

Greg Tollefson
Specialized Reporting
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WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO THE SMITH RIVER?
(Part 1 of a Series)

When George Erickson first floated the Smith River in a rubber raft he didn't see another boat for five days. He didn't see any No Trespassing signs either.

It took a whole day's drive from his home in Great Falls to the launching site, called a "put-in" in boating jargon, near Fort Logan. The rutted one-lane county road from Ulm was nearly impassable in spots and when the going was good the car crept along at 10 or 15 mph. The first night of Erickson's first Smith River trip was spent camping in the car at the edge of the stream.

Near first light the next day, Erickson slid the cumbersome black army surplus raft into the water, fitted a pair of oars through makeshift oarlocks, lashed a duffel bag to a plank stretched across the raft for a luggage rack, threw in a fishing rod, and sailed down the river.

For five days he drifted downstream, stopping to fish and nap as he pleased. The fishing was so good that the novelty wore off and he found himself spending more time gawking at the spectacular scenery.

Each night he selected a campsite that showed little or no

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sign of previous occupancy. Dinner consisted of fresh trout, grape Kool Aid and a Hershey bar. The sound of the river lulled him to sleep.

The few cabins he passed seemed deserted. Two or three times he saw fishermen along the banks. They all waved and smiled. He also saw several ranchers who waved from their tractors or honked the horns on their pickup trucks.

Erickson's father was waiting for him as he pulled the raft up the bank of the river near Hound Creek late on the fifth day. He felt like he had returned from another world.

That was in 1948.

"The river hooked me that first time and I've been floating it ever since, sometimes two or three times a year," Erickson said.

One June afternoon in 1985, after driving down through Belton and White Sulphur Springs, George Erickson and his wife slid their sleek Avon raft into the Smith at Camp Baker, one of the last of more than 50 boats launched that day. The raft, like most of the others, was fitted with a tubular steel frame for rowing, with a huge camp cooler mounted on one end. There were no army surplus rafts on the river that day.

It was nearly dark when Erickson pulled the boat up next to

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six others at Spring Creek boat camp, just eight miles from the put-in. The nicer camping spots already had tents on them so the Ericksons set up camp more than 100 yards from the stream in a small clearing in a willow thicket.

They could not hear the river from camp, but they could hear the other campers. Someone had firecrackers and somebody had a tape deck. Between the fireworks and the soothing melodies of punk rock, sleep didn't come until the wee hours.

Before any of the other campers were stirring the next morning, the Ericksons were on the river, hoping to get far enough ahead to have some solitude. It was not to be.

"I don't think more than an hour went by on the entire trip without us passing or being passed by another boat," he said. "It got to be a race each night, just to see who would get to the good campsites first."

With No Trespassing signs everywhere along the banks, the limited public campsites were crowded, noisy and littered.

Along the banks a number of new A-frames and other vacation cabins had appeared. People lounging on decks in front of these places did not wave or smile.

Rounding one bend in the river, Erickson thought he was hallucinating until his wife assured him that he did see a golf

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course laid out where a stand of native grass had been the year before. At another spot, they had to stop the boat to allow a pickup to ford the river to a brand new cabin. The people in the truck just glared at them.

They didn't fish much, but when they did it didn't seem the fishing was very good compared with years past. They carefully released all the fish they caught.

When they pulled their raft out of the river at the fishing access site near Eden Bridge it took 10 minutes to find the car they had paid \$50 to have brought from the put-in. The parking lot was jammed and cars were parked on the shoulder of the county road for nearly a quarter mile. They had to wait for four other groups to load before they could back their car down to the crowded gravel beach.

"Things are real different on the Smith these days. It may be too far gone to save. One thing I know for sure, you don't get that feeling of aloneness out there anymore," Erickson said.

Erickson is not the only one who has noticed the changes along the Smith River, and he is not the only one who is concerned about it.

Landowners all along the stream, formerly friendly and helpful to floaters when needed, have begun posting their property

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against trespassing. Confrontations between landowners and floaters have increased, sometimes turning ugly.

