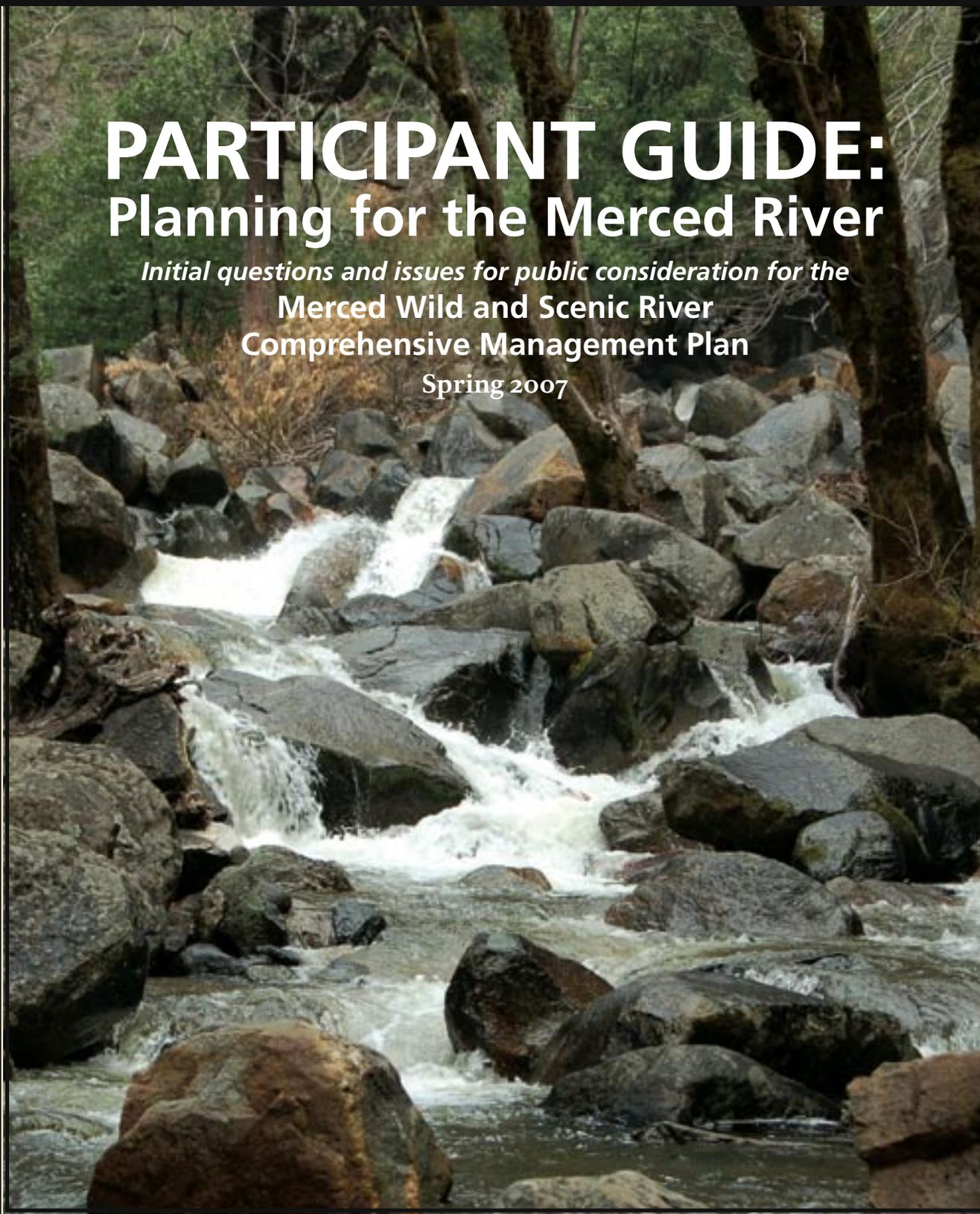




## **PARTICIPANT GUIDE: Planning for the Merced River**

*Initial questions and issues for public consideration for the  
Merced Wild and Scenic River  
Comprehensive Management Plan*

