



[www.americanwhitewater.org](http://www.americanwhitewater.org)

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February 4, 2010

Superintendent Don Neubacher  
Yosemite National Park  
Attn: Merced River Plan  
P.O. Box 577  
Yosemite National Park, CA 95389  
Submitted via email to: [yose\\_planning@nps.gov](mailto:yose_planning@nps.gov)

RE: Merced River Plan

Dear Superintendent Neubacher,

American Whitewater is pleased to offer these scoping comments regarding the Merced River Plan. American Whitewater is a national non-profit organization with a mission of protecting and restoring our nation's whitewater resources while enhancing opportunities to enjoy them safely. Our members are primarily non-commercial conservation-oriented kayakers, canoeists, and rafters. American Whitewater specializes in connecting paddlers with river stewardship opportunities. While much of our work is focused on river conservation, we also strive to keep Americans connected with rivers and the natural environments that they flow through. Maintaining a close connection between a conservation-oriented facet of the public and our nation's treasured natural landscapes - in a low impact manner that inspires nature appreciation and conservation - is the context of these comments.

Yosemite National Park prohibits human-powered kayaking, canoeing, and rafting on most of the rivers and streams within the Park, including significant reaches of the Wild and Scenic Merced River and its tributaries (both within and outside of the Wild and Scenic Corridor, including the Wild and Scenic South Fork of the Merced). American Whitewater asks that the NPS explore (and ultimately adopt) an alternative that allows the public to experience the entire Merced River and its tributaries in human-powered whitewater-specific boats. We ask that the alternative allow only non-commercial use (except for reaches already permitted for commercial use). We ask that the alternative consider managing paddling like any other day use of the Park such as hiking and rock-climbing, and managing overnight paddling like any other overnight backcountry use like backpacking or climbing. We ask that no new or formal river access areas or parking facilities be considered, and that the alternative consider paddlers identical to hikers and other sightseers with regards to parking and accessing the rivers

and streams in question. We are fully supportive of also considering (and employing) methods to monitor and if necessary limit use in a rational and fair manner, similar to methods used regarding trail and other resource use and capacities. In analyzing the alternative outlined above, we ask that the National Park Service consider the following issues:

### **1. National Park Policy and Practice**

Yosemite National Park is one of only two National Parks in the entire Country to prohibit human-powered kayaking, canoeing, and rafting (i.e. paddling) on any river reach. All other National Parks allow paddling throughout the Parks' waters. For an example you may want to review the recently completed Olympic National Park Final General Management Plan Environmental Impact Statement, Vol 2, at page 68, which outlines the Park's simple management policy regarding paddling:

"Within the frontcountry and wilderness zones, nonmotorized/hand powered boating, including kayaking will continue to be an approved activity."

The New River Gorge National River and the Gauley River National Recreation Area are units of the NPS that are largely dedicated to supporting paddling on the New and Gauley rivers in West Virginia. The Rivers and Trails Conservation and Assistance program within the NPS actively advocates that rivers on private and public lands be made accessible to the public. It is generally the policy and practice of the NPS to support the interests of citizens who seek to explore and experience our National Parks from kayaks, canoes, and rafts.

### **2. Recreational Use Capacity**

We believe that the paddling capacities of the various reaches of the Merced River and its tributaries are not zero. However, most reaches have been managed as though they have zero capacity for some time. Surely one group of paddlers would not be too many, and alternately one million groups would be too many. We expect that the demand will be significantly below capacity for the waterways in question, and are of course supportive of methods to track and when necessary limit use. We ask that the NPS address the paddling capacity (regardless of the methodology used) of the entire Merced River and its tributaries. If the NPS determines a river reach has a zero capacity, then we ask that the determination be made with significant evidence and explicit rationale.

### **3. Wilderness Compatibility**

Paddling is a Wilderness compliant activity. It is non-mechanized, human powered, quiet, low-impact, and is an ancient primitive form of travel. Paddling is allowed in Wilderness areas across the country, and on virtually every river and stream in the Nation.

#### **4. Wild and Scenic Rivers Act Compatibility**

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is very supportive of paddling, as are the many interpretive documents relating to the Act published by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Council. This oft quoted section of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act offers insight:

“Each component of the national wild and scenic rivers system shall be administered in such manner as to protect and enhance the values which caused it to be included in said system without, insofar as is consistent therewith, limiting other uses that do not substantially interfere with public use and enjoyment of these values. 16 U.S.C. § 1281(a).”