Floaters complain about crowding and lack of access. Public campsites along the river are limited, and in some cases far apart, making private lands tempting for overnight stops. Litter and human waste have accumulated at some of the more popular areas, making camping a sometimes unpleasant experience. Firearms, firecrackers and tape decks used by some floaters all detract from the experience for others.

Occasionally large parties, sometimes as many as thirty people, tour the river together, taking over entire campgrounds and keeping others awake late into the night with their merry-making. [Alcohol consumption, in camp and on the river, has contributed, some say, to the present problem.

"I can fill a big garbage bag with beer cans every trip," Joe Murphy of Helena said. [Murphy, who first floated the Smith in 1963, said that the people now using the Smith are different.

"Years ago, you only saw the hard core fishermen on the Smith, people who knew what they were doing and were prepared for the unexpected. Now everybody and his brother floats the Smith, sometimes in boats that you wouldn't put in a swimming pool."

The Smith River has been discovered, and many people are not

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pleased.

The Smith River flows north from its headwaters in the Castle and Little Belt Mountains near White Sulphur Springs for more than 80 miles to its junction with the Missouri River near Ulm. From a Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks fishing access site at Camp Baker, north and west of White Sulphur Springs, the river is inaccessible to the public for some 60 miles until it reaches another fishing access site at Eden Bridge, south of Great Falls.

Between the two access sites the river winds through timbered country and spectacular canyons. About one third of the land bordering this stretch of river is public, most of it administered by the U.S. Forest Service. The rest of the land is in the hands of about 20 major landowners and a similar number of smaller cabin site owners.

The holdings along the river are remote and virtually inaccessible in winter. Only a few hardy families live "down on the Smith" year round. Even in summer a brief rain can render the county road and private ranch roads impassable as the road surface transforms suddenly to a greasy gumbo.

This is dry country and water is scarce. The Smith River itself runs dry some years in some sections. Most years the

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Smith is too low to float by mid-July, sometimes earlier.

When the water in the Smith goes down, the fences go up. Ranchers, trying to keep their cattle from wandering upstream or downstream onto other ranches, string barbed wire across the river bed. More than one boat has been chewed to shreds by rusty wire over the years.

Lewis and Clark camped on the Missouri, ^{in 1805,} across from the mouth of "a beautiful river. . . which wound through a charming valley toward the Southeast, in which many herds of buffalo were feeding; till at a distance of 25 miles it entered the Rocky Mountains and was lost to our view." Saving the big names for later, the explorers honored then Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith by naming the stream after him.

Change came slowly to the Smith River country. It was not until the second half of the century that the presence of the white man in the region became more than a transitory phenomenon. Even then, when the gold played out, most of the newcomers moved on.

Following the discovery of gold at Last Chance Gulch, present-day Helena, miners spread out over the territory. Major strikes occurred at Confederate Gulch and Diamond City, both located on headwater tributaries to the Smith River. To protect

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the fortune hunters from marauding Indians, the U.S. government saw fit to establish a military presence in the area. Camp Baker was ~~established~~ ^{built} on the Smith River in 1869. A more permanent facility, later named Fort Logan, was ~~established~~ ^{built} a few miles upstream a year later.

Once the gold was gone and the Indians no longer a threat, things settled down in the Smith River country. The town of White Sulphur Springs was established in 1878 and served as the hub of new ranching activity throughout the upper Smith River country.

By the time of statehood, 1889, large cattle and sheep ranching operations were underway all along the river. Smaller homesteads also began cropping up. The "honyockers" staked out their farms and ranches on good bottomlands and benches along the river. Small communities developed, post offices were established and schools built. Communities like Millegan, Truly and Orr, Ming Coulee, Spanish Coulee, Deep Creek and Two Creeks became the social and educational centers for clusters of ranch families from the Smith River country.