Spring 2007





## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MERCED RIVER



In 1987, the U.S. Congress designated the Merced River—from the headwaters in the Yosemite Wilderness to the impoundment at Lake McClure—as a Wild and Scenic River. A Wild and Scenic River is one that has been identified as having what the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act calls “outstandingly remarkable values” that set it apart from all other rivers in the nation. The National Park Service manages 81 miles of the Merced River, encompassing both the main stem and the South Fork. This designation, as well as the fact that 75% of the river exists in designated Wilderness, gives the Merced River special protection and requires the managing agencies to prepare a comprehensive management plan for the river and its immediate environment.

***The National Park Service is asking for your input in its planning efforts. Share your passion for the place by helping to shape its future.***

### HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

On the pages that follow you will find background information on some of the issues and concerns that may be addressed in the new Merced River Plan, presented in a question-and-answer format. Many of these questions do not have answers—they are for you to “fill in the blanks” with your ideas, impressions, concerns and knowledge. This is the beginning of the process, and this document is meant as an informational resource and an instrument to provoke thought and discussion. Feel free to use it as a workbook, jotting down thoughts to the questions posed. Once you’ve considered the issues, share your thoughts with us at public meetings or by sending them to us. Don’t be limited by space—attach additional pages as necessary. Your comments and ideas will help us to understand your thoughts and incorporate them into the planning effort.

*The document is organized into the following sections:*

1. Schedule of Meetings
2. Merced River Planning Basics
3. Merced River Environment
4. How can I get involved?
5. Visitor Use



# SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS

## CALENDAR OF PUBLIC SCOPING EVENTS FOR THE MERCED RIVER PLAN.

For information on this and other planning efforts in Yosemite National Park, go to [www.nps.gov/yose/planning](http://www.nps.gov/yose/planning).

### APRIL

S	M	T	W	TH	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30					

**Wednesday, April 25**  
**Open House, 1-5 pm**  
 Auditorium  
 Yosemite Valley  
 Visitor Center

### MAY

**Tuesday, May 16**  
**Mariposa, 4-8 pm**  
 Masonic Hall  
 5154 Jones Street

S	M	T	W	TH	F	S
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

**Wednesday, May 30**  
**Open House, 1-5 pm**  
 Auditorium  
 Yosemite Valley  
 Visitor Center

**Thursday, May 17**  
**San Francisco, 4-8 pm**  
 Fort Mason, 1st Floor-  
 Conf Room, Building 201  
 (Bay & Franklin Streets)

## MERCED RIVER PLANNING BASICS

### WHY PLAN FOR THE MERCED RIVER?

Without planning, the future of this exceptional river is left to reactive, piecemeal management measures to respond to the growing pressures and effects of human activity. A plan is an opportunity to develop and implement a vision for the future of the Merced River that integrates protection of river values with the appropriate management of visitor and park activities.

The plan will be a comprehensive management plan for the Merced Wild and Scenic River, as required under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA). Alternatives and the ultimate decisions for the plan will be analyzed in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that evaluates the benefits and drawbacks of different management approaches, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act and National Historic Preservation Act.



# MERCED RIVER PLANNING BASICS

## ISN'T THERE ALREADY A MERCED RIVER PLAN?

The National Park Service completed the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan/ Environmental Impact Statement* in August, 2000. After the Record of Decision was signed in August 2000, the Merced River Plan entered a lengthy litigation process. The Merced River Plan was upheld in U.S. District Court with the exception that language be added to specifically indicate how the plan amends the park's General Management Plan. However, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit further ruled that the Merced River Plan was deficient on two grounds: 1. A failure to adequately address user capacities, and 2. The improper drawing of the Merced River's boundary in El Portal.

The park believed that the deficiencies were corrected in a revised *Merced River Plan/ Environmental Impact Statement* that was released in 2005. The park was challenged by two local citizens groups, and the U.S. District Court declared the revised plan invalid in 2006. The court mandated the park to complete a new Merced River Plan. This new planning process will take approximately 33 months, with a final Record of Decision anticipated in September 2009.

