

FORTY YEARS downstream for the
National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

1968 1969 1970 1971 1972 1973 1974 1975 1976 1977 **1978** 1979 1980 1981 1982 1983 1984 1985 1986 1987 **1988** 1989 1990 1991 1992 1993

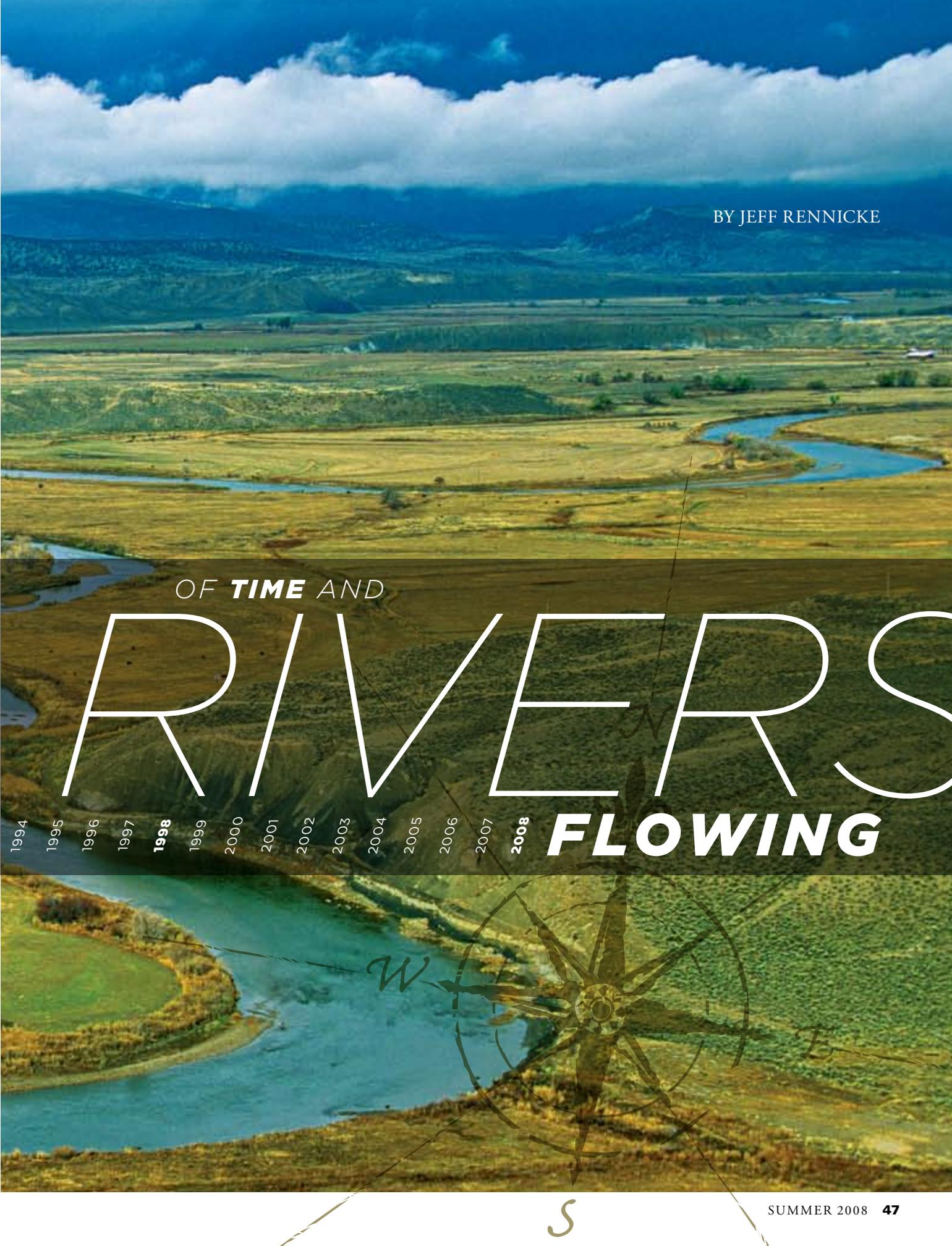
BY JEFF RENNICKE

OF **TIME** AND

RIVERS

FLOWING

1994
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2006
2007
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TUCKED IN THE NORTHWEST CORNER

of Colorado amid the canyons and cougar tracks of Dinosaur National Monument, the Yampa River winds like a coiled snake. In spots it rumbles through rapids with names like Warm Springs that make rafting the Yampa feel like being shot out of a water cannon. In other places, such as Serpentine Bends, its path loops lazily through seven miles of graceful turns to cover just two miles as the raven flies, slowing the pace to the speed of a cloud shadow, a spectacular but contemplative ride. That combination—long stretches of quiet drifting punctuated by bursts of sheer excitement—makes the Yampa one of the premier whitewater rivers in our national parks, and the perfect metaphor for the up-and-down history of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System (NWSRS), which will celebrate its 40th anniversary in October. As one of the nation’s wildest but unprotected rivers, the Yampa may also be the perfect symbol for what the system still needs to accomplish.