A road was built roughly paralleling the river from Eden to White Sulphur Springs. This gravel road -- now Montana Secondary 360 -- running some 80 miles along the west side of the river,

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high above the breaks and bottomlands, remains the only access to most of the ranches along the Smith.

For many years, the Smith River country was known only for its cattle. A few sportsmen ventured into the remote canyons and returned with tales of rugged beauty and unbelievable fishing, but it was just too inaccessible for most. Those who lived there were not particularly eager to advertise the place.

After World War II a strange phenomenon occurred. People occasionally began floating down the Smith River in rubber rafts, the kind left over from the great war in the Pacific.

"The first one I saw go by must have been about 1946 or 47," according to Junior Carlson, a rancher near Two Creek who has lived his whole life on the Smith. "It was like the martians or something that first time."

Those first few boats did not signal an imminent invasion. No more than a handful of people would venture down the river each year. Those ranchers who encountered them generally treated them with kindly amusement, didn't mind them camping on private land and gave a helping hand when it was needed.

"In those days they always seemed like such nice folks," Carlson said. "They were just people who loved the scenery and liked to fish. They didn't seem to cause much trouble."

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By the early 70's traffic on the river was beginning to pick up. The availability of cheap, non-surplus rubber rafts began to turn more and more streambank fishermen into wilderness voyagers. The bright yellow two and four-man rubber boats began to appear more and more frequently on the river, sometimes floating all the way from old Camp Baker to Eden.

It was easy in those days to get permission from a rancher to put-in or take-out a boat on private property. Many times the floaters would only be on the water for a day or two. Then feelings began to change. If permission was not given, floaters sometimes took matters into their own hands. Occasionally fences were cut and tire tracks slashed across a hay meadow. Garbage and litter accumulated at campsites. Fence posts wound up being used for firewood. Sometimes buildings and equipment were vandalized. Occasionally a rancher would find a cow killed by a vandal's bullet.

At the same time, a few individuals began to see some commercial potential for the river. Fishing outfitters, looking for places to take customers that wouldn't be as crowded as the Madison and the Big Hole, began to pay attention to the Smith.

Richard Fryhover was the first commercial outfitter to ^{guide} operate regularly on the Smith. As late as 1974 he was the only

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one known to be operating on the river, taking four or five groups down the river between mid-May and mid-July. His sole proprietorship did not last long after that.

The outdoor recreation boom beginning in the mid-1970s and continuing to this day, has permanently changed the way things are on the Smith.

In 1973, the Montana Fish and Game Department estimated that 400 floaters used the Smith. By 1979 the figure was estimated at 1600 floaters for the month of June. Nearly a dozen commercial guiding operations were using the river for at least part of the season.

Paul Roos, a Helena outfitter who first floated the Smith as a teenager in the 60's, has watched the increasing use with alarm.

"As I booked more and more trips on the Smith, I saw that I wasn't the only one doing it. Some days five or six outfitters put in at Camp Baker, not to mention the considerably larger numbers of the general public."

Roos and others watched with dismay as camping on private land was eliminated and No Trespassing signs went up. Public campsites along the river were overcrowded and being destroyed.

"I spent two hours collecting and burning toilet paper from

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the brush around the camp at Cow Coulee one trip. It was enough to make me sick," Roos said.

John Maki, another outfitter, shares Roos' ^{dislike} ~~dismay~~.

"Years ago we could float the Smith and hardly see another boat. Ranchers were tickled pink if you stopped to talk awhile. We were a novelty and it used to be kind of a friendly thing," Maki said.

Now, according to Maki, the ranchers look at floaters as an inconvenience or worse.

"The gates are all locked, the private camps are all closed and the old friendliness is gone," he said.

In years past, Maki occasionally booked customers for shorter trips on the Smith, relying on his rapport with some of the landowners to obtain permission to end the float on private property and cross that property to get out of the valley.

"No more," Maki said. "The last time I did that it cost \$100 a person to take the boats out on a ranch two days down, and even that took a bunch of horse trading."