Public scoping was held for both the 2000 Merced River Plan and the 2005 Revised Merced River Plan. *If you have submitted scoping comments for the two previous planning efforts, your comments will be incorporated into this latest process. However, if your thoughts have changed, new issues have arisen, you didn't comment before or you simply want to reiterate your thoughts, the National Park Service welcomes your comments into this planning effort.*

## WHAT KIND OF SCOPING COMMENTS ARE MOST USEFUL?

Through our previous Merced River Plan efforts, the NPS has progressed in our understanding of the public's concerns as well as our scientific knowledge of the natural and cultural resources along the river

corridor. The public involvement process in the two previous planning efforts have been analyzed and incorporated into the planning decisions. Many of the comments gleaned from previous efforts are summarized throughout this document. Public concerns about the level of development, the use of science in decision-making, Merced River boundaries, river classifications, Outstandingly Remarkable Values, management zones, and user capacity have informed the park staff's understanding. If you'd like more information on previous scoping comments, summaries and reports are available for review on our website at [www.nps.gov/archive/yose/planning/mrp/revision/scoping/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/archive/yose/planning/mrp/revision/scoping/index.htm).

While the National Park Service hasn't forgotten your previous comments, the park welcomes all ideas and concerns regarding this planning effort. In particular, consider the following:

• *What do you love about the Merced River and the Yosemite Valley?*

---



---

• *What types of experiences do you value along the river?*

---



---

• *What kind of natural environment do you want to see? What kind of social environment? How would you like to see the culture and history of Yosemite preserved and shared?*

---



---

• *What kinds of services or facilities would you like to see offered, improved or removed?*

---



---



# MERCED RIVER PLANNING BASICS

## WHAT IS A WILD AND SCENIC RIVER?

During the 1960s, the citizens of the United States recognized a need to protect entire river systems and their immediate environments from degradation caused by industrial and municipal pollution, pesticides, dams, dikes and diversions. In October 1968, Congress created the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA). The designation of a river as Wild and Scenic is intended to preserve its free flowing, unique and exceptional characteristics, while allowing for uses that are compatible with the management goals of the river condition its. There are 3 primary purposes to the WSRA:

1. To protect rivers in their free-flowing condition
2. To protect and enhance a river’s unique values for the benefit of future generations
3. To protect water quality

## WHAT IS A COMPREHENSIVE MANAGEMENT PLAN?

One of the stipulations of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is that a management plan must be developed for each river in the system. The WSRA states that a management plan must establish the following, all of which will be a part of the Merced River Plan:

- **Classifications** for segments of a river which describe the level of development along the river at the time of designation;
- **Boundaries** establishing the area to be managed;

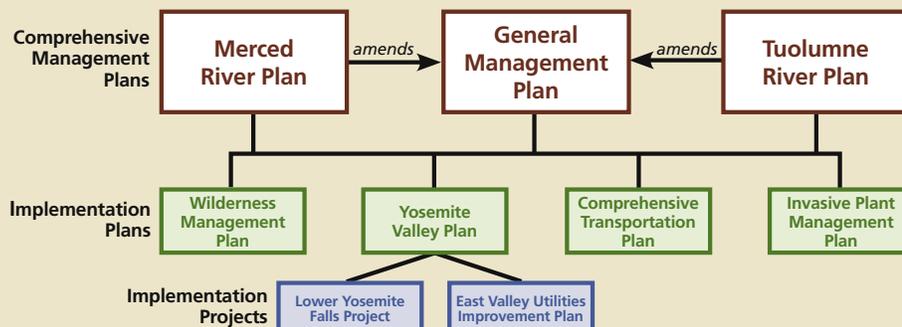
- **Outstandingly Remarkable Values** (defined as the river-related characteristics that are rare, unique, or exemplary in a regional or national context) to be protected and enhanced;
- Protection of the *free-flowing character* of the river; and,
- A **User-Capacity Management Program** that ensures protection of river values while allowing use and enjoyment.