Rivers flow through the heart of America and Americans. They have been the pathways of explorers, the conduits of commerce, and the muse of poets and painters. They have lit the lights and turned the turbines of a nation straining at its seams to grow. “America is a great story, and there is a river on every page



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YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK’S plan to protect the Merced River has been repeatedly overturned by the courts, despite the park’s vigorous efforts.

of it,” Charles Kuralt once famously said. Less famously, he continued, “Let’s remember that, and dedicate ourselves to the great work of restoring these rivers to health.” That part would take a little longer.

It wasn’t until the mid-1950s that any real thought was given to systematically preserving some of this nation’s 3.5 million miles of rivers. A proposal for a dam at Echo Park, near the confluence of the Yampa and Green Rivers



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A WOMAN GUIDES a raft through the Rio Grande, in Big Bend National Park, Texas.

in Dinosaur National Monument, had raised the ire of a public that believed that at the very least, rivers within national parks and monuments should be safe. The outcry shouted down the proposed dam and raised the issue of river protection in the public eye. Sections of the Tuolumne River in Yosemite National Park had already been lost to the O’Shaughnessy Dam in Hetch Hetchy Valley. Glen Canyon would soon become “the place no one knew” when the dam planned for Echo Park was moved downstream on the Colorado River, drowning a beautiful but little-known canyon. Scores of other less publicized rivers all across the country were being stilled by dams, polluted by industry, channeled for flood control, or tapped out for irrigation. Rivers, it seemed, were becoming an endangered species. Something needed to be done. On October 2, 1968, something was.

“The Congress declares that the established national policy of dam and other construction... needs to be complemented by a policy that would preserve... selected rivers in their free-flowing condition,” reads the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act signed by Presi-

dent Lyndon Johnson that day.” At its outset the NWSRS included 789 miles of eight rivers—the Middle Forks of both the Clearwater and the Salmon in Idaho, the Eleven Point in Missouri, the Feather in California, the Rogue in Oregon, the Rio Grande in New Mexico, and both the St. Croix and the Wolf in Wisconsin—and named 27 other rivers to be studied for potential inclusion. Perhaps even more important, the legislation did for wild rivers what the Wilderness Act had done for wild landscapes: It established a formal system to ensure that valuable natural resources would be preserved and protected “for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.”

“The act fits neatly with the mission of the National Park Service,” says Sue Jennings, formerly the Wild and Scenic Rivers coordinator for the Midwest Region (now with Mount Rainier National Park). “It creates an additional layer of protection for rivers—another tool in the toolbox.” With that toolbox the act designates rivers, or stretches of rivers, as “wild,” “scenic,” or “recreational,” depending on the level of existing impoundments and

shoreline development. It protects designated rivers from federally licensed dams and diversions, limits development in a quarter-mile-wide riparian zone on those rivers flowing across public lands, and calls on the managing agency to preserve the rivers’ “outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural or other similar values.” Rivers can be proposed for inclusion in the system by citizen groups working through a member of Congress, by federal agencies, or by state governments petitioning the Secretary of Interior.

Like river runners dreaming of white-water, passage of the act came with big visions—100 protected rivers in the first decade, double that by 1990, and eventually a blue web of protected rivers stringing the nation together from coast to coast like watery ribbons. But it hasn’t worked out that way. Like the meanders of the Yampa, the system has at times surged forward and at other times seemed to move two steps sideways for every step ahead. In its first four years, not a single river was added. The tenth anniversary came and went with only

THE GIFT THAT Keeps On Giving

DAVID MORYC of American Rivers has a vision: a gift for the National Wild and Scenic Rivers all wrapped up in blue ribbons, 40 of them to be exact. “The goal of our ‘40 by 40’ initiative is to see 40 new rivers added to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System by its 40th anniversary.” Only four of the 40 rivers have been secured so far, which Moryc admits isn’t terribly impressive. But there are now 16 bills involving more than 100 rivers before Congress. One of those, the Snake Headwaters Legacy Act, could yield the largest addition to the system in 15 years. The bill, introduced by Wyoming’s Sen. Craig Thomas shortly before his death, would protect 21 segments including rivers in both Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. Others would protect the Perquimans River in North Carolina, an ecological wonder complete with bald eagles and blue crabs; the Pratt, a popular paddling river in Washington; and the Eightmile in Connecticut, among others. Moryc is urging people to write their congressional representatives to support the passage of these important bills. “Wild and Scenic Rivers are the gifts that keep on giving,” he says. “A little bit of work right now will result in endless enjoyment for millions of Americans, for generations to come.” To lend a hand, visit www.AmericanRivers.org.



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16 new rivers. Then, as if rushing through a rapid, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act added 26 rivers, nearly doubling the mileage with one stroke of the pen. Oregon added 40 rivers in 1988, and Michigan, another 14 in 1992. In between, the system seemed to drift on long stretches of quiet inaction.