Gary Anderson, a rancher on the Smith, explained that many of the landowners aren't "anti-floating."

"I don't mind people floating past, in fact sometimes I enjoy watching the show. It's just that what comes with it has

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started to have some economic impacts on us. It takes time to fix fences, clean up garbage or repair a piece of equipment that has been vandalized. Time spent on that kind of stuff is time not spent tending to business, and that costs me money."

Anderson is also concerned with the increasing number of people who he thinks are floating the river without the proper equipment or knowledge to make it to the other end.

"You would be surprised to see the number of people who show up at my door in the middle of the night with a torn up boat and a few soggy belongings. It happens all along the river. When it does, we get saddled with babysitting them until we can get them to town."

One rancher who asked not to be identified told of being awakened just after midnight by the sound of a tractor. With his nearest neighbor being more than five miles away, he knew that it must be his own equipment.

"This guy had driven my tractor through two fences. Turned out he was just drunk and joyriding. They were camped right in the middle of my hay meadow. Sometimes it seems like people just don't think the law applies any more once they leave town," he said.

"It may be just a fraction of the people floating the river

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who cause the trouble, but they cause enough ~~trouble~~ to make it tough for everybody," Gary Anderson said.

Over the years, ranchers have taken more and more action to restrict public use of their lands. Don McKamey, whose family has ranched near Eden for nearly 100 years, once allowed floaters to end their trips on his ranch, saving them an extra six miles of floating through a braided channel with tricky logjams and stretches of slack water. "There got to be so many people who didn't pay attention to my fences or signs that I just closed it up," he said. "I tried to be neighborly, but it just didn't work," he added.

While many ranchers posted their land, some started to sell it. A rash of subdivision in the mid-70's brought nearly twenty new summer homes to the Smith River. In some cases trailers were hauled in and planted along the shore. Each year a few new cabins appear.

"The subdivision business is the thing that scares me most about the Smith," George Erickson said. "They can always figure out how to regulate floaters, but it isn't nearly as easy to stop developers."

In 1985 a new means of identifying and posting private property was approved by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife

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and Parks. Landowners were to mark gate posts and fence corners with fluorescent orange paint to warn away potential trespassers. The ranchers along the Smith River have been very liberal with the bright paint. Even some of the cliff faces are now adorned with great swaths of fluorescence.

For Joe Murphy, his trip down the Smith in 1985 was especially disturbing. "There was paint everywhere. I like to call it the oranging of the Smith," he said.

Those who use the Smith River for recreation, those who earn part of their living by guiding on it and those who live and ranch there may not agree on much, but they do agree on one thing. Something must be done to save the Smith before it's too late. It is not a new idea.

"The landowners have been trying to get something done for years," according to Gary Anderson.

"We outfitters recognized the problem coming and have tried to at least police ourselves, but the problems go far beyond what we can do alone," said Craig Madsen, a Great Falls river guide.

Dave Todd is the recreation specialist for the Great Falls region of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. One of his responsibilities is working on a solution to the problems on the Smith River.

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"We have been working on the problem for years. We are hopeful that things are about to get better, rather than worse," Todd said.

(Next week, "What is being done to save the Smith?")

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SAVING THE SMITH -- BETTER LATE THAN NEVER
(Part 2 of a Series)

Back around 1970, west central Montana's Smith River was under consideration for protection under the national Wild and Scenic Rivers program. The Smith, had it been included, would have come under federal management, with strict limitations on kinds of development along its banks, numbers of floaters and tightly controlled commercial use. Gary Anderson, a Millegan rancher, fought hard against the designation, fearing that the added not@riety would, in fact, increase use on the Smith.

In 1972 a similar piece of legislation was considered by the Montana legislature. Gary Anderson spearheaded the successful fight to defeat that bill, claiming that it would make the Smith into an "80 mile garbage can."

Now he's not so sure he did the right thing.

"Maybe if we had that legislation, we wouldn't be in the fix we're in today," he said.

