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First name: Madeline and Samuel

Last name: Gargas

Organization:

Title:

Comments: To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Madeline Gargas. I am writing on behalf of my husband, Samuel, and myself. We both grew up in and graduated from high school in Columbia Falls, and will soon be raising our own family here in the Flathead. I teach school in Kalispell and he works at the Whitefish Lake Lodge. We enjoy floating, paddleboarding, swimming, fishing, and recreating in and around the North, South, and Middle Forks of the Flathead River. The rivers are near and dear to us. We keep to ourselves and like to leave things better than we found them.

My concern today is about the Flathead Comprehensive River Management Plan #56536. My husband and I went to the Scoping Meeting on January 21st and would like to submit some comments and questions. These will be listed in no particular order.

* We are concerned about the division of permits between raft guide companies and the general public, especially down the road if certain thresholds are met. How do we determine what ratio is fair? Can we ensure that there will be no corruption or collusion between the people dividing up the permits and the people who stand to make a lot of money off of said permits (businesses/raft companies)? We worry about the rivers becoming a privatized, pay to play system and that the top buyers will have prioritized access. Members of the general public deserve at least equal access to the rivers as these businesses and companies.

* In the same vein, is the ratio of business vs. public users considered in terms of the 'boats per day passing' or 'party encounters' in the triggers/thresholds? There was lots of talk regarding 'user experience.' I really want to stress that user experience is SUBJECTIVE. In our experience, as well as that of our friends and family members who also use the rivers, encounters with raft companies/businesses on the river are far, far more disruptive than with members of the general public. The rafts themselves are enormous and stuffed with as many people as possible. These large groups then feel entitled to be loud and take up tons of space. We have floated past large groups where people are literally screaming and yelling. We have floated the river and literally not been able to find a single good pull off since every single nice shore/beach area was taken up by a huge raft company group. When floating, fishing, or just enjoying the beach, I would rather have 10 solo user or small party encounters than 1 single encounter with one of these huge rafts. They are generally obnoxious and not as respectful of the peace that public users are seeking in nature. Is that user experience data accounted for? Are these large party sizes considered when monitoring encounters and decibels? Ultimately, I worry about whose user experience we are prioritizing; the people who stand to make money off the river, or the tax paying members of the general public. I hope that no decisions regarding the river reflect ranking the user experience of the businesses/raft companies as more important than the user experience of the general public.

* We noticed some triggers describing water quality. Is there a plan in place to determine whether water quality/stream habitat/wildlife abundance/etc. is affected by recreational users specifically, or is affected by other causes, such as chemical runoff from fertilizers, magnesium chloride, sewage/wastewater treatment, abandoned railroad and industrial debris, the aluminum plant, etc.? If water quality degradation is due to factors other than recreational use, recreational use should then not be limited as the solution to fix/improve the water.

* We were surprised by the lack of content concerning parking, river access road quality, and trash/litter at river accesses. Are these also not important issues related to river quality? In our experience, river access parking areas are frequently crowded, difficult to navigate due to both large and numerous raft company vehicles and trailers, unsafe due to theft and what appears to be homeless encampments/long term camping, and full of trash and litter. Why are none of these factors included as triggers/thresholds? These are easily measurable and observable issues. If we are going to dedicate time and money to address human recreation impact on the water,

we need to address the impact on the surrounding land as well.

I hope that our concerns will be considered when going forward with this River Management Plan. Knowing that one day our access to the rivers may be restricted is extremely upsetting. We watched access to Glacier National Park slowly decrease and now it's far more difficult to enjoy time there. We are worried that this trend will slowly spread to all the areas we love recreating. I trust that the Forest Service will be able to continue to work with the Park Service and other agencies to ensure that everyone can continue to enjoy these incredible natural areas and that we can balance recreation with protection and conservation. Thank you for your time and I appreciate you folks trying to do this right and consider public opinion. Feel free to contact or follow up with me about any of our questions and comments.

Have a great rest of your weekend!

Sincerely,

Madeline and Samuel Gargas