

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior

St. Croix National Scenic Riverway

**Comprehensive River Management Plan
Public Listening Sessions Comment Summary**

Summer 2023

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INTRODUCTION

This document provides a brief summary of the public comment period that took place from July 7 to August 8, 2023. It highlights the main themes from comments submitted online through the park planning website. These themes were similar to St. Croix National Scenic Riverway (the Riverway) comprehensive river management plan.

The following six questions were asked during the comment period:

1. What experiences on the St. Croix and Namekagon Rivers are most important to you?
2. What experiences do you want future river users to have when visiting the St. Croix or Namekagon Rivers?
3. What barriers interfere with your desired experience at the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway?
4. What could the National Park Service do to address these barriers?
5. What river-related issues/topics are most important to you and why?
6. What is the National Park Service doing well in managing the riverway?

Questions 1, 2, and 6 provided an opportunity for commenters to share important perspectives of what they enjoy about the river. A short description of responses to these questions is provided.

Questions 1 and 2 create a vision of what respondents enjoy about the St. Croix River, many of which are popular recreation activities, including motorized and nonmotorized boating, fishing, camping, wildlife viewing, and enjoying nature and solitude. Many respondents expressed a desire for the same experiences that they enjoyed being available to future visitors.

Representative Quote

The experiences that are most important to me are recreation activities of canoeing, kayaking, paddle boarding, motor boating, camping, fishing and swimming. I appreciate the serenity of the St Croix river in my area without large power boats, jet skis and looming apartment complexes. It always amazes me the amount of wildlife I see like eagles osprey, deer, fox, beaver, muskrats and even otters. It is a magical place and a unique treasure. I have also enjoyed camping and canoeing on the Namekagon river and it has been a special place for my extended family to take an annual canoe trip.

Responses to question 6 primarily expressed appreciation for the work that the National Park Service is doing to protect and preserve the St. Croix River and its efforts to provide access and recreation on the river.

Representative Quotes

The National Park Service has been stellar in the past fulfilling its obligations to preserve and protect our national treasures from loss to those who would seek profit in the degradation and ultimate destruction of these public lands and waters.

Question 3, 4, and 5 provided an opportunity for commenters to share their perspective on concerns and suggestions. This analysis is a summary of a random sampling of comments. It captures the major themes that people expressed. The themes are:

- Watershed Development
 - Mining
 - Surrounding land development
- Fishing and Hunting Regulations
- Invasive Species
- Signage
- Law Enforcement
- Boat Speeds and Wake
- Camping
- Commercial Operations
- Recreation and Accessibility
- Noise
- Visitor Use and Negative Visitor Experience

KEY THEMES AND CONCERNS

WATERSHED DEVELOPMENT

Mining

Mining appeared as a consistent theme throughout many of the comments. Several commenters directly mentioned the Talon Metals Mine close to the Kettle River. Concerns were also expressed about watershed level pollution, including sulfides, heavy metals, and acidification, which could affect the water quality, public safety and biodiversity on the St. Croix River.

Surrounding Land Development

Similar to the mining development, many commenters were concerned about development along the rivers and in the watershed. Comments included concerns about city development, agriculture, and concentrated animal feeding operations. The threats of development can impact water quality, biodiversity, noise, night sky, and viewsheds.

Representative Quotes

*Actively combat efforts to push noise and light pollution closer to the river corridor.
Seek partnerships for land or easement purchases to increase the corridor.*

*definitely not approving any CAFO (concentrated animal feeding operations), which
clearly are very polluting, destructive to waterways.*

Prevent building on the banks of the river.

FISHING AND HUNTING REGULATIONS

Commenters expressed concerns about hunting and fishing regulations, including the use of live bait and lead. Commenters also expressed concerns about specific fishing regulations, such as catch and release and take limits. A few comments addressed concerns about hunting.