We will be defining new classifications, boundaries, user-capacity management strategies and management zones for this new Merced River Plan.

## HOW IS THE MERCED RIVER PLAN RELATED TO OTHER PLANS IN YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK?

The Merced River Plan amends the General Management Plan. The purpose of a general management plan is to set a “clearly defined direction for resource preservation and visitor use” and provide general directions and policies to guide planning and management in the park. Implementation plans (like the Yosemite Valley Plan) tier off programmatic plans (like the Merced River Plan) and focus on “how to implement an activity or project needed to achieve a long-term goal.” Implementation plans may direct specific projects as well as ongoing management activities or programs. These plans provide a more extensive level of detail and analysis than do general management plans. Once the Merced River Plan is approved, it will provide a framework for upcoming implementation plans such as the Comprehensive Transportation Plan.

Merced River Plan’s Relationship to other plans in the park





## MERCED RIVER PLANNING BASICS

### HOW DOES THE MERCED RIVER RELATE TO THE REST OF THE PARK?

The National Park Service has the privilege of managing 81 miles of the Merced River, which includes the main stem and the South Fork, as it travels through Yosemite National Park and the El Portal Administrative Site. Seventy-five percent of the Merced River is located in designated Wilderness. The South Fork drains approximately 76,000 acres while the Main Stem drains approximately 250,000 acres within the park boundaries.

The headwaters of the South Fork originate at Triple Peak Divide at an elevation of 10,500ft and then flows westward through Wawona, a community that contains the National Historic Landmark Wawona Hotel Complex. The South Fork has a total length of 43 miles from its headwaters to its confluence with the Merced River several miles downstream from the western park boundary. It accounts for the greatest number of miles of Wild and Scenic River within the park's boundaries.

Within the Main Stem of the Merced River, the portion that meanders through Yosemite Valley presents one of the most prominent example of the need to strike a balance between access to the river and protection of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values. Yosemite Valley is the centerpiece and often the only place people visit when making a pilgrimage to Yosemite National Park. This World Heritage Site within the Merced River corridor lures millions of people from around the globe to see the striking granite big walls and waterfalls each year.

When the Merced River was designated in 1987, the rich cultural and natural history of the park and Yosemite Valley was embedded in the reasons for why the river was worthy of special protection. Camping in Yosemite Valley next to the Merced River and the opportunities for solitude and contemplation in meadows are all considered to be outstanding and remarkable values of the Merced River. It is this great variety and abundance of these types of opportunities in Yosemite Valley that make striking a

balance between use and resource protection particularly challenging in a river management plan.

### WHAT IS AN OUTSTANDINGLY REMARKABLE VALUE?

Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORVs) is a term that comes from the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to describe why a river stands apart from other rivers in the country. These values are what drive the process for designating a Wild and Scenic River, and serve as the foundation for the entire management plan. ORVs are the superlative qualities—recreational, biological, cultural, scenic, hydrologic, geologic, scientific—that will be protected for the benefit of present and future generations. Along with possessing a free-flowing character, a waterway need only contain one such river-related value to be eligible for Wild and Scenic River designation.

### HOW IS AN OUTSTANDINGLY REMARKABLE VALUE DEFINED?

The current guidance for ORVs states that in order for a resource or experience to be considered an ORV, it must pass a two-pronged test:

1. Is the value river-related or river-dependent? (i.e. does it owe its existence to the river?); and,
2. Is the value rare, unique, or exemplary in a regional or national context?

In order to be considered an ORV, a value **MUST** satisfy both questions.

Data collected from previous Merced River planning efforts will be reviewed in defining ORVs. The National Park Service will then consult with government experts in geology, biology, hydrology, archeology, landscape architecture, and outdoor recreation to identify what, in their best professional judgement, is unique or exemplary about the river. Indian tribes will also be consulted in this process.

