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IDAHO'S SALMON RIVER: LEGISLATIVE INTENT, SCIENCE, AND SPECIAL

Keywords: wilderness experience, user groups, jet boats, special provisions, legislative intent, Idaho, Salmon River

PROVISIONS IN WILDERNESS

Background & Management Issues:

Section 4(d) of the U.S. Wilderness Act provides general direction for the establishment of special provisions that allow preexisting uses, such as the maintenance of reservoirs or the use of aircraft or motorboats, in designated wilderness. Despite the fact that these statutory compromises are often controversial, there has been little research to guide the implementation of special provisions in managing wilderness.

The Central Idaho Wilderness Act of 1980 established The Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness with special provisions allowing for continued motorized use on the main Salmon River. Prior to the passage of this bill, numerous hearings around Idaho and in Washington D.C. produced arguments in favor of and against the motorized use exemption. An understanding of the historical context of special provisions and the user group accommodated (jet boat users) is important to the wilderness

Project Objectives:

- ❖ To combine an understanding of the historic context of special provisions legislation with an understanding of jet-boat-users on the main Salmon River as input to help guide management decisions.

planning process.

Project Description: This project combined an investigation of legislative history leading to the special provision with qualitative and quantitative studies to better understand the jet boat user group. The statutory language of the Central Idaho Wilderness Act and accompanying legislative discussions were analyzed to determine legislative intent. To assess the

perspectives of jet boaters, interviews were conducted with five leaders of a prominent and politically active jet boat club in Idaho. Analysis of these five interviews guided an extended set of interviews within the jet-boat-user community and the development of a mail survey.

Results:

Legislative Intent

Maintaining access was a key theme in the legislative history regarding motorized use on the Salmon.

Congressional committee reports emphasized that the amount of motorboat use would be allowed to continue at a level not less than that which occurred in 1978, but set no upper limit on the amount of motorboat use. The legislation allowed for management of motorized use to protect “the experience,” but stopped short of defining the actual nature of the experience to be protected. The vague nature of the legislation reinforces the need to develop an understanding of the nature of experiences, meanings, and relationships to place among motorized users.

Jet Boat Users

Some key concepts jet boaters used to describe their relationship to the Salmon River were:

- ✓ *The nature and significance of the place.* 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.* Many jet boaters viewed the Salmon River as a local resource. As local users they valued accessing the area spontaneously and over short periods of time. Some felt that the current permitting system was not flexible enough to allow that kind of access.
- ✓ *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



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wilderness. Jet boaters valued the area as a predominantly roadless area managed in a wild state where they would encounter few

people, yet many placed great value on the area's extensive human past and a continued human presence.

Management Implications:

- ❖ The existence of special provisions in wilderness-enabling legislation reflects compromises among subgroups, ultimately creating ambiguities and apparent contradictions that managers may need to address when implementing the statute.
- ❖ Controversies regarding management of recreational use of the Salmon River are not solely conflicts between motorized and non-motorized users or locals and non-locals. An understanding of the historical context and the perspectives of user groups involved leads to a deeper understanding of the controversy.
- ❖ The planning process may be perceived as more legitimate if the significance of the relationship users have to the Salmon River is considered in addition to the size of various user groups.
- ❖ Jet-boat users identify some traditional wilderness values, such as solitude, as integral to their experience on the Salmon River, yet are not troubled by other facets of the experience that seem to contradict wilderness values. These contradiction or tensions are not unique to jet boat users, but are apparent in the experiences of other types of wilderness users.
- ❖ A careful analysis of legislative history in conjunction with an understanding of current stakeholders can enhance the planning process in dealing with controversial special provisions.

Publications / Products:

- ❖ Meyer, Shannon S. 2000. Legislative interpretation as a guiding tool for wilderness management. In: Cole, David N.; McCool, Stephen F.; Borrie, William T.; O'Loughlin, Jennifer, comps. 2000. Wilderness science in a time of change conference— Volume 5: Wilderness ecosystems, threats, and management; 2000 May 23– 27; Missoula, MT. Proceedings RMRS-P-15-VOL-5. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. 343-347.

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- ❖ Patterson, Michael E. 2000. Qualitative analysis of jet boat users on the Salmon River-Frank Church River of No Return



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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.
- ❖ Watson, Alan E., Patterson, Michael, Christensen, Neal; Puttkammer, Annette; Meyer, Shannon. 2004. Legislative intent, science, and special provisions in wilderness: A process for navigating statutory compromises. International Journal of Wilderness. 10(1): 22-26.

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