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JET BOATING AND THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE



photo by USDA Forest Service

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Background & Management Issues: The Central Idaho Wilderness Act of 1980 established The Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness with special provisions for motorized use on the main Salmon River. Very little information is available on the nature of experiences of jet boaters as a wilderness user group. During the planning process for any wilderness area, the U.S. Forest Service is required to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement. In so doing, the Forest Service must consider alternatives that affect user groups, and managers must be able to assess how planning decisions affect each of those user groups. Accurate assessments require a thorough understanding of the nature of the relationship each group has to the wilderness area(s) being managed.

Project Objectives:

To characterize the range and nature of the wilderness experience expressed by jet boaters on the Salmon River.

To provide managers with a deeper understanding of jet boaters' concepts of relationship to place, nature of experience, and appropriate use ethics.

Project Description: The project was conducted in two phases. The first phase included 1½- to 2-hour interviews with five members of the Western Whitewater Association's committee who responded to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement. Interviews were in-depth and designed to gain understanding of the experiences, relationship to place, and concerns about the planning process for this user group. No single standardized set of questions was used, although interviewers were equipped with a guide identifying themes to be addressed and lead-in questions to focus on these themes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The second phase was designed to assess the general population of jet boaters and to identify other themes, in addition to the experiences of the Western Whitewater Association members, relevant to management. The sample of 20 individuals included jet boat operators, passengers, and landowners who used jet boats to access land holdings on the Salmon River.

Results: The key concepts for understanding the dimensions of the relationships of jet boaters to the Salmon River could be categorized in six themes:

The nature and significance of the Salmon River. The personal significance of the Salmon River ranged from being an integral, cross-generational component of jet boaters' lives to having relatively low significance.

Access. Important concepts discussed included (1) using jet boats to access some other value provided along the Salmon River; (2) concerns of local users regarding the permit system; and (3) jet boats as a valuable means of access for the young, elderly, and those with disabilities.

Meaning of wilderness. Jet boaters frequently characterized the Salmon River and surrounding area with terms and concepts defined in the Wilderness Act, even though they saw human habitation and history as being compatible with wilderness. Jet boaters valued the area as a predominantly roadless area managed in a wild state where they would encounter few people.

Use ethic. Jet boaters believed the area should be managed to facilitate opportunities for human use

and enjoyment and advocated “responsible shared use” of the river. Responsible shared use included responsibility to the community of users, equitable opportunity, and stewardship of the river.

- ✓ *Public relations.* Jet boaters felt a strained relationship with the Forest Service and had significant concerns about the legitimacy of planning and decision-making processes. Specifically, jet boaters felt that the Forest Service ignored public input, favored special interests, and was “out of touch” with the resource they managed. Jet boaters also had different values and perceptions about the

most appropriate means to protect the resource. Moreover, this user group felt the Forest Service had difficulty communicating the purpose and meaning of information they presented, especially in regards to specific management actions. Moreover, the Forest Service had difficulty communicating the purpose and meaning of information they presented.

- ✓ *Dimensions of the experience.* Although some jet boaters used the river for specific activities such as fishing and hunting, many were seeking the challenge, skill, and humility afforded by the jet boating experience, nature, cultural history, family unity, and a multi-dimensional experience.

Management Implications:

- ❖ Controversies regarding management of recreational use of the Salmon River cannot be viewed solely as potential conflict between motorized and non-motorized users or locals and non-locals.
- ❖ The planning process may be perceived as more legitimate if the significance of the relationship users have to the Salmon River is considered besides just the size of various user groups.
- ❖ Managers who address the communication issues within this user group may find more positive resolutions of conflicts that arise during the planning process.

Publications / Products:

- ❖ Patterson, Michael E. 2000. Qualitative analysis of jet boat users on the Salmon River-Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness: Final project report for phase II– Across individuals analysis. Missoula, MT: University of Montana. Final Rep. RMRS-99523-RJVA. 47 p.
- ❖ Patterson, Michael E. 2000. Qualitative analysis of jet boat users on the Salmon River-Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness: Final project report for phase II– Biosketches and data excerpts. Missoula, MT: University of Montana. Final Rep. RMRS-99523-RJVA. 113 p.

For additional information...

Michael E. Patterson, Principal Investigator
phone: 406-243-6614
email: mike@forestry.umd.edu

Alan E. Watson, Leopold Institute Investigator
phone: 406-542-4190
email: awatson@fs.fed.us



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