To date there are 168 rivers in the system, flowing for 11,409 miles, including some of the “crown jewels” of American rivers—sections of the Missouri traveled by Lewis and Clark, the Chattooga of South Carolina and Georgia made famous by the movie *Deliverance*, and the Allagash Wilderness Waterway in Maine, among others. (To see a complete list, including Wild and Scenic Rivers in your area, visit www.rivers.gov.)

For its part, the National Park Service (NPS) oversees 37 Wild and Scenic Rivers flowing for more than 2,800 miles. These too include “crown jewel” rivers— from the grizzly stitched horizons of Alaska’s Noatak to the Delaware, the longest free-flowing river east of the Mississippi, from John Muir’s beloved Tuolumne in Yosemite to the Great Egg Harbor in New Jersey. Twenty-eight of the rivers managed by NPS are units of the National Park System. Nine, including the Delaware, are “partnership” rivers managed cooperatively with state and local authorities. Another 19 rivers designated under Section 2(a)(ii) of the act are managed by the states, although the Park Service retains a complex set of review responsibilities.

The varied designations and management categories have led to a diverse system of protected rivers but have not been without their problems. Citing “failure to meet legal mandates,” “inconsistency in management,” and “absence of centralized leadership and staff training” among other issues, a recent report by the Park Service’s Wild and Scenic Rivers Task Force gave the agency grades ranging from B+ to a series of Fs for the handling of its responsibilities under the National Wild and Scenic River Act. “The credibility of the Park Service’s management role is threatened,” the report stated, “as are the nation’s



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WILD & SCENIC rivers preserve resources for paddlers and wildlife, like this newt in Tennessee’s Obed River.



ARKANSAS' BUFFALO NATIONAL RIVER isn't a Wild and Scenic River, but its management set a precedent for many rivers that are.

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NPCA in Action

LIKE THE TANGLE OF CURRENTS seething through a rocky rapid, the regulations of the Wild Rivers Act can be a Byzantine maze, which may help explain how an NPCA battle to stop a dam on a tributary of a river *not* designated as a wild river came to help protect rivers in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

The Buffalo River in Arkansas became America's first National River in 1972. Although not a part of the system, the Buffalo is managed by the National Park Service and protected under language very similar to Section 7 of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, language requiring that developments upstream or downstream from the protected river not "unreasonably diminish" the river's values. When Searcy County in Arkansas proposed damming Bear Creek, a tributary of the Buffalo River some 20 miles outside of the park, that language was put to the test.

"The big question," says Don Barger, NPCA's southeast regional director, "was who should be allowed to decide if a project 'diminishes' the river: the people responsible for permitting the dam, in this case the Army Corps of Engineers, or the National Park Service, who is responsible for protecting the river?" Combining forces with groups as diverse as the Ozark Society, the Sierra Club, American Rivers, and others, NPCA filed a lawsuit that eventually led authorities to revoke the permit for the Bear Creek Dam. Perhaps more important, the decision set an important legal precedent that provides watershed-wide protection of national wild and scenic rivers extending beyond national park boundaries.

Rivers are fluid, elusive, and unpredictable. Sometimes, so are river battles. "We wanted to stop a dam," says Barger, "but by helping the National Park Service fight this dam, NPCA helped reshape Section 7 of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, ultimately giving federal agencies more control over development that could influence the rivers they protect both inside the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, and beyond."

heritage river resources with which the Park Service is entrusted." For evidence, the task force pointed to costly litigation on the Merced River in Yosemite and the Park Service's failure to address use capacity issues. It cited resource damage from tributary dams on the Obed and permitting issues involving a gravel mine on the Eel River. Each year since 1996, American Rivers' annual list of "Most Endangered Rivers" has included at least two rivers managed in part or in whole by the Park Service. That troubling reality led the report's authors to conclude, "As the 40th anniversary of the Act approaches, it has become clear that...the Park Service management approach is in need of a tune-up."

A key step in that potential tune-up may happen soon. In May 2007, the Park Service National Leadership Council announced the creation of a new service-wide Wild and Scenic Rivers Program and a steering committee to investigate funding sources for a national coordinator. The program would consolidate management, facilitate employee training, oversee outreach programs, and establish a management home for the rivers program within the Park Service. The effort is "a real bright spot," according to Joan Harns, a member of the task force that recommended the program. "I see this as a renewed commitment on the part of the Park Service to say yes, indeed, Wild and Scenic Rivers are important, and we are going to take steps to improve the coordination and consistency of the way we manage our responsibilities to these rivers."

Beyond the funding initiatives and the acronyms, beyond the politics and the numbers, there is still the simple beauty of the rivers themselves. "Humans have always had a fascination with flowing water," says Cassie Thomas, a planner in the Park Service regional office in Alaska. "They focus something in us in a way that even beautiful mountains can't. Linear and sinuous, they are metaphors for life and the passage of time." **NP**

Jeff Rennie is a former whitewater river guide who now teaches literature at Conserve School in Wisconsin's North Woods.