In the previous Merced River Plans, the public had diverse viewpoints on what meets the Outstandingly Remarkable Value criteria. The focus of public comment revolved around: 1. What should be included as an Outstandingly Remarkable Value?, and 2. How complete were the Outstandingly



# MERCED RIVER PLANNING BASICS

Remarkable Value descriptions? Some felt that better protection of biologic, scientific, hydrologic and geologic values was needed. Others advocated for the inclusion of more protected wildlife, rock climbing for recreation, historic structures, and an expansion of boundaries for specific places such as El Portal. People also wanted us to consider the importance of upstream tributaries to make sure those were also protected. While these comments continue to inform our planning, we are reopening and redefining the Outstandingly Remarkable Values.

*• What characteristics of the river—scientific, scenic, geological, recreation, biological, cultural, and hydrologic processes—are important to you?*

---



---

*• Are there other river-related values that you'd like to include? Tell us why.*

---



---

## WHAT ROLE DO INDIAN TRIBES HAVE IN THE PLANNING PROCESS?

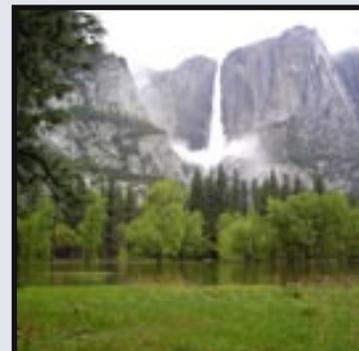
Indian people have inhabited lands now encompassed by Yosemite National Park for thousands of years. The foundations of their

cultural heritage are grounded in park resources. On-going cultural traditional practices and religious ceremonies perpetuate traditional knowledge about resource uses and management. Plan management and use strategies can be informed by American Indian participation in the planning process.

## WHAT ROLE DO GATEWAY COMMUNITIES HAVE IN THE PLANNING PROCESS?

Gateway Communities are those communities that surround the park and serve as entryways for visitors. Tourism is an important driver in these communities' economies. As a result, they have a vested interest in how the park is managed. Likewise, the park is dependent on these communities to serve park-bound visitors and enhance their experience. Together the park and its neighbors must address trans-boundary issues such as transportation, fire management and invasive species management.

While it is the National Park Service's responsibility to address and incorporate to the extent possible all public concerns in a planning process, it recognizes the special relationship that exists between a park and its immediate neighbors. Because our actions affect the Gateway communities, the Merced River Plan will include a socioeconomic analysis of the impacts of its alternatives on these communities. Our ongoing meetings with Gateway partners are helping to refine our research questions and provide us with data for analysis.





# MERCED RIVER PLANNING BASICS

## WHAT IS USER CAPACITY?

User capacity has been one of the primary issues in the litigation process for the Merced River Plan. For the previous Merced River Plan the National Park Service presented a user capacity program comprised of a variety of management methods, including facility limits, wilderness quotas, and the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection framework, an adaptive management strategy that seeks to manage human activities based on the impacts these activities are observed to cause.

However, in the ruling on the 2005 revised Merced River Plan, the US District Court ruled that the park needed to present a maximum number of people allowed in the river corridor (especially Yosemite Valley). In this planning process we will be analyzing and evaluating a variety of management methods for user capacity, including day-use and overnight quotas (and their various implementation methods, such as reservation systems), as well as the types of adaptive management strategies commonly employed in the National Park Service, the US Forest Service, and along other Wild and Scenic Rivers. All of these methods will be weighed against the quality of the visitor experience they provide while guaranteeing protection of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the river.

In order to determine how effective any given user capacity management method will be at achieving this goal, it helps to know precisely what kind of resource conditions and visitor opportunities are desired along the river. Throughout the planning process, questions such as the following are considered in defining the management vision for a river:

- What level of protection do natural and cultural features and processes require? How sensitive are they to the effects of human activity? What areas are in need of restoration?
- What kind of visitor experience should an area provide? Is it more suited to a solitary experience, or would it be acceptable to encounter many other visitors in this environment?

- Are facilities such as stores, lodges, and/or campgrounds needed for the area? Do facilities currently exist that should be removed?

Taken as a whole, the answers to these questions will then be used to guide decisions related to visitor activities, location of facilities, and other capacity-related issues.

