, CHAIRMAN
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee:

I am Aaron Pruzan and I live in Jackson Hole, Wyoming with my wife Tamsen and our three children, Noah, Nate and Neve. As a retailer, instructor, guide and coach I have introduced thousands of people of all ages to the joy of paddling rivers since I began my career in 1993. In 1995 I started Rendezvous River Sports and Jackson Hole Kayak School, a retail sales and outfitting destination which quickly became the hub of paddling activities in Wyoming. I am very fortunate that I have turned my passion for river running into my career and can share that passion with so many people from all walks of life.

In 1996, in response to the youth skiing community wanting more summer activities, I founded the Jackson Hole Kayak Club to give the opportunity for kids in the Jackson Hole area to understand and experience the waterways of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Since that time I have taken generations of young kayakers – now including my own kids – to rivers throughout the west to enjoy healthy outdoor recreation.

In 2009 I began working with Teton Adaptive Sports to provide free adaptive paddling opportunities for special needs kids and adults. In addition we provide free paddling and rafting programs for Honoring Our Veterans, which facilitates outdoor experiences for returning veterans and wounded warriors. We have worked extensively with the City Kids Wilderness Project which gives inner city kids from Washington D.C. the opportunity to experience the rivers and mountains of Wyoming.

Over the past three decades I have enjoyed paddling in many spectacular places as a team member on numerous whitewater expeditions, exploratory descents and in individual kayaking competitions. This includes exploratory river running in Wyoming, British Columbia, Chile, Argentina, New Zealand and Siberia.

Paddling has fostered in me, as it has in others, a deep sense of stewardship for the rivers I experience. I have worked extensively for river stewardship as a founding board member of the Snake River Fund and a board member of American Whitewater. This work included being one of the leaders of the Campaign for the Snake River Headwaters. Through this six year process I worked with numerous conservation organizations, hosted planning meetings at my store, met with landowners, presented the campaign at public forums and helped build lasting partnerships between different river users and political affiliations. This culminated in 2009 with the passage of the Craig Thomas Snake River Headwaters Legacy Act, which protects 400 miles of the upper Snake River and was one of the largest conservation measures in Wyoming in many decades.

In 2010 I spearheaded the special excise tax funding proposition which was approved by voters in Teton County and provides funding to facilitate the transfer of riparian lands from the Bureau of Land Management to Teton County for river access and preservation. I am currently working to complete this process with the addition of private lands and the creation of riverside parks and access points at South Park, Wilson and Hoback Junction on the Snake River in Jackson Hole.

As a current member of the Jackson Hole Travel and Tourism Board I am working to promote outdoor recreation and sustainable travel. Jackson Hole and the Greater Yellowstone Area are a national treasure and we are working to be a world leader in sustainable tourism as well.

I have traveled to Washington D.C. twice before. Both times were to meet with our Wyoming members of Congress to advocate for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. LWCF funding is very important to Wyoming as LWCF funds have been used to acquire valuable lands in river corridors, with more riparian lands targeted for purchase via LWCF in the upcoming year.

While I make my living sharing rivers with people, I am not testifying on behalf of my own or anyone's commercial interests. I am testifying on behalf of the many people that cherish the opportunity to experience rivers and special places in their kayaks, canoes, and rafts. This is a community of people that have a deep land and river stewardship ethic and a strong connection with the natural world. Through nearly every aspect of my life I am part of that community, and it is an honor to testify on their behalf.

The rivers of Jackson Hole are one of the main reasons many visitors come to our area. This is part of a long tradition; river running was one of the original and primary means of travel throughout the west. Today, whether using traditional hard shell kayaks, inflatable kayaks or pack rafts (small one-person rafts that fit in

a backpack) paddling down a river is still one of the most enjoyable and low impact ways to experience the outdoors. A day paddling on the river offers an almost magical connection with the landscape and the water, and different stretches of river offer something for everyone, from floating tranquil waters flowing through quiet canyons to the rush and roar of rapids and the challenge of paddling whitewater. Paddling teaches skills and awareness, fosters an appreciation of nature and protected areas, and is truly a lifetime activity enjoyed by all ages.