The "fix" Anderson is referring to stems from the dramatic increase in popularity of the Smith River among recreationists in recent years.

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The Smith, long a kind of local secret, has for a number of reasons become known to the outside world. Among fishermen it is known as an excellent and occasionally "fantastic" brown trout and rainbow trout fishing stream. Among others it is known for the beauty of its winding course through narrow, shaded canyons gouged out of limestone a millenia ago. For still others the teaming wildlife and wilderness setting are enough ^{of an attraction} ~~to draw them~~.

For whatever the reason, people have learned about the Smith.

In 1973 the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks estimated that 400 boaters used the Smith River between April and October. By 1980 the number of floaters was closer to 2000, with the vast majority of them on the river between Memorial Day and the 4th of July. Use continued to increase steadily. On June 30, 1984, a total of 278 floaters were known to be on the river.

Public campsites are limited on the Smith, especially in the first 15 and last 20 miles of the 60-mile trip. The capability of the Smith to withstand the impacts of continually increasing use is severely in question.

Is anything being done to protect the Smith?

Well, yes, but is it enough?

Montana Department of Fish, Wildilfe and Parks personnel

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have been keeping tabs on the Smith for years. The first official step in regulating use of the river came back in 1972 when the stream was closed to use by all powerboats. This apparently small step actually eliminated a majority of the potential users.

"If we hadn't eliminated powerboats, this river would be done," according to Al Wiperman, a fisheries biologist for the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. "New jet boats could easily navigate the whole thing today."

At the same time, the Department embarked on an effort to inventory the various resources of the Smith River to lay the groundwork for a management plan. The work was done in conjunction with the Department sponsored effort to gain legislative protection for the river.

A series of recommendations resulting from this work were issued in a 1973 planning report. Many of the recommendations foreshadowed the problems that have since developed on the river.

"I think that if we had been able to convince the landowners to support some sort of scenic waterway designation at that time, we could have solved some of our problems long ago," according to Dan Vincent, supervisor for the Great Falls Region of the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

"Without legislation to support our efforts at managing the

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Smith, we have had to make do with the few tools we have," he said.

One of the tools used by the Department in their effort to protect the Smith has been silence.

"We try not to advertise the Smith. In fact we don't even pass out information on the Smith unless someone specifically asks for it," he said.

Conspicuously absent from the rack of brochures, maps and regulations in the waiting area of the Great Falls office of the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks is the Smith River Floaters Guide. Those interested must ask the receptionist for one.

Dave Books, editor of the Department's publication, Montana Outdoors, has complied with the Department's policy of not publicizing the Smith.

"We may occasionally use a photo from the Smith, but we have avoided doing any articles on it. The department just doesn't want to draw any attention to it," he said.

There are others involved in this informal conspiracy of silence. Bert Lindler, environmental writer for the Great Falls Tribune, has deliberately avoided publicizing the Smith in his columns.

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"We have tried to cooperate with Fish and Game in not doing much to publicize the river. Other than publishing regulation changes and warning floaters when the water level drops too far, we probably haven't done five stories about the Smith over the years," he said.

Despite these efforts, exposure has come. Fishing magazines have done stories extolling the quality of the fishery, and the manufacturers of Coleman canoes used the Smith in a national advertising campaign for one of its products.

"Interestingly," Lindler said, "you see more of those Coleman canoes wrapped around logs on the Smith than any other kind of boat."

By 1980, landowners on the Smith were beginning to demand that the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks do something to regulate floating on the Smith. Conflicts between landowners and floaters had increased with the traffic on the river. Vandalism, trespassing and ill-will were increasing each season.

"Our hands were pretty much tied as far as regulating floaters, but we could regulate fishing and the use of other resources," Vincent said.

Vincent explained that the only justification for limiting floating would have to be based on threats to the resources.

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Crowding, as long as it doesn't damage the resource, is not enough, he added.