In terms of public scoping, the subject of user capacity had many comments for the Revised Merced River Plan in 2005. Many felt that the National Park Service should provide greater specificity about condition standards, monitoring plans, management actions, and which resources are threatened by visitor use. Some wanted a more comprehensive range of indicators. Some advocated limits or quotas on use of facilities, day use, and annual park use. More specifically other comments have advocated the implementation of a day-use reservation system. We have not forgotten your previous comments; they will be used to inform our planning process and are available on our website at [www.nps.gov/archive/yose/planning/mrp/revision/scoping/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/archive/yose/planning/mrp/revision/scoping/index.htm).

Our goals are to provide fair and equal access to all while still protecting the natural and cultural features. As a first step toward defining and managing user capacity for the Merced River Plan, please consider the following:

*• What kind of environmental conditions and recreational activities you would like to see for various areas along the Merced River?*

*• How might various methods for managing human use help achieve these conditions?*

*• Of the management methods you may be familiar with, how do they fare in providing equal opportunities for visitors of various economic, social and ethnic backgrounds?*



# MERCED RIVER ENVIRONMENT

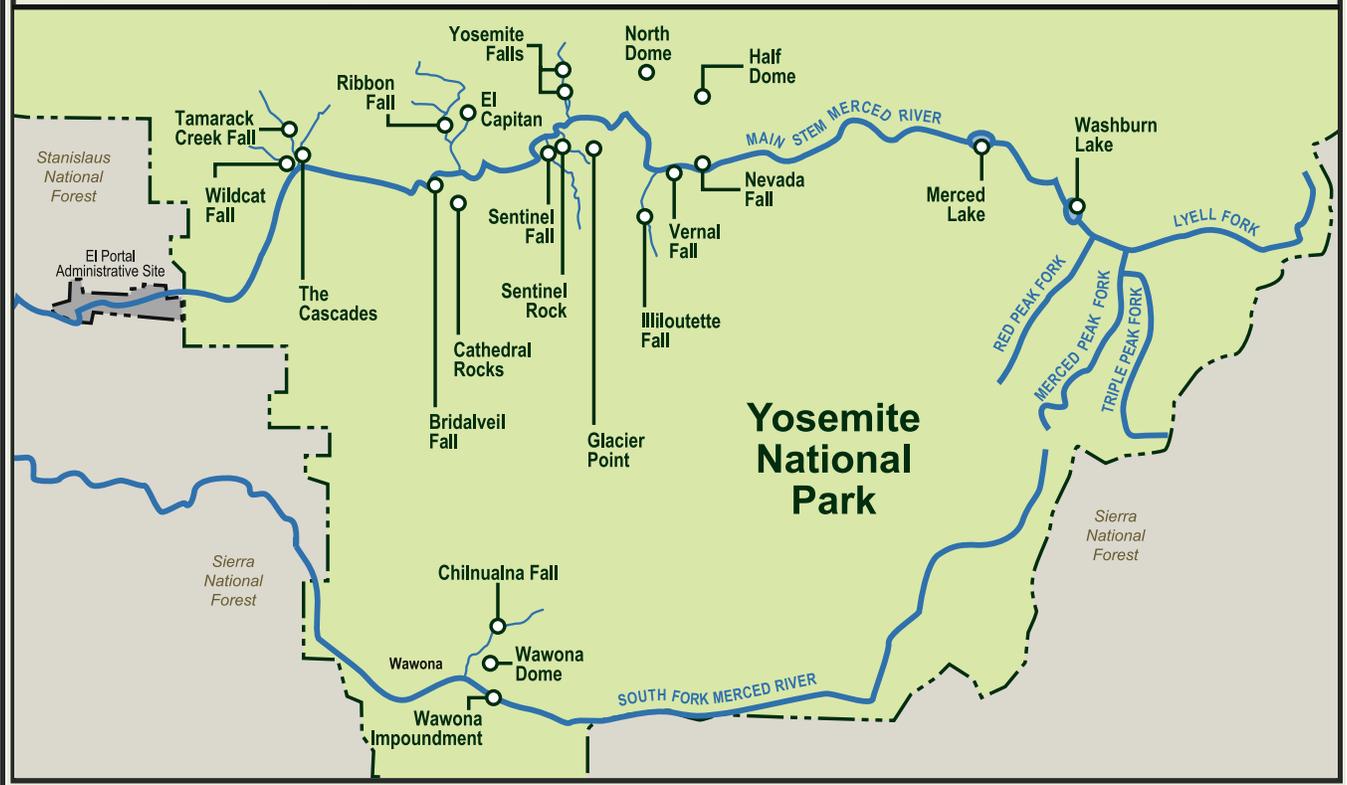
## WHAT IS RARE OR EXEMPLARY ABOUT THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT ALONG THE MERCED RIVER?