There is a current push from the highest levels of government to get more people outside and involved in fitness activities and specifically outdoor recreation. My staff and I are actually doing that all summer long by getting kids and adults away from their computers, tablets and smart phones and out on the water paddling. In this over-stimulating era, rivers require kids and adults alike to focus on natural forces and the natural world, to calm their minds, and exercise their bodies. It is exactly the type of activity that our National Park System was set up to support.

In the late 1920's the great conservationist Olaus Murie embarked on a canoe trip on the Upper Yellowstone River with his two sons. Reflecting on the experience in his book Wapiti Wilderness, he wrote: "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."

I am very fortunate to have gotten to know many rivers while kayaking with my own family, my 6 and 8 year old boys in their kids kayaks, my 4 year old daughter in the front seat of my tandem with me and my wife paddling alongside. River running is an incredible family activity, it provides endless excitement and is something real we all share together that is an experience far beyond anything that a TV, video game or amusement park can offer. Unfortunately though, I am forbidden from replicating Olaus Murie's trip, or taking my family on any river trip in Grand Teton or Yellowstone National Park except for on portions of the Snake and Lewis rivers. The National Park Service forbids floating all other rivers in these parks.

As someone who has paddled many of the world's most formidable whitewater rivers, as well as many that are perfect family floats, I can attest that Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks offer some of the best paddling opportunities in the World for all abilities. Not only would the rivers themselves offer wonderful rapids, currents, and pools, but floating quietly through these areas and taking in the unique scenery would be an experience of a lifetime for many people. It would give Park visitors a truly wild experience of a very special place.

Visitors to our area often ask incredulously why these rivers are closed. The history of the boating ban in Yellowstone and Grand Teton dates back to the 1950s and was solely intended to curb the overfishing that plagued the Parks. This resulted in the unforeseen consequence of banning future access to rivers and streams for enjoyment by paddling. Even though rivers like the Yellowstone had been paddled, the high value of the river recreation resource that exists in both national parks was not envisioned 60 years ago. This ban lives on, while in other national parks and wilderness areas paddling is a regular activity (check out the kayaker on the latest National Parks Pass) that is managed in a simple and sustainable manner.

To live so near to these amazing rivers and yet be unable to experience them is a constant frustration for me, many other residents of the area surrounding the Parks, and many visitors. Many of our students and kids that I coach strive to be able to run rivers like the Yellowstone and have trouble understanding why the boating ban still exists. They simply can't understand why floating a river should be a crime in these parks, while it is supported as a great way to experience the natural world virtually everywhere else.

Despite efforts over the years by American Whitewater to have boating managed like other similar activities in these parks – the ban persisted. With the 2009 Wild & Scenic designation of the upper Snake River and its tributaries – which includes several rivers in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks – a new river management plan was required and thus a new opportunity to consider suitable uses for the resource. Again despite a flood of comments in favor of paddling, including recommendations by river stewardship organizations that paddling be considered, and the requirement by law that all kinds of use be looked at, paddling was explicitly excluded from the draft Comprehensive River Management Plan. The authors of the plan cited the unusual 1950's federal regulations that ban paddling, claiming that these rules made considering paddling a moot point, since they were forbidden from allowing the activity. Park managers do not have the discretion to manage these Parks consistent with modern National Park Service policies, priorities, and practices because of these outdated and unusual federal rules.

It is clear that these 1950's regulations are outdated and the National Park Service needs to manage with modern methods and standards. Yellowstone visitors no longer watch the bears at open dumps, the National Park Service no longer stock exotic fish or engage in other outdated management practices. Changes to park management can improve visitor experiences and natural resource protection. The paddling prohibitions in the Park need to change.

