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Work still left for Wild and Scenic rivers

by Tim Palmer and Len Carlman 4 hrs ago

Jackson Hole is gifted with some of the finest rivers in the Rocky Mountains, if not all of America. An icon of Western scenery, the Snake River is a brilliant ribbon of blue water and cottonwood-scented shorelines, a winding passage teeming with wildlife and a recreational gem. From Grand Teton National Park through the canyon to Alpine, this river receives some of the most intensive use by paddlers and anglers in the United States. Meanwhile the Hoback, Gros Ventre, Buffalo Fork and others flow as stellar tributaries.

These cherished streams were honored in 2009 when the Snake River Headwaters, including the main stem and 14 tributaries, were inducted by Congress as National Wild and Scenic Rivers.

That premier program for river protection began with President Lyndon Johnson's signature in 1968. Its upcoming 50th anniversary invites reflection on what has been accomplished and also on what remains to be done. Enrollment in this system spares designated rivers from unwanted dams and other federal projects that might cause harm, and it protects the streams for fishing, recreation, habitat and other values.

Though most Wild and Scenic designations are limited to narrow and discrete corridors, the Snake Headwaters was conceived with an awareness that a regional network of streams is crucial to health of the larger flow. Few places in America have such a stunning web of waterways thriving from the heights of the Rockies. And few other Wild and Scenic designations recognize the dependence that the larger rivers have on the tributaries above them. Inclusion here of the larger network recognizes the migration needs of native fish, the importance of clean water from raindrop to roaring rapid, and the reliance of people downstream on the biological integrity of all that lies above in one big cycle of life.

After 41 years of a National Wild and Scenic program and only one Wyoming river being included — the Clark's Fork in 1990 — Congress passed the Snake River Headwaters Legacy Act. Some have asked, "How did the Snake River Headwaters become protected as Wild and Scenic in a state where the congressional delegation's cumulative favorable voting record at that time was rated by the League of Conservation Voters at 5 percent?"

Growing up on a Wyoming guest ranch near Yellowstone National Park, U.S. Sen. Craig Thomas had the foresight to realize the importance of these streams. To him and others the Snake and its tributaries offered a lucid example of how our waterways directly relate to the local economy and also to the health of people who live nearby, plus those who come here from all over the world to immerse themselves in nature. In tribute to the late Sen. Thomas, and seeing the merits of the bill he had crafted, the 2008-09 Wyoming delegation of Sens. John Barrasso and Mike Enzi, with Congresswoman Barbara Cubin, were inspired to take the Wild and Scenic River plunge here in Jackson Hole. We are grateful for their leadership on behalf of the Snake River watershed and all who depend on it.

The hopeful lesson in this narrative is that, even in divisive times, our great expanses of public land and our lifelines of rivers — owned by every citizen — are indispensable and irreplaceable natural features. Good stewardship offers advantages to everyone.

In 2018 the Wild and Scenic program will celebrate its golden anniversary. Dozens of rivers across the West and in Wyoming still deserve protection from damming, from desiccating withdrawals, from the ravages of fracking and poorly regulated fossil fuel development and from other threats that have rendered all but 2 percent of the nation's waterways unfit for this prestigious initiative, according to the Nationwide Rivers Inventory by the National Park Service.

Thinking of that 2 percent, we have often reflected on what local and beloved wildlife biologist Frank Craighead told us years ago: "I came to Jackson Hole because of the mountains, but I stayed because of the rivers."

Those who have protected these magnificent waters have earned our thanks, and those who are willing to carry on with opportunities for further protection deserve the support of everyone who fishes, paddles, hikes or simply stands in wonder in at the edge of these great rivers.

Tim Palmer is the author of "Wild and Scenic Rivers: An American Legacy," "The Snake River: Window to the West" and other books. Len Carlman is the executive director of the Snake River Fund.