

In a lifetime of paddling remote rivers throughout the world, I've enjoyed close encounters with animals of all types. At home on the rivers of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, my family and I regularly paddle past pelicans, elk, moose, deer, otter, beaver, eagles and osprey. Never do we experience the closeness to wildlife – both physically and more deeply - as when quietly gliding by in our kayaks. The response from the animals is usually the same: apparent disinterest, or curiosity, sometimes trepidation. And then we vanish down the river.

River running is one of the most ancient and low impact ways of traveling and experiencing wilderness. Whether using native bull boats or dugouts, or the pirogues of Lewis & Clark, river travel is ingrained in the history and lore of the West. Yet I cannot count the times that I've been asked: *why are Yellowstone's rivers closed to river running?*

The boating ban is a fishing regulation enacted in 1950 to curb pressure on the fishery. While float fishing and recreational floating on the Yellowstone (above the lake) and other magnificent stretches were not uncommon at that time, greater in number were bank and wade fisherman. One broad-brush regulation hit the books and floating was banned. Grand Teton National Park followed suit in 1962, with the exception of the Snake River.

In 2009 the Jackson Hole community celebrated a huge conservation victory. That was the signing into federal law of the Craig Thomas Snake River Headwaters Legacy Act. It protects 400 miles of our watershed as Wild & Scenic. Frank Ewing, Derek Craighead and I introduced this campaign to the valley. It was masterfully guided through congress by Wyoming's U.S. Senators Craig Thomas and then John Barrasso. Following this designation, land management agencies were required to create new comprehensive river management plans that studied **all** appropriate uses in the Wild & Scenic corridors. This duty fell to both the Bridger-Teton National Forest and the National Park Service.

The BTNF studied and included paddling as a use on many miles of pristine wilderness rivers. The NPS did not even study paddling. Instead the

NPS cited the 1950 boating ban, asserting those rules made it impossible to consider paddling. That was a huge disappointment.

When it became clear that no comprehensive study of the river corridors would be done, members of the river running community pointed out this shortcoming to our congressional delegation. Wyoming U.S. Representative Cynthia Lummis had the vision to create legislation to correct this. The current bill, the Yellowstone and Grand Teton Paddling Act, H.R. 974, intends to finally end the 65 year old boating ban and cause the NPS to study and then manage rivers with modern methods and standards.

This legislation is the product of working with the NPS and listening to helpful ideas and concerns from colleagues in the conservation community. The bill authorizes a three year study of paddling that will begin when funding is provided. Following the study, new rules for paddling will be created. Riparian areas will benefit from the study – they already have use from fisherman, hikers and horses – more baseline data about existing impacts from invasive species, social trails and river users will provide information that will allow for better management of river corridors. New commercial use is prohibited by this legislation.

What is the paddlers' vision for river running in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks? It is quite limited. The number "7,500 river miles" is the tally of every tiny spring, rivulet, side-channel, creek and river. It's silly. Less than 10% of the waterways in both parks are feasible and suitable for paddling. With the use of small, paddle-propelled vessels, no new launches or infrastructure are needed. Appropriate river access and trails already exist.

Paddling is allowed in every other National Park that has rivers, and in all designated wilderness areas too. Management of paddling in Yellowstone and Grand Teton should follow similar guidelines; it must meet the legal duty to put resource protection first. Rivers flowing through particularly sensitive or high use areas could still be kept on the banned list. Other more remote or resilient settings should only allow a limited number of permitted launches, require leave no trace practices, and use seasonal

closures to protect wildlife. Some sections of rivers, like the Yellowstone River through the Hayden Valley or the Firehole River through the geyser basins, should not even be studied for paddling access. Packraft.org has a list of rivers recommend for this study.

It's time to create a modern river management plan for Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. Well-managed paddling will allow park visitors more opportunities to get away from the roads and experience the Parks in the quiet, no- or low-impact, self-reliant, traditional way that only running a river can provide. It's time to bring river adventure back to these Parks.

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