While I do not feel that opening every river all the time in both parks is the correct course of action, I support the active management of paddling in Yellowstone and Grand Teton and feel there are many stretches that can be opened with minimal impacts. There is already a boat registration system in place for both parks and all non-motorized boats are required to have a permit. Boat registration requires a fee, is a source of revenue for the parks and provides boaters with the park boating regulations. Backcountry use is already tightly controlled and paddlers would need to adhere to current regulations as hikers and back packers do. There are also numerous simple templates for river management from other western rivers that flow through sensitive areas which would allow paddlers to be easily, cheaply, and sustainably managed just as hikers are.

It is important to recognize that managers have many tools to manage paddling and other forms of recreation. This is not an all or nothing issue. The paddling community appreciates and supports well-supported limits on river use and here again, there are many great examples of river management from popular rivers in the region like the Middle Fork of the Salmon, the Selway, Yampa or Green. Furthermore there is no need for additional infrastructure to facilitate paddling. Trails and parking already exist for access and kayaks or pack rafts can be easily carried.

I realize that legislation regarding management issues, like litigation, is a last resort and it should only even be considered when there has been a dramatic failure in the administrative process. The 60+ year paddling ban, and recent refusal to consider paddling, is evidence that just such a failure has occurred in Yellowstone and Grand Teton. I do not like the idea of legislating this issue, but given that antiquated federal rules are preventing modern management planning, the paddling community is at a loss as to how else to move forward.

In this case, the NPS feels they are constrained by roughly 60 year old federal regulations that are no longer serving their purpose. It makes sense to grant the Parks the discretion to manage with the full suite of modern management tools. By getting rid of the boating ban, an old regulation that ties the hands of the current park managers, it is not taking away the authority to manage but rather restoring it. We greatly appreciate Representative Lummis for seeking to remedy this problem with the River Paddling Protection Act, and would likewise consider any ideas the National Park Service may offer.

In discussions with my colleagues in the conservation and paddling communities about this legislation, it is evident that regardless of what Congress does concerning this issue, the National Park Service must retain their typical discretion to protect the natural resources of the Parks through fair, reasonable, and well justified limits on all forms of recreation, including paddling. The paddling

community is not seeking special treatment. Paddlers simply want to be considered like other similar low-impact, human-powered, wilderness-compliant visitors. Likewise, we do not seek priority over the preservation of natural resources. Quite the opposite, we feel strongly that the conservation of natural resources should be granted priority over all forms of recreation. We are confident that the parks can support sustainably managed paddling opportunities in concert with other existing similar uses.

It is also vitally important that the final language of this bill be very specific to ending the antiquated boating ban in Yellowstone and Grand Teton and that this bill not be misconstrued or set a precedent that may apply to other parks or other uses in the future.

When we consider human-powered recreation, particularly in a nation that is currently striving to improve the fitness of our citizenry, it is a sad statement that the vast majority of all visitors to Yellowstone experience the park only from their cars, as a roadside attraction. Most rarely venture beyond the boardwalks. Getting people outdoors and out of their cars is important. Whether it is this legislation, a modified version, or NPS action, it is important to encourage the sustainable and healthy exploration and enjoyment of our Parks via ancient, fun, and low-impact means.

Both Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks have highly adept land managers as their Superintendents. Both the departing Mary Gibson Scott of Grand Teton and Dan Wenk of Yellowstone have years of experience dealing with challenging management issues. I ask that you help them with this issue by ending the boating ban and allow both parks to welcome Americans to once again experience two of our nation's most prized National Parks through sustainably managed paddling.

I encourage you to move forward with the River Paddling Protection Act. The bill would address a very real problem that has hindered healthy outdoor recreation for decades. I hope this bill continues to be vetted, discussed, and if needed improved to meet the conservation and recreation goals I have outlined in this testimony.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony and to appear before this subcommittee. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

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