Countless extraordinary river values exist along the main stem and South Fork of the Merced River. From the headwaters to El Portal and Wawona, the Merced River is free-flowing and has excellent water quality. Features range from an active flood regime and world renowned water falls to unique wetlands and oxbows traversing a 10,000 foot elevation change that contains steep gradients, cascades, and seasonal rapids. The high quality and large extent of riparian, wetland and other riverine areas provide rich habitat for a diversity of river-related and special-status species.



## WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT ALONG THE MERCED RIVER?

The Merced River contains evidence of thousands of years of human occupation which are reflected in a large number of archeological sites, including the oldest known site in the Yosemite area, as well as portions of prehistoric trans-Sierra routes. In addition, many historic features such as homesteads, the High Sierra Camp site, nationally signification historic landscapes, circulation systems, and buildings are a part of the Merced River's cultural landscape.





## HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?

### WHY IS COMMENTING IMPORTANT?

Although park planners and resource managers often have very specialized knowledge of an area, it would be impossible for them to know all the issues of importance to the hundreds of thousands of visitors to that area—this information needs to come from the visitors themselves. Park plans are more thorough because of the members of the public who have chosen to participate in them...

*One comment CAN make a difference!*

### WHAT IS MY ROLE IN THE PLANNING PROCESS?

Public comments are sought for major planning efforts to help identify the range of issues that should be addressed. Public scrutiny of proposed actions helps to ensure that actions are consistent with the National Park Service mission, enabling legislation, and other relevant laws and policies.

Each planning process provides at least two formal opportunities for the public to become involved, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act and National Historic Preservation Act. First, when a planning effort is announced, public scoping takes place. At that time, the public is asked to raise issues and concerns to help park staff identify issues to be addressed. The questions and issues presented in this document serve only as a starting point; feel free to add your own.

Once a draft document is released, the public is provided the opportunity to examine sets of proposals (known as “alternatives”) and submit comments.

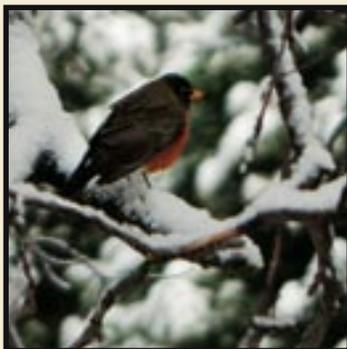
The comments are then analyzed and often contribute to revisions in the final plan.

At Yosemite, the National Park Service is also working to provide more opportunities for engagement throughout the planning process through public meetings, the Internet, and monthly public Open Houses. For the Merced River Plan, there will be a series of hands-on workshops after public scoping (when the planning team is working to develop plan alternatives), where the public will be asked to become “park planners for a day.” This opportunity has been developed in response to the public’s desire to participate more during this stage of plan development.

### WHEN IS PUBLIC SCOPING FOR THE MERCED RIVER PLANS?

The public scoping period for a new *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (MRP/EIS)* began formally on April 11, 2007, the date the Notice of Intent was published in the Federal Register. It will run 60 days until June 9, 2007.

In addition to Public Open Houses on March 30, April 25, and May 30, 2007 in Yosemite Valley, the National Park Service will be holding Public Scoping Meetings in Mariposa, California on May 16 and San Francisco on May 17. For information on this and other planning efforts in Yosemite National Park, go to [www.nps.gov/yose/planning](http://www.nps.gov/yose/planning).





## HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?

### WHAT HAPPENS TO MY SCOPING COMMENT ONCE I SUBMIT IT?

Public comments made during scoping directly inform the draft plan. Park staff are continually reviewing your comments as they work to define the scope of what the plan will cover and develop alternatives to address the issues. Overviews of comments are often a formal part of planning meetings; at times comments are even posted during alternative development meetings, so that the public concerns are a constant presence and an active part of the discussion.

As a formal part of the planning process, National Park Service staff reads and analyzes all comments submitted. A scoping report will be developed to summarize key issues and concerns. This will be posted on the park's website. Comment reports from the previous plans are posted at: [www.nps.gov/archive/yose/planning/mrp/revision/scoping/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/archive/yose/planning/mrp/revision/scoping/index.htm)

### WILL I GET TO SEE OTHER PEOPLE'S COMMENTS?

The park encourages all those who are interested and able to attend one of our public meetings and participate in discussions with other members of the public. Additionally, all comment letters received will be published on the park's website.

### HOW CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

For more information on park plans and how you can stay involved, visit the park's website at [www.nps.gov/yose/planning](http://www.nps.gov/yose/planning). You can also subscribe to the Planning Update newsletter and/or the electronic newsletter by signing up on the website or contacting us by any of the methods listed below .

### HOW DO I SUBMIT COMMENTS?

You can submit comments by the following means:

- In person at Open Houses and public meetings
- By email to [yose\\_planning@nps.gov](mailto:yose_planning@nps.gov)
- By fax to (209)379-1294
- By mail to:

**Superintendent**  
Yosemite National Park  
Attn: Merced River Plan  
PO Box 577  
Yosemite, CA 95389

*Don't be limited by the space provided! This workbook serves as a starting point only—feel free to attach additional pages as needed.*





**WHY ARE WE LOOKING AT VISITOR ACTIVITIES ALONG THE MERCED RIVER?**

The Merced River offers a full complement of river-related recreational activities such as outstanding opportunities for solitude in wilderness areas, sight seeing, nature study and simply enjoying the river itself. An abundance of opportunity to hike, backpack, horseback ride, camp, raft, fish, and others await recreational enthusiast along the Merced River. Because Yosemite National Park is one of the premier recreation areas in the world, conflicts between visitor use and the river's resources is inevitable. For this very reason, the NPS is charged with providing and ensuring access, use and enjoyment of the Merced River, while finding a balance to ensure a healthy and functional river ecosystem. This is why the NPS monitors the impacts of use and enjoyment of the river, on resources and takes action to correct problems when necessary.

As with any human activity, all of these uses have an impact to the environment. The Merced River Plan must strike the balance between activities that occur in the area and those features of the natural or cultural environment in need of protection.

• *What activities do you think are appropriate for the Merced River area?*

---



---

• *What are the impacts of these activities?*

---



---

**WHEN IS A PICNIC TABLE NOT JUST A PICNIC TABLE?**

For every visible park activity or service, there is less visible—but associated—infrastructure to support those activities or services. For instance, for every parking space or picnic table added to an area, services such as bathrooms—and in turn, the sewer infrastructure needed to support them—may need to be considered.

Before the NPS can create a new picnic or activity area, decisions must be made about the appropriate types and levels of activities that should be supported for that particular area. These types of decisions are made through the land use planning process in the Merced River Plan. Collectively, we will re-examine the appropriate types and levels of activities along the Merced River which will translate to “management prescriptions” which in turn will provide the necessary guidance in order for the NPS to make determinations about where additional activity areas are needed, or where they should be removed.

Other examples of less visible impacts that need to be considered are parking, traffic congestion, and trash removal. Decisions need to be made on what kinds of activities are appropriate for a given area, but all the effects of those activities and the infrastructure needed to support them need to be considered first.

• *What other “hidden issues” can you identify that will need to be considered?*

---



---