Paddling either is such a value on the Merced River and its tributaries, or is at least an appropriate means of “public use and enjoyment of these values.” Certainly paddling does not “substantially interfere” with those values. Thus, the NPS should protect and enhance, or at the very least not unreasonably limit, paddling enjoyment of the Merced River and its tributaries.

In addition, allowing paddling is vital to the process of defining the Merced River’s outstanding remarkable values. Currently, it is difficult to assess the recreational value of some river reaches because the primary form of recreation is prohibited. Indeed it seems that the NPS will be unable to analyze and recognize an inherent and likely outstanding remarkable value while prohibiting its expression.

#### **5. Management Needs**

Skilled non-commercial whitewater paddlers have very different and vastly fewer management needs than unskilled and commercial users on easier stretches. Paddlers would utilize existing trails to access rivers and creeks and follow the same rules as hikers – in fact they are hikers until they reach the water. Paddlers typically traverse these streams with kayaks that are easily portaged around downed trees (Large Woody Debris) and un-runnable rapids, and typically pass through places without a trace. Paddlers receive their information from trusted community resources, primarily peers, guidebooks, and websites, and do not need interpretive displays or signage. No trails, roads, golf courses, streetlights, hotels, swimming pools, interpretive displays, campgrounds, or new parking facilities are required to support paddling. Paddlers simply need enticing natural rivers and a way to get to them via car or foot.

#### **6. Resource Impacts**

Resource impacts of allowing paddling can be presumed to be low compared to other uses of the Park. Paddling downstream on a river is likely the lowest impact means of traveling through a natural environment. While accessing the river, scouting, or portaging, paddlers are just like hikers or anglers, leaving only footprints and often not even those when traversing riparian bedrock and boulders. While camping, paddlers are just like backpackers and overnight climbers, and practice leave no trace methods. Many

of the paddling opportunities are in parts of the Park that are seldom visited, and flows support paddling during shoulder seasons when other uses are lower in density. Paddling is compatible with other uses of the Park, and equal to them in merit.

## **7. Recreational Context**

Paddling is, like hiking, a means of moving through the Park and seeing the sights. In addition, paddling rapids that are unique to the Park allow visitors to directly experience the power and beauty of the Park in a way that can be experienced no other way, and in no other place. The challenges that rivers offer focus the senses, and sharpen the experiences that paddlers have in the Park. Solitude, scenery, small group definition, and sense of place are important to every specialized group like paddlers.<sup>1</sup> Research has shown that paddling, and especially whitewater paddling, is a highly place-based activity.<sup>2</sup> Allowing the American public the opportunity to establish a relationship with the Park on this deep and personal level will significantly enhance the public value of the Park.

## **8. Youth Outdoors**

Paddling is fun. Young people like fun. Young people like paddling. Paddling is a great way to get young people outside and experiencing nature in a captivating and playful way. While a family camping trip may not hold the attention of today's youth, paddling a whitewater river certainly does. Just as stressed out adults find peace and solace navigating rapids, scaling crags, and skiing powder, so too do over-stimulated kids and young adults. Watching adults paddle more challenging water can also inspire kids to get outside and learn how to paddle, even if they themselves do not paddle the most challenging rapids. Supporting paddling on the Merced River offers one way to entice kids and young adults into the woods.

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<sup>1</sup>Ewert, Alan., Hollenhorst, S. 1994. *Individual and Setting Attributes of the Adventure Recreation Experience*. Leisure Sciences 16: 177-191.

<sup>2</sup>Kinney, T.K. 1997. *Class V Whitewater Paddlers in American Culture: Linking Anthropology, Recreation Specialization, and Tourism to Examine Play*. Unpublished Graduate Thesis. Northern Arizona University.

Bixler, R., and E. Backlund. 2002. Chattooga National Wild and Scenic Private Whitewater Boater Substitution Study. <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Document/view/documentid/709/>

Backlund, E.A. *The importance of place and substitutability of river recreation experiences: empirical evidence from the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River*. Proceedings of the 2005 Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium. 386. [http://www.fs.fed.us/ne/newtown\\_square/publications/technical\\_reports/pdfs/2006/ne\\_gtr341.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/ne/newtown_square/publications/technical_reports/pdfs/2006/ne_gtr341.pdf)

**Conclusions:**

Thank you for considering these comments. We are hopeful that you will conclude that allowing paddling in Yosemite National Park, on at least the entire Merced River and its tributaries including the South Fork of the Merced, is highly appropriate and is a great compliment to the other uses allowed in the river corridor.

Sincerely,

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