

Saving Wild Rivers

Critics complain that they could support the National Wild & Scenic Rivers Act—if only it didn’t prohibit dams. But of course, it was Congress’ specific intent when it passed the Act in 1968 to balance building thousands of dams with preserving the free-flowing condition and outstanding values of a very few selected rivers. The Act contains many other provisions which have proved immensely helpful in protecting rivers over 44 years, but it’s been the prohibition on water projects such as dams that has most distinguished it.

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Even Western legislators recognized the need to protect rivers. Idaho Senator Frank Church, underscoring the urgency, said “generations which wait at our threshold may never know the excitement of whitewater, fish in crystal-clear rivers, or leisurely floats down blue streams which meander between tree-covered banks. Even as our wild rivers disappear, our need...escalates.”

Perhaps nowhere else in the United States has this dynamic between dams and river protection been better demonstrated than in California, with more than 1,200 dams that are 25 feet or higher. The Middle Fork Feather River was one of the first eight rivers protected when the Act was passed in 1968. Federal protection of the river killed several proposed hydroelectric dams, and as it turned out, saved a local Congressman’s favorite fishing hole.

Thanks in good measure to Friends of the River, a statewide advocacy group, the Act’s legacy of dam-killing in California continued over the years. Federal designation stopped dam projects proposed on the Eel in 1981, the Tuolumne in 1984, and the Merced and Kings in 1987. In the 1990s, environmental pundits even started claiming that the era of big dam building was over.

Still, only 2% of rivers nationwide are protected. And global warming’s impact on water supplies and other factors have triggered a recent revival in controversial dam proposals. The Bureau of Reclamation wants to build a large dam in the beautiful San Joaquin River Gorge, which was recommended for federal protection by a fellow federal agency. Reclamation also wants to raise the height of Shasta Dam, enlarging the state’s largest reservoir to flood a few miles of the McCloud and upper Sacramento; both rivers are eligible for federal protection. More alarmingly, the House of Representatives approved a bill last year that would remove federal protection for a small segment of the Merced Wild River to allow for another reservoir expansion.

In California, we have come full circle and the “dam vs. river” fight continues. Today we are faced with the choice of building more destructive dams, at increasingly higher costs and with fewer benefits, or protecting some of the few remaining free flowing rivers we have left. May we choose wisely.



Credit: Mike Osborn

This stretch of California’s Merced River is a Wild and Scenic River—but perhaps not for long.

19 Lesson: Eternal vigilance is the price for free-flowing rivers.