



Embargoed for May 17, 2011

Ozarks Riverways among Nation's Most Endangered Rivers

Overuse, mismanagement threatens clean water, recreation

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Missouri— The clean water and unique recreation experiences prized by paddlers and anglers on the Ozark National Scenic Riverways is being destroyed by pollution, erosion, and poor management. This threat landed the Ozark Riverways on the annual list America's Most Endangered Rivers™ – a report issued by the conservation group American Rivers.

Beloved for its fishing, boating, and other recreation opportunities, and hosting 1.3 million visitors a year, the Ozarks Riverways Scenic Park is a mainstay of the region's economy. The park has features unparalleled in North America, including more than 350 springs (including the National Park Service's largest spring), 338 recorded caves, and archaeological sites reflecting 12,000 years of human habitation, and 200 species found nowhere else in the world. However, the park's popularity has come with a heavy toll, particularly from off-road vehicles that destroy vegetation and cause severe erosion and pollution.

“If the National Park Service doesn't do a better job of protecting these rivers, everything that makes them special - their clean water and value to paddlers and anglers – will be lost,” said Fay Augustyn, Conservation Associate for American Rivers. “Overuse on the Riverways is a symptom of a bigger problem. The public is hungry for river recreation opportunities. We need more designated areas so people can access and enjoy rivers. With a little investment we can protect river health *and* support the huge public demand for river access and recreation.”

In 1984, there were 13 developed river access points and public campgrounds in the park. Today, there are more than 130 vehicular river access areas, and mazes of unmanaged dirt roads that bleed sediment into the river, harming water quality. Only four horse trails are designated by the park, but more than 250 miles of horse trails are unofficially tolerated – including 80 places where horses cross the rivers and harm water quality with erosion and fecal coliform pollution.

The National Park Service plans to complete several "capacity" studies prior to issuing a draft General Management Plan (GMP) for public comment in 2011. American Rivers is calling on the Park Service to hold the Ozarks Riverways to the same standards of protection and enforcement as in other parks. This means the Park Service must complete a full Environmental Impact Statement about current usage, including an updated study of roads, motorized intrusion at the river, primitive camps, and horse trails. "With the Obama Administration promoting its America's Great Outdoors initiative to boost conservation and recreation nationwide, the Riverways is the perfect place for the administration to put its words into action -- by protecting this park for future generations, said Augustyn.

About America's Most Endangered Rivers

For 26 years, American Rivers has sounded the alarm on 360 rivers through our America's Most Endangered Rivers report. The report is not a list of the "worst" or most polluted rivers, but is a call to action for rivers at a crossroads, whose fates will be determined in the coming year. Over the years, the report has helped spur many successes including the removal of outdated dams, the protection of rivers with Wild and Scenic designations, and the prevention of harmful development and pollution.

American Rivers' staff and scientific advisors review nominations for the following criteria:

- A major decision that the public can help influence in the coming year
- The significance of the river to people and wildlife
- The magnitude of the threat, especially in light of climate change

For the third consecutive year, America's Most Endangered Rivers™ is sponsored by The Orvis Company, which donates 5% of their pre-tax profits annually to protect nature.

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