Representative Quotes

*Better management of fish population by eliminating live bait, treble hooks, barbs on
hooks and reduce bag limits.*

*Work with the DNR to effectively control deer feeding near the Riverway with
regulations that actually limit feeding to a reasonable amount for those who want to
enjoy a few deer in their yard.*

PREVENTION OF INVASIVE SPECIES

Respondents were concerned about the presence and expansion of invasive species. Suggestions ranged from increasing aquatic invasive species boat inspections to banning live bait. Many of the respondents were concerned about invasive species being introduced by live bait but also

worried about the impacts that invasive species have on the fishery in general. One respondent suggested that management should be taken above the St. Croix Falls Dam to prevent invasive species from entering the upper part of the river.

Representative Quotes

Clearly post invasive species regulations at all boat landings and enforce cleaning of boats entering and leaving the waters by investing in cleaning stations and inspectors all day long at all landings.

SIGNAGE

Several comments were related to signage, which appeared to be split between two categories—increased NPS presence and increased education. Many respondents suggested adding better and more signage at landings to better inform visitors of the regulations, particularly boat speeds and wake.

Representative Quotes

I think a lot more could be more done to let people know that this is a National Park. There is a certain degree of respect and (hopefully) care for our National Parks.

I think it would be a good idea to post signage at boat landings on the rivers the Park tips hotline number, with info on specific things that citizens can watch out for and report them as needed.

Increase signage encouraging responsible river use.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Some commenters wanted to see more enforcement of current regulations and increased enforcement related to boating speeds. Respondents were concerned about preserving the nature of the St. Croix and suggested more enforcement as an avenue to ensure protection.

Representative Quotes

Enforce the no wake rules. Add more staff to patrol and respond to citizen complaints. Be particularly attentive to the ingress of unauthorized boats at the High Bridge, especially in the spring.

It all comes down to funding and staffing. I feel we need a greatly increased presence of enforcement and education on the river now that, post-Covid, outdoor recreation is greatly on the rise. The reality is that YouTube and Instagram have made access and entry much easier, but the lengthy 'Leave No Trace' ethics and other skill sets passed down to outdoor users in more traditional methods is now greatly lacking. When outdoor recreation became the best social distancing, lots of people started camping and venturing out. As great as that is, people enthusiastically venture out without the stewardship practice and knowledge. Having increased numbers of

friendly staff to give free education or education by 'tuition' (Law Enforcement Citation) is very much needed! Let's keep in place the protections that allow areas to be TRULY wild and scenic!

BOAT SPEEDS AND WAKE

Respondents expressed concerns about boats not following current wake laws and suggested a restriction on engine size be implemented. Commenters also expressed concern about motorboats expanding into areas that they have not historically been to, and suggestions were made to preemptively protect those areas by banning or placing restriction on motorboats.

Representative Quotes

Not allowing motor craft on the Namekagon. Potentially destructive and dangerous.

Limit the size of motor allowed on the St. Croix, implement a wake and/or speed limit.

Designate more parts of the rivers for non-motorized use only. Increase enforcement of existing slow-speed/no-wake rules.

As boat traffic increases in these areas boaters will extend their reach to as yet less traveled areas of the river. The National Park Service could restrict access to the river by requiring special use permits, limiting means of propulsion and I'm sure other means have been explored.

CAMPING

Commenters expressed the difficulty of locating a campsite while boating down the river. Suggestions included creating a reservation system and/or use a fee* that would be paid on-site or before arriving at the campsite. Another suggestion was to develop more campsites and add more separation between water access and land access campsites.

A few commenters were concerned about shoreline erosion associated with camping. Many people expressed their appreciation for camping opportunities and facilities.

*An additional note on fees. At least one respondent recommended looking into an entrance fee as opposed to a camping fee.

Representative Quotes

Legislate that shoreline campsites are only for use by watercraft travelers and not by drive-in or walk-in users. Put in a few more shoreline campsites or introduce more permitting systems for the current number of campsites.

Have a reservation system for the campsites and charge a small fee. This will provide another opportunity to let people know this is a national park and educate them on caring for it.

... The National Park Service could add just a few additional campsites and could try to monitor the landings, especially on weekends.

have registration boxes at sites and possibly start charging at least a minimal amount to deter nature-ignorant campers who only use campsite to get wasted and be loud, with no appreciation and respect for wildlife, earth and water cleanliness.

COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS

Commenters expressed their views on rental companies and guide services, particularly for tubing. Many questioned the sustainability of current levels of use and felt that large crowds were impacting their experience on the river. Commenters suggested limiting the number of commercial operators or creating dedicated landings for commercial groups.

Representative Quotes

Well, they could first start by limiting the amount of rentals that are allowed to use that section every single day. Then a little bit of education about how boat landings work would be nice.

These rental companies have a right to do business and I have seen those businesses explode since the early 90s. I want their patrons to get to experience the same river I get to experience. However, where is the accountability for the demands this puts on the public spaces? A 'commercial use only' river entry point seems pertinent. These companies have the ability to fund such a space that includes rental company-maintained restrooms, parking if needed, and erosion proof river entry. It would eliminate the land damage from poor parking availability, the pre-stagging of equipment that eliminates loading and unloading capabilities for non-commercial users, traffic jams (and safety) for loading and unloading, and above all for me--the public health threat that is being created by thousands of people needing to use the restrooms prior to leaving on their float.

Dedicated tube entry points with restrooms maintained by the rental companies to keep this traffic away from canoe landings and campgrounds, littering education/enforcement for tubers, river cleanup days for the rental outfits to help remediate the existing trash issue in the river.

Put limits and or restrictions on tubing outfitters. What's the tipping point to river destruction?

*Operators of canoe and tube trips who do not supervise/police their clients.
Operators of canoe and tube trips who do not help keep the river clean.*

RECREATION AND ACCESSIBILITY

Respondents expressed a desire for more varied recreation opportunities throughout the riverway. These suggestions included building landings for multiple types of watercraft and developing land-based recreation such as biking.

Representative Quotes

There are some put-ins and take-outs that are very inconvenient or difficult for drift boats. Not everyone uses a canoe or kayak which they appear to be designed for. One such place is on the Namekagon is off Co. Rd K and F. a few miles down from the dam above K. There used to be stairs which was difficult to back down and get a boat out now there is a small ramp certainly not designed for drift boats.

Work with MN DOT to find ways to allow cyclists to ride along the river in a safe way.

NOISE

Noise was expressed as a concern both for human experience on the river but also as a hazard for wildlife. The source of the noise ranged from development of roads close to the river to loud park visitors. Respondents suggested creating noise restrictions close to the river.

Representative Quotes

Noise - unsafe for wildlife & visiting humans. NPS has scenic easement. Also need an auditory easement. If only skeet & trap allowed, would improve the harmful noise pollution I routinely record 80-130 dB 1/4 mile away & on the butt end of the guns. River is on the muzzle end.

Develop a part of the comprehensive plan specifically addressing noise. Scenic and aesthetic values are good, the sound of gunshots that scare wildlife and interrupt the enjoyment of river paddlers are not. Repeated sharp sounds, as well as machinery, and transportation, impact the enjoyment of the wild Riverway as much as its scenic attributes.

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Respondents shared experiences when their visit was impacted by other visitors behaving in disruptive ways. Comments mentioned large and loud groups and people who were intoxicated and disrupting others. Some respondents questioned the legality and ethics of others' behaviors.

Representative Quotes

When seeking out a peaceful environment, sometimes the quiet has been interrupted by teenagers using the beach access/landings for "partying". Especially when leading

youth group through a YMCA camp, I have had uncomfortable and even dangerous situations.

Along the Middle Saint Croix, large rafts of tube floaters are often intoxicated and litter small liquor shot bottles and cans along as they float. Some camping groups also exceed the maximum allowed size. During Covid, illegal camping was rampant. The barriers to my experiencing the riverway are those of unethical and illegal uses, people who use the scenic riverway the same way they would use a river with a lesser designation.

CONCLUSION

This document provides a summary of the public's concerns and suggestions on how the National Park Service can improve the riverway. While not every individual comment is included, the major themes have been captured and every correspondence has been reviewed. This information is meant to help assess current conditions and guide management decisions.