

THE WILD CASCADES

October - November, 1964

# Concept of River Wilderness

Wolf Bauer



## CONCEPT OF RIVER WILDERNESS

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Editor's Note: Wolf Bauer brings to this article an unmatched background in wilderness experience, and leadership in wilderness enjoyment. Climbers know him as the founder of the Climbing Course presented annually since 1935 by The Mountaineers, and since emulated by many other organizations. Skiers know him as one of the pioneers of the sport in the Northwest. Paddlers know him as the founder of the Washington Foldboat Club. All travelers of the hills know him as the founder of the Mountain Rescue Council. He is currently at work on a book about paddle-sports, to be published by The Mountaineers in the near future.

Recent favorable conservation legislation indicates that an eleventh hour quirk of conscience has struck the national mind in the matter of saving what is left of a shrinking American wilderness for the mushrooming recreational demands of an exploding population. More and more is being said and written about the need of protecting remaining free-flowing rivers as a significant facet of wilderness. My purpose in this discussion is primarily to point to some of the unique characteristics of river wilderness, and to compare local conditions and trends with those elsewhere. Rather than to simply apply the cliches of conservationist logic to river wilderness promotion, let us first examine some terminology and popular concepts of wilderness needs and availability and suggest how these might be modified in terms of wild river classification and preservation. In addition, we might be justified to attempt a critical examination and broad classification of wilderness users as to motivation background, thus better to identify and label specific wilderness for specific needs within the broad spectrum of outdoor recreation.

#### BOUNDARIES IN WILDERNESS PERCEPTION

One of the more elusive problems conservationists and policy makers will have to tackle and solve will be that of defining the term "wilderness" in terms of use and the user.

The image of wilderness may not vary too greatly from person to person, but the ability to find it, fit it to one's best personal needs, and to enjoy it for its own sake, may soon become an art requiring considerable conscious effort. Much as we may want to cling to our own concepts of what connotes true wilderness to us in terms of primeval landscape and life, solitude and vastness, we may soon have to re-define and evaluate the state-of-wilderness in broader terms. There may needs emerge more realistic synthesis of all that is now loosely and vaguely gathered into the term.

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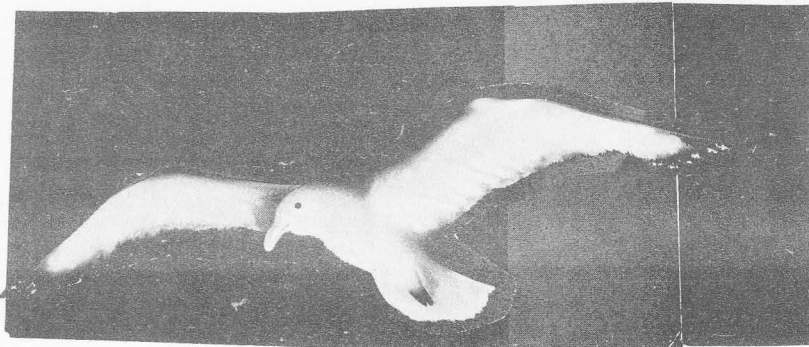
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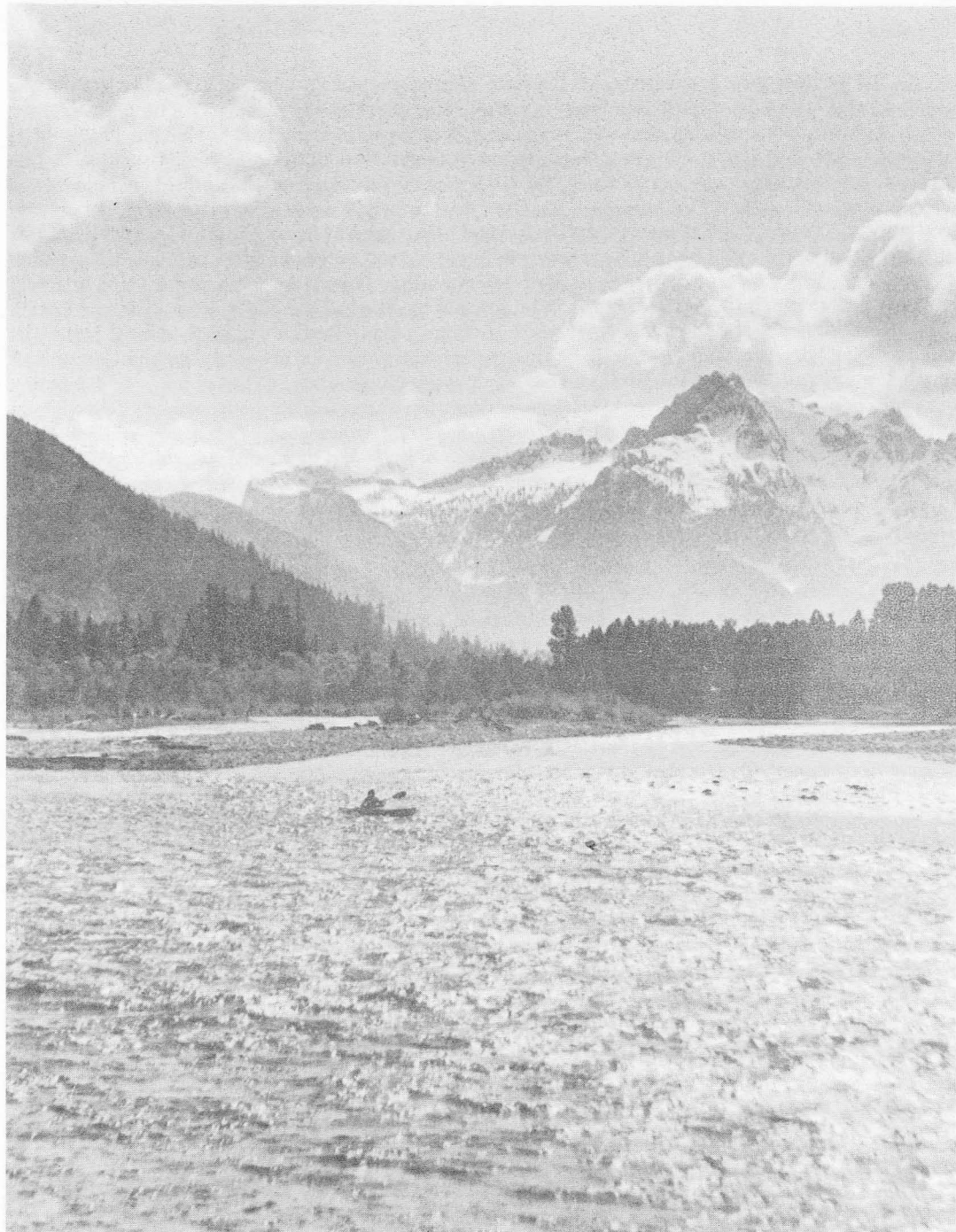
Spectacular ramparts of White Horse Mountain form an impressive backdrop to the Sauk River flowing north here from Darrington to the Skagit River. Harriet Bauer paddles her kayak down the Sauk on a recent spring day. Both mountain and river are among the most scenic and accessible from Seattle for climbing and river touring. (Photo by Wolf Bauer)

To me, the term is relative, for the state of mind may be as much a part of the experience of wilderness as is the natural topography and wildlife therein. In many parts of the West, we can still find wilderness-plus-solitude surrounded by beckoning unexplored horizons. In the East, we must increasingly share it with others, learning to shrink the radius of our perception to immediate surroundings. To serve us in the future, wilderness cannot be defined and classified only in size-scale, degree of isolation, or type, but may have to be judged in terms of private availability. Not so much the occasional signs and structures of man, but the repeated presence of man himself, will require us to become satisfied with smaller and smaller patches of "private" wilderness. A tiny virgin wild oasis in the depth of a canyon or on the hump of a wooded hill may be protected in a primeval state; but if it is overrun by people, one of its most precious assets will be lost. In Europe, the shrinking number of camp-touring streams in their natural state will and are being "drowned" as effectively by jostling humanity as by the ever encroaching backwaters of the dams. Thus the privacy of wilderness is a needed ingredient. This is not only a function of people per square mile of area, not only a matter of dispersion from multi-access approaches, but also dispersion in the dimension of time. The peopled wilderness of the week-end and fair-weather period becomes the quiet undisturbed haven of primeval nature during the week-day, or the rain and storm period in the severe season. Whether or not "temporary" or "part-time" wilderness is acceptable, it is overshadowed by the fact that it is real, hence must be utilized where the ingredient of privacy becomes essential.

More and more will modern man have to turn searcher for his patch of refuge. The more the individual requires some solitude, the more cunning a strategist and opportunist need he become to find and experience primeval nature.

We who have explored and toured our myriad Pacific Northwest rivers and streams have learned to contemplate and enjoy "immediate" wilderness within the narrow confines of the channel and its boundary banks. The thrill of traveling a so-called wilderness river at a point a hundred miles or more from the nearest civilized outpost is basically psychologic and mental, for the physical aspects of the stream, its banks, as well as its plant and animal life are usually little different a few hundred yards from the nearest bridge or road. Being the low-point of the surrounding topography, the backdrop landscape is generally hidden and of secondary concern to the water-level traveler. It is much more difficult to dismiss the encroaching signs of civilization in the view from the mountain, than it is from the river bed where the immediate terrain above eye-level vision is often completely concealed. Very much akin to the diver and underwater explorer who exists and travels within a tiny sphere of vision boundary, and whose submarine wilderness appears quite absolute within even the busiest of harbors, so must one's mental eye and attitude become trained to focus on that which is original and elemental in nature, even though surrounded by synthetic forms and conditions.





The Skagit River System with its Suiattle and Sauk tributaries was recently selected as one of 12 rivers in the nation to come under detailed study by the Departments of Interior and Agriculture for inclusion in a nation-wide system of protected wild and free-flowing rivers of unique recreational values. This view is typical of the Sauk Prairie section near Darrington, and is a favorite semi-wilderness paddle-touring and camping area of the Washington Foldboat Club. (Photo by Wolf Bauer)



