

Endangered US rivers at grave risk from dams, mining and global heating

By: *Nina Lakhani*
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New report lays out dire situation facing the most imperiled rivers but environmental activists say situation is salvable



Fishing at the mouth of the Ipswich River in Massachusetts. Photograph: Andrew Borsari

Dams, mining, factory farms and global heating are among the gravest threats facing America's endangered rivers, according to a new report.



Lower Granite Lock and Dam at Snake River.
Photograph: US Army Corps of Engineers

The Snake River in the Pacific north-west is ranked the most endangered US river of 2021, where salmon runs are on the brink of extinction because of four federal dams obstructing the free flow of water, according to American Rivers' annual report.

It poses an existential threat to north-western Native American tribes who depend on the fish for food, culture and their identities, as well disrupting the entire local ecosystem, from black bears and orcas.

But, the dire situation is salvable.

“On the Snake River, we have an opportunity for the greatest river restoration effort the world has ever seen ... saving iconic salmon and orcas, bolstering clean energy and strengthening the region’s economy,” said Tom Kiernan, president of American Rivers, an advocacy group.

Advocates are urging Joe Biden to include a \$33.5bn proposal by the Idaho congressman Mike Simpson, a Republican, to remove the four dams and recover salmon in his infrastructure package.

Every year American Rivers ranks the country’s 10 most endangered rivers to highlight where imminent threats to human health, safety and survival could be resolved through decisive political, business and community measures.

America’s most endangered rivers in 2021



Guardian graphic. | Source: American Rivers 2021 “America’s Most Endangered Rivers” Report and the US Geological Survey.

Note: The Snake River traverses multiple states, including Idaho, Washington, and Oregon. The Lower Missouri River traverses multiple states, including Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska.

This year’s list highlights the unequal impact of unchecked big business, Native American treaty violations, and inadequate regulation on the nation’s rivers and the communities who depend on them for water, food and cultural heritage.

In second place is the Lower Missouri River, where communities in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska face increasing floods that threaten homes and businesses, and environmental and public health. The risks are exacerbated by authorities’ continued reliance on an antiquated flood control system, say advocates.

The Missouri is America’s longest river, but the once meandering, ecologically diverse 2,300-mile waterway has long been artificially contained by hundreds of miles of levees, which are being increasingly breached.

Extreme weather events linked to the climate crisis, such as droughts, hurricanes and floods are a growing threat to rivers, communities and drinking and wastewater systems.

“In Missouri we have coal ash, radioactive waste, abandoned lead mines and a variety of other toxic accidents waiting to happen. When an area floods, this chemical soup becomes part of our water system, potentially impairing your drinking water or your favorite fishing stream,” said Rachel Bartels, the director of Missouri Confluence Waterkeeper, a conservation group.



Nationwide, at least 945 toxic superfund sites are vulnerable to extreme weather such as hurricanes, floods, rising sea levels and wildfires, which are becoming more frequent and intense as the planet heats up.

John Kerry, the presidential envoy for climate, said: “The climate crisis threatens so many aspects of life as we know it. It threatens our health, our

security and our economy, and that’s in large part because it threatens our most precious resource, abundant, fresh, clean water. The climate impacts of clean water resources are becoming increasingly pronounced all over the world.”

Toxic waste from factory farming, extractive industries and sewage plants is also pouring into the nation's rivers, rendering them dangerous for humans and aquatic life.

In Iowa, the state's largest water utility was forced to invest in one of the world's most expensive nitrate-removal systems due to harmful levels of agricultural pollutants in the Raccoon River, which is relied upon by more than half a million people for drinking water. The Raccoon River, ranked ninth in the endangered rivers list, is polluted by more than 700 factory farms given free rein by state lawmakers who refuse to implement mandatory pollution controls.

In Oklahoma, toxic pollution from one of the country's biggest Superfund sites has made Tar Creek a feared no-go zone for communities including several tribes who once depended on the river for subsistence and cultural practices.

The legacy of toxic waste from what was once the world's largest lead and zinc mine, has turned Tar Creek orange, killing aquatic life and threatening human health with heavy metals including lead and arsenic. Every day, 1m gallons of contaminated water are discharged into Tar Creek, which is ranked sixth in the endangered list.

“For 42 years, acid mine water and toxic runoff has been pouring down Tar Creek under the eyes of the state and the EPA,” said Earl L Hatley, Grand Riverkeeper at Local Environmental Action Demanded.

“To date, they have no plan for stopping this toxic offsite release. When will our lives matter?”

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