

# It's time to protect Montana's best rivers

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By Tim Palmer and Scott Bosse, guest columnists

Battling a long-forgotten dam proposal for the Middle Fork Flathead River along the southern border of Glacier National Park in the 1950s, the renowned wildlife biologists, John and Frank Craighead, conceived the idea for a nationally protected system of rivers.

Little did the rugged twin brothers know that their inspiration along those streambanks would resonate with Congress, with President Lyndon Johnson, and with the nation, or that it would evolve into the world's premier program for safeguarding rivers. But it did.

Starting on those colorfully cobbled shorelines of the Middle Fork, alive with bull trout and grizzly bears, the concept of protected rivers gained clarity through statesmanlike compromise that blossomed into the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act half a century ago. Since then, an initial eight designated rivers has grown to nearly three hundred. Led by Congressman Max Baucus, the three forks of the Flathead were enrolled in 1976, and under Lee Metcalf's leadership in the Senate, 149 miles of Montana's free-flowing Missouri also joined this prestigious group.

Status as a Wild and Scenic River means that no dams will be allowed to block the streams' flows and thereby permanently flood their wild canyons and adjacent farms and ranches. That act also protects a river's clean water and outstanding values such as scenery, wildlife, and recreational activities including fishing, hunting and paddling.

Despite the Craigheads' insight and the Montana delegation's pivotal bipartisan role in the early years, the Big Sky state remains underrepresented in this distinguished program. Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California and Alaska all have far more designated streams than our river-rich state. Even with mythic trout waters, postcard-perfect scenery, and a population that may be more connected to rivers than virtually any other, no rivers here have been added to this special cache of waterways since 1976. In the meantime Wyoming, Idaho and Utah, not to mention New Jersey, Mississippi and 35 states in all—plus territorial Puerto Rico—have all seen rivers included.

As the 50th anniversary of this landmark program approaches, it's a good time to reflect on Montana's rivers, on the heritage of protection that began here, and on the opportunities that remain.

A broad coalition of local conservation organizations, recreation groups, businesses, and riverside landowners operating as Montanans for Healthy Rivers is proposing Wild and Scenic status for 600 river miles—an exquisite suite of lifelines including the public lands portions of the Gallatin, Madison, Yellowstone, Smith and Dearborn. Dams, such as once proposed at Allenspur on the Yellowstone and Spanish Creek on the Gallatin, would forever be banned. Montana’s world-class trout fisheries, wildlife, scenery, and recreational economy would gain an insurance policy safeguarding them from uncontrolled mining, oil and gas drilling, and other harmful activities that would rob them of their special character and pollute their pristine waters.

Not surprisingly, recent polls show that 75 percent of Montanans support using the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to protect the state’s rivers, and two-thirds of the state’s residents want to see more rivers designated under the act. Montanans know that healthy rivers mean great fishing, hunting, and a thriving outdoor recreation economy.

As we welcome the 50th anniversary of the world’s most effective program for protecting rivers, let’s celebrate the best of Montana’s heritage by honoring the vision of the Craighead brothers, by appreciating the foresight of our statesmen who courageously set aside the Flathead and Missouri, and by welcoming a future when the finest of our rivers will continue to flow wild and free for all the generations to come.

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