That year the department assigned a river ranger to patrol the Smith during the floating season. The ranger was responsible for enforcing regulations and served a public relations role with both landowners and the floating public. The ranger also began to collect the user data necessary to plan for the future of the river.

It was also in 1980 that the outfitters using the Smith got together for the first time to share their concerns over the future of the river.

"It was kind of informal at first, but finally we realized that we had to organize for our own good," said Paul Roos, a Helena outfitter.

The outfitters began to police themselves and plan trips to avoid conflicting with each other's plans *and to avoid those periods of highest public use, weekends and holidays.*

"We probably know better than anybody how bad the situation has gotten," according to another Helena outfitter, John Maki.

"Lots of people blame the outfitters for the increased traffic on the Smith. Anything that goes wrong, people are quick to say it was some outfitter who did it. Fact of the matter is our clients are generally the least rowdy people on the river. Our camps are

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the cleanest and we keep the size of our parties down to prevent crowding," he said.

The outfitters and the landowners were not the only ones ~~concerned~~ ^{talking} about the Smith. Complaints from floaters about crowding, poor fishing, fences, litter, and inconsiderate behavior of other floaters came in to the Fish, Wildlife and Parks offices in increasing numbers each year. In 1984 the department was finally able to get representatives of all the interested groups together to work on the problem.

The group, known as the Smith River Ad-Hoc Committee, includes representatives of the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the U.S. Forest Service (which manages most of the public land along the Smith), Gary Anderson as the representative for the Smith River landowners, Jim Kent of Livingston and Craig Madsen of Great Falls representing outfitters on the river and Diane McDermond of Great Falls who, as a member of the Medicine River Canoe Club, represents the floating public.

Since 1984 the committee has met on a monthly basis in an attempt to reach some agreement on the proper way to manage the Smith. The agreement did not come easily. At first some members of the committee were suspicious of the motivations of others.

"It took awhile, but we finally learned that we were all

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basically interested in the same thing," Jim Kent said. "Once it was accepted that we were all primarily interested in preventing the ruination of that river and the land along it, we started to get things done."

Acting upon the committee's recommendations the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks was able to enlist the aid of landowners, outfitters and the public to improve the situation on the Smith. Some of the things resulting from the committee's work were:

- * Latrines were installed at the most heavily used camps along the river.
- * Signs indicating private land were made available to landowners and more signs to identify public lands and camps were installed.
- * Fish, Wildlife and Parks personnel worked with landowners to design and install "float gates" in fences across the river, to allow for boats to pass without damage.
- * A detailed float guide was prepared and distributed to floaters describing available camps, providing information on methods of low impact camping and listing the "do's and don'ts" of etiquette on the river.

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- * A full-time river ranger was assigned to the Smith during floating seasons, supplanting the part-time position that had been filled intermittently in years past.
- * The Fish, Wildlife and Parks also stepped up enforcement efforts on the river, and conducted periodic saturation checking of licenses and limits.
- * A program of floater education was established using bulletin boards at the put-ins and visits from the river ranger along the way.

All of these measures required cooperation from landowners. Access across private land was needed for enforcement. An interest in avoiding further conflict was needed to induce ranchers to install float gates. Help was needed in hauling portable toilets to remote public camps.

One of the problems identified by the committee, subdivisions, was not easily addressed by the group. The department has no legal means of preventing a landowner from selling off parcels of land.

"We contacted the Nature Conservancy because they had been instrumental in establishing the Blackfoot Recreation Corridor," Vincent said.

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The Nature Conservancy purchases conservation easements on lands with unique biological characteristics and then, when public funds become available, transfers the easements to public agencies. The easement is a guarantee that the parcel of land will not be developed or subdivided. The Conservancy is now examining the possibility of similar arrangements on portions of the Smith.

Bob Kiesling is the director of Nature Conservancy activities in Montana and Wyoming. The Smith has become one of his main concerns.

"I can't tell you what land we're looking at down there. Confidentiality is real important at this stage. