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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Dear Flathead National Forest:

When John and Frank Craighead and friends floated the majestic Flathead nearly seven decades ago, their experience on the remote and rarely traveled river inspired the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. As with most land, water, and wildlife issues, protections began with recreationists who could see beyond their own interests. We protect what we love, and we love what we know and experience most deeply.

Today, the Craigheads would recognize the upper sections of the forks of the Flathead, which still retain that character as the quintessential wild and scenic rivers, but might not recognize the lower sections, which are now heavily used.

The forks of the Flathead have particularly outstanding values for both recreation and wildlife habitat.

The first grizzly bear that I ever saw was on the North Fork, and the Flathead remains some of the best habitat for grizzlies and other large carnivores anywhere in the Lower 48. Their presence does more to enhance the wildness of the human experience along these rivers than anything except the remoteness of the upper forks.

I have paddled the entire North Fork from the Canadian border to the confluence. I have stooped under an 80-pound pack for miles into the Great Bear Wilderness to paddle my packraft down the wild section of the Middle Fork, which boasts the clearest water that I've ever seen. My group saw three black bears, one of which swam across the river as we watched from a distance.

Our group of packrafters was small. We protected our food from bears, limited our fires to small collapsible firepans, and packed out our own waste. While all backcountry users have some impact, if only by their transient presence, I consider our impact to be less than that of a person on a horse or a mountain bike, and also less than a typical large raft trip.

In contrast to the upper sections, the takeout at the confluence of the North and Middle Forks was heavily used. Blankenship Bridge may be the busiest river access point in Montana.

While not needing a permit seemed an important aspect of the wild character of my backcountry trips, I support the proposed establishment of a permit system, as long as it does not restrict the number of private boaters or require application months in advance. A permit system would provide the data to better estimate user capacity numbers, which currently are little more than educated guesses.

In addition to knowing how many people use the river, we need to know more about how wildlife use the river, including where animals are most likely to cross. That should include where and when grizzlies are most likely to be present, and how that fits into connectivity from the Northern Continental Divide, which includes all three forks, to other grizzly habitats further west, including the Cabinet-Yaak area. I also support the no-stopping order around the Goat Lick on the Middle Fork.

The greatest threats to the river are the sprawling human population growth to the west and southwest of the river corridor (which is beyond the scope of this plan), and the related surge in commercial recreation-reflecting the West-wide trend of exurban sprawl and industrial tourism. The plan should not allow an increase in commercial river trips, as currently the proposed plan would allow for a huge increase, including a near quadrupling of commercial user-days on the Middle Fork. Currently, the four commercial outfitters all offer the same business model that is degrading rivers across the West: the river as theme park for vacationing tourists,

most of whom will not learn to love the river and use it with respect.

Instead, wild and scenic rivers like the forks of the Flathead should prioritize educational trips and backcountry experiences like the historic expeditions by the Craighead brothers, who went on to great careers in wildlife ecology and conservation.

Sincerely,

Matt Barnes

Rangeland scientist, wildlife conservationist, and river runner