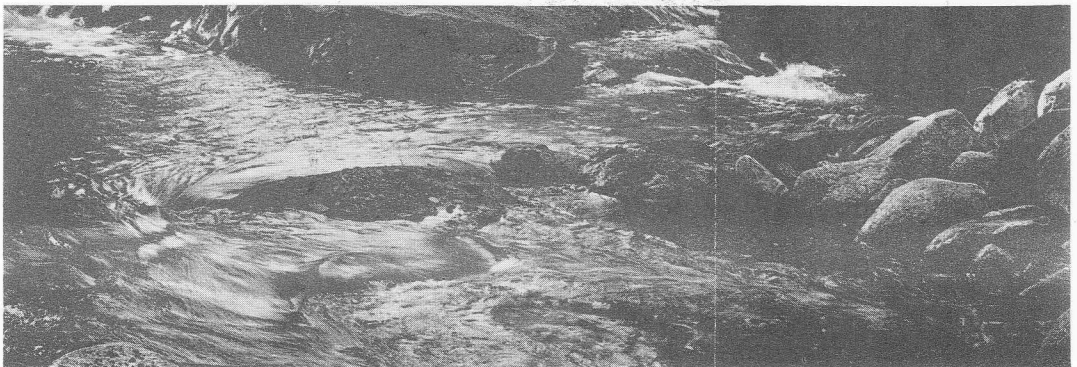
WILD-RIVER  
WILDERNESS

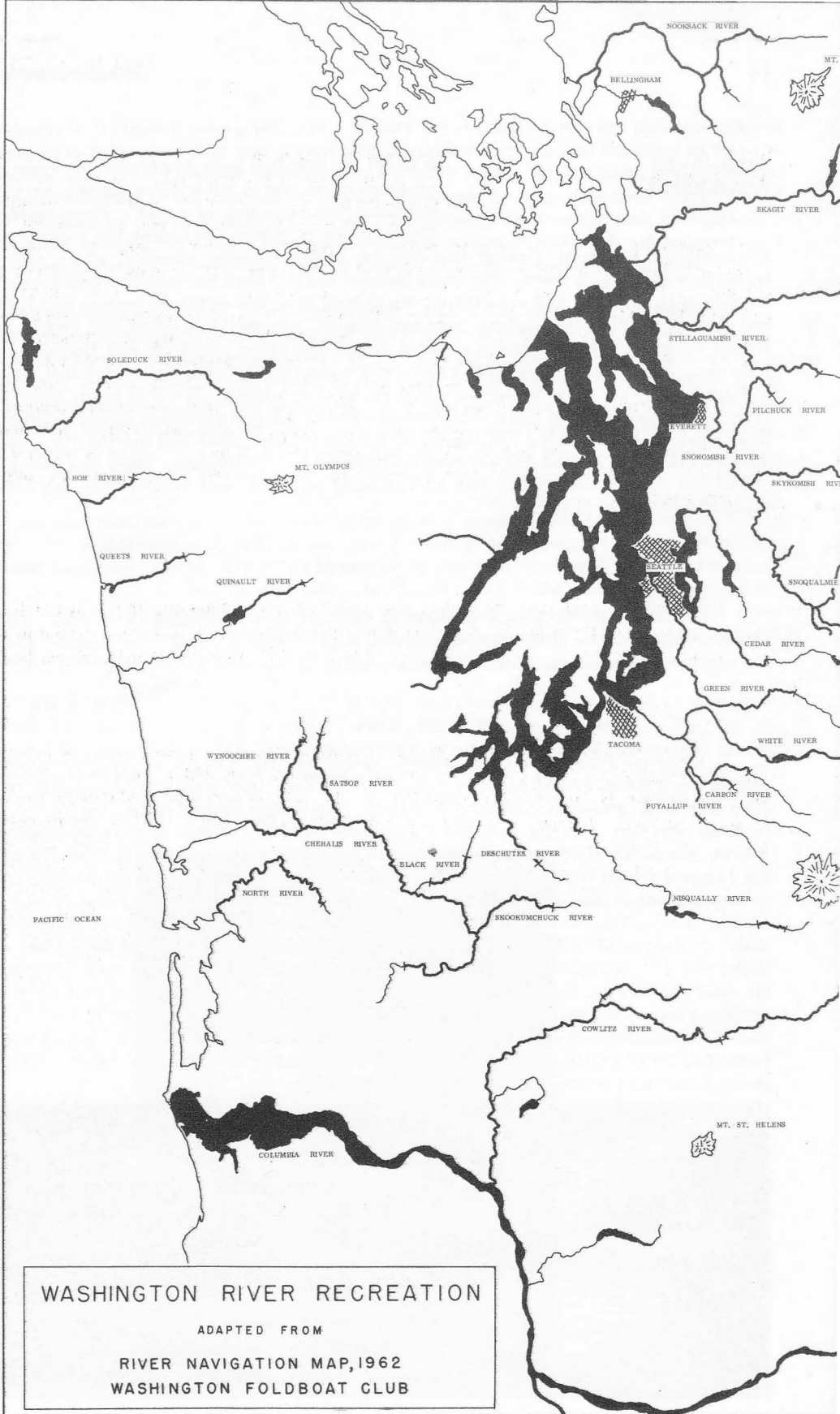
It is not the intention here to dismiss the value and desirability of protecting a wilderness terrain or region whose dominant feature is that of a scenic river drainage system.

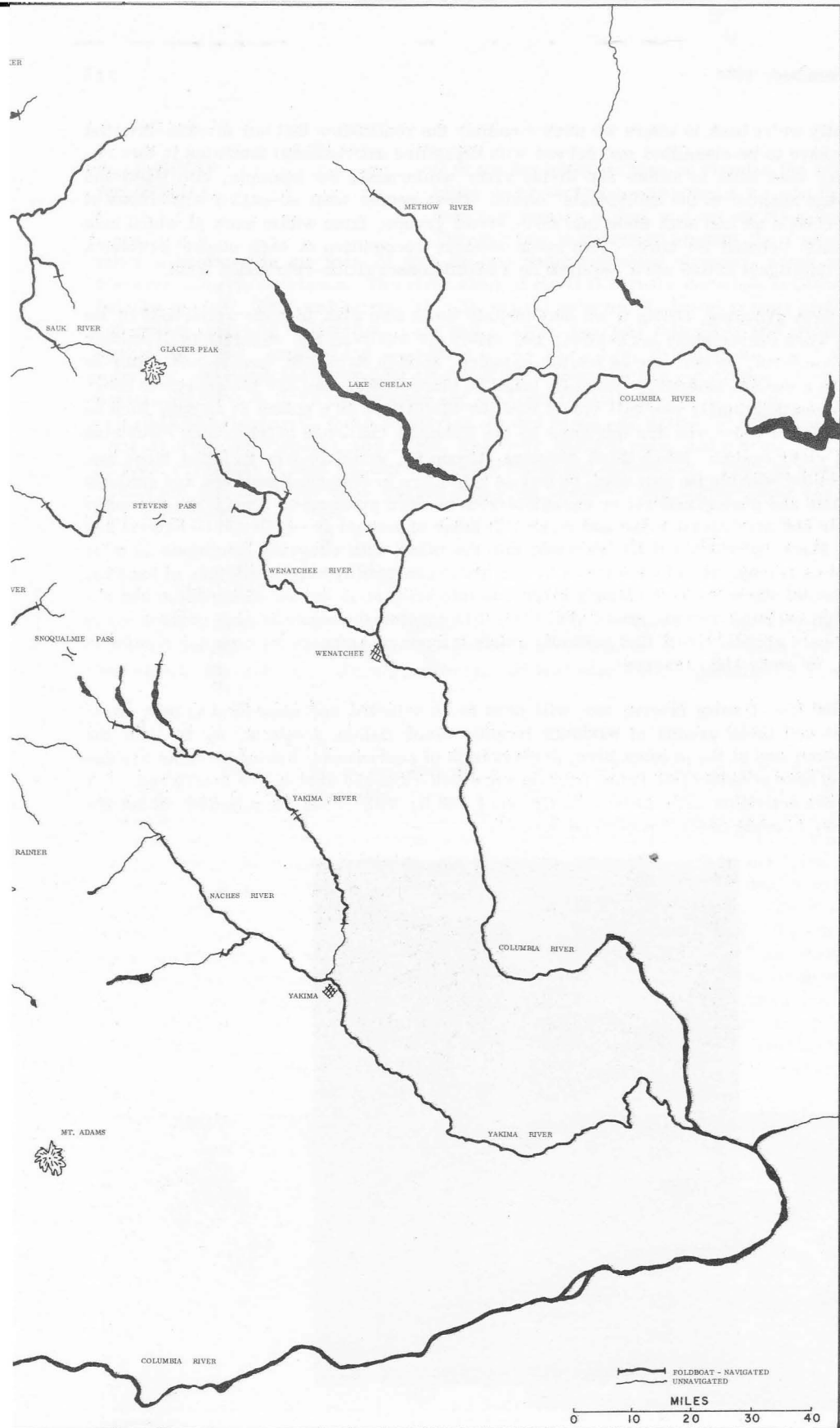
The purpose is rather to present the concept of "limited" river wilderness in the form of free-flowing natural-channel streams, which may or may not traverse wilderness terrain. The river channel itself is here the complete entity with its delicate balance of plant, fish, and animal life, its natural selective action of sorting and arranging sand and gravel, building and shifting bars and islands, swirling into pools and drops, aerating and silting its water, digging and depositing caves and dikes, draining and flooding, feeding and watering. Such natural river flow produces the fascinating basic riverscape that maintains true wilderness aspects in its topographic and ecologic dynamics. For it is here, along the geologic arterials of nature, with their sheltering wooded banks and driftwood gravel islands and bends, their arbored back-waters and ponds, and their verdant plant and marine life, that the hard-pressed creatures of land and sky find ready haven and sustenance. Here is a last-stand branch of thin and pulsing wilderness fingers extending uneasily, and farther than any others into the expanding backyard of man.

We can be realistic and prosaic in the matter of assessing the relative importance of rivers to mankind, for it needs no discussion to prove that streams are among the most dominant and significant economic, social, political, and aesthetic forces operating on our landscape.

Since the recreational and esthetic values derived from nature have become more generally appreciated and fashionable, rivers too have been more widely "discovered" for other reasons than as single-purpose fishing facilities. The unique seclusion and detachment experienced by those who have learned to travel these waterways in various craft is no longer a well-kept secret, nor is the strenuous activity of negotiating whitewater rapids considered a perilous evil, but rather a sought-after sports activity. Wherever potential hazards due to lack of experience or training accompany such activity, and where safety and comfort cannot be readily bought with money, a selective and self-limiting process tends to reduce the number of participants. At the same time we must admit to, if not condone, a reluctance on the part of the wilderness friend to broadcast the whereabouts of his particular escape hatch. It is partly for these reasons, that not all voices will cry in unison to save and protect any one particular stream for wilderness travel purposes alone, for the less discriminating recreationists may concentrate on more accessible and least jeopardized waterways. Is not a summer home cottage on the river bank also a recreational use for a beautiful stream in natural surroundings? And yet, does not river tract development clash with the concept of a wilderness river?



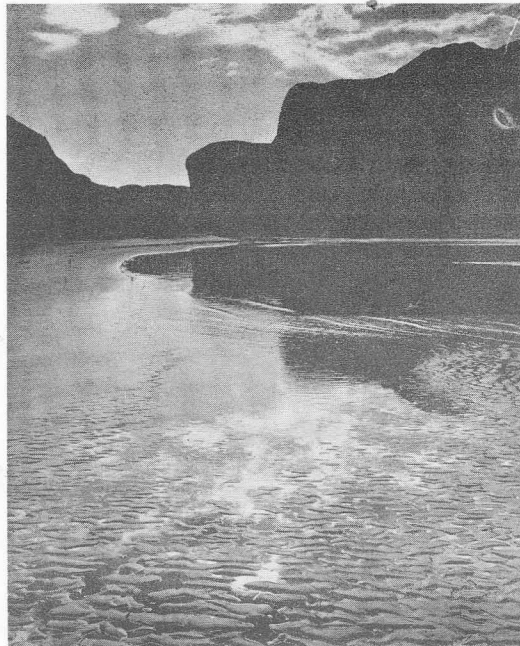




Evidently we're back to where we were - namely the realization that our diverse-interest humanity may have to be classified and served with classified recreational facilities in this respect. We may thus need to define and divide river wilderness, for example, into types and restrictive usage adapted to the individuals' needs. Most people want so-called wilderness of some kind. Perhaps we can sort them into three broad groups, from within each of which may emerge a specific demand for need. This would enhance recognition of each others' problems for concerted intelligent action when required on a broad conservation-recreation front.

In the first grouping, Group I, we may include those who wish to taste wilderness or its fringes if and when conveniently accessible, and within the environs and assurances of modern gadgetry and comforts, be that car or trailer camping, cottage living, or mechanized water or trail travel. In a second category, Group II, could be placed those who are the energetic doers and more restless individuals who will travel thru the wilderness as a means to an end, such as hunting or fishing; or those who are intrigued by the technical challenge of ascending mountains or descending river rapids. Into a third grouping, Group III, would then be included those who penetrate the wilderness for its own sake, be that as explorers or loafers, observers and students of nature, artists and photographers, or escapists from modern pressures. That there are many whose interests and activities overlap and mesh with those of another group should be natural and self-evident. Many individuals drift from one into the other with changing conditions in their lives. Be that as it may, use of wilderness by one group can readily clash with that of another. Some governmental agencies have already taken this into account in the use-designation and restrictions within certain areas and preserves; thus, it is possible that one may seek outdoor areas in which to remain gregarious or find solitude, rough it alone or compete for camping comforts, shoot and kill, or study and preserve.

Wild and free-flowing rivers, too, will need to be selected and classified to best serve the aforementioned three groups of outdoors people. Since fishing accounts, by far, for the greatest man-hour use at the present time, preservation of recreational fishing streams has and will continue to have considerable public backing when fish-runs and access are threatened. For fishing and other activities associated with Groups I and II, wilderness environment is not required, and may in some cases not even be desired.



*Colorado River from Klondike Bar*



The Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, in connection with its wild river study evaluations, has set itself certain preliminary guide-lines for assessing the potential recreational values of rivers and river systems. For such selection, a river should possess a natural channel with pleasing banks and near-wilderness character as seen from the water. The water should be clean and unpolluted, and be suitable in size and flow cycle to perform its recreational function. The stream should have unique features of beauty and location that will tend to draw to itself other-than-local visitors and users; and it should be possible to show that such values surpass those to be derived from any other usage of the stream. It is significant to note that while such rivers may be considered or tagged for some future commercial or industrial use other than recreational, they may, nevertheless, be deemed as "available" if actual construction toward non-recreational purposes has not already been initiated. Whether extensive river tract developments come under a commercial or recreational classification will probably depend on which recreational group passes judgment. The Bureau is not a policy-making, but rather a coordinating and evaluating body, created to initiate or to assist in studies and recreational problems of this kind.

Our most serious problems, in this respect, will likely arise in attempts to preserve paddle-boat navigable rivers particularly suitable for boat-camping in unspoiled wild surroundings in which cabin site construction along the banks has no place. This type of riverscape should be attractive to, and supported by Group II as well as the more purist Group III interests. There will also arise a need, no doubt, for saving from damming and drowning free-flowing rivers and streams along which the growing river-cabin crowd has settled in irreversible density and extent. Here again, the large interest Group II, such as represented by the Washington State Sportsmens Council, for example, could add its potential voice and weight. This process of concerted action was illustrated not too long ago in the Cowlitz dam controversies where the well-known voices of commercial and recreational fishing interests were reenforced by the lesser-known voice of our kayak river touring organization, even if to no avail.

Aside from preservation efforts, the river traveler needs to interest himself in the proper interpretation of writing of laws and statutes pertaining to his rights and limitations of access and travel upon public waters. Only a few States, such as Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Kansas, for instance, define as "navigable" any stream having public access. Wisconsin specifies, in fact, that "Any natural waters usable for rowing and canoeing are navigable" - most other States either associate navigability with that pertaining to commercial boat traffic, or the statutes are vague and do not define the terms "public waters" or "navigability".

While our Washington laws, with respect to the interpretation of "navigability", may be considered somewhat archaic, since no clear-cut test cases have helped to rewrite the statutes in this instance, we probably can take some comfort in the fact that recreational boating on all types of waters is here to stay in a big way. It should become increasingly difficult to deny it as a major form of navigation because of understandable early omissions and lack of legal foresight in serving public interest. As in all acts of human conduct requiring legal protective decisions and spelled-out rights and limitations, reasonable acts and courtesies in the matter of traveling by, alongside of, or portaging over private river bank land, or camping on gravel bars and islands within private domain will inhibit restrictive legislation and encourage the writing of friendly laws.

WASHINGTON'S  
WILD-RIVER  
POTENTIAL

The State of Washington, while unsurpassed in number, variety, and the consistency of flow of its recreation-navigable streams, is nevertheless lacking somewhat in long rivers flowing within isolated wilderness regions, such as the Rogue, John Day, and Owyhee in Oregon; the south fork of the Fláthead in Montana; the upper Salmon, Lochsa, and Selway in Idaho; the upper Fraser, Skeena, Finlay, and Liard in British Columbia; or the Athabaska and North Saskatchewan in Alberta, as examples. In view of the fact that the north-western portion of the State is covered with a more or less deep mantle of glacial sand and gravel, very few rivers have cut into the solid bed-rock to isolate themselves within gorges and canyons. This feature, however, is significant in several ways, since it has tended to inhibit construction of high power dams outside of the mountains proper. The completed Mayfield and the impending Mossy Rock dams in the canyons of the Cowlitz are poignant illustrations of this geologic factor. It may well portend a sad future for one of the most fantastically primitive and beautiful close-in wilderness strips we still own in western Washington, namely the length of the wild Green River Gorge, thirty miles from a million people.

Within the lengths of rivers in our State there remain rather few absolute wilderness stretches as such, but there are several which, especially in their upper navigable reaches within the mountain foothills, retain most of the wild features associated with the primeval riverscape. Here only fleeting and unobtrusive signs of habitation, small roads, or an occasional bridge allow even the purist to enjoy boat camping on innumerable secluded gravel bars and river islands in self-sufficient isolation.

It would be presumptuous to suggest, at this point, a preferred list of rivers and river sections warranting protective considerations, since it is not just a matter of selection on the basis of personal or group preferences, but requires first of all a thorough overall study and analysis of associated economic, social, legal, and even political factors as well.

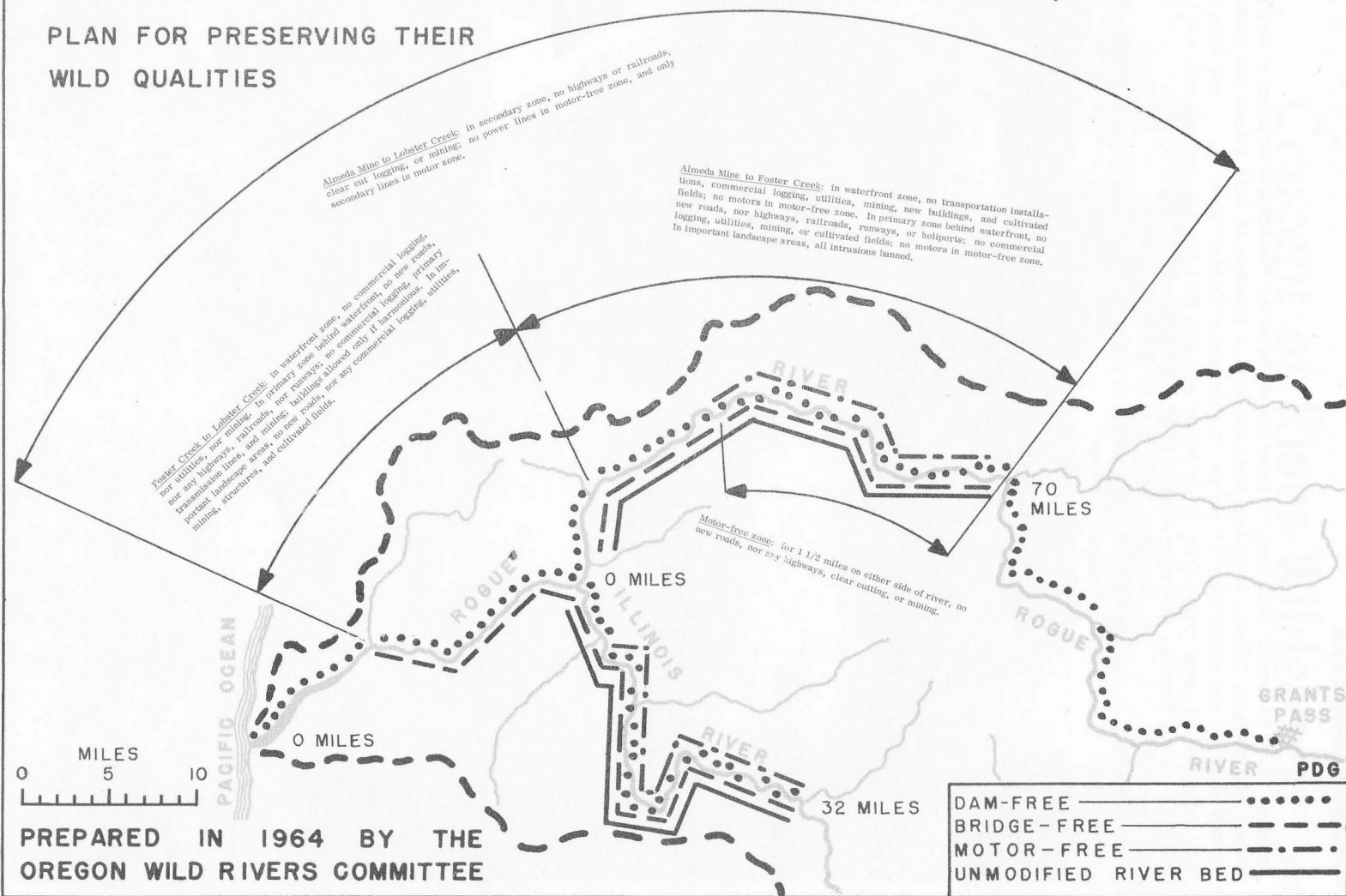
Such rivers as the Methow, Wenatchee, Yakima, Natches, and Grande Ronde in Eastern Washington; the Nooksack, Skagit, north and south forks of the Stillaguamish, the Skykomish, Puyallup, Nisqually, and Cowlitz draining the western slopes of the Cascades; and finally the Soleduck, Hoh, and Quinault on the Peninsula are typical of semi-wilderness natural rivers of wide public interest and appeal warranting preservation in their present state of flow and shore-line character. Unfortunately, a number of these streams are already well along in river tract planning and development.

Some usually lesser-known rivers and sections still exhibit total original environment, and these need protection now to preserve a uniqueness that may not be fully appreciated until it is too late. Of such, we might mention the Chiwawa and Cle Elum rivers on the east side of the mountains; the Suiattle and Cascade, the upper Sauk, the upper, middle, and north forks of the Snoqualmie, the Green River in its Gorge, as well as the upper sections and branches of the Wynootchee and Satsop on the southern flanks of the Olympics.

Obviously we will need an alert, informed, and interest-generating nucleus of individuals concerned with the present haphazard "development" of our free-flowing rivers and streams. Existing Conservation-minded organizations such as those represented by the Federation of Western Outdoor Clubs should and could give closer attention to this specific phase of our vanishing wilderness. Oregon citizens have already established an Oregon Wild Rivers Committee under the energetic guidance of J. Michael McCloskey, Northwest Conservation Representative at

# LOWER ROGUE AND ILLINOIS RIVERS, OREGON

## PLAN FOR PRESERVING THEIR WILD QUALITIES



Eugene. There is similar need here for representatives of our Washington outdoors groups concerned with fishing, hiking, camping, and paddling. A spear-head wild rivers committee or council could be formed to keep the public, the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, and interested State agencies informed and alerted to the forces and acts that are now increasingly and irretrievably encroaching upon our unique heritage of river wilderness.

Can we learn from the title of a not-so-recent European river-touring book, "THE SOON-LOST PARADISE", that it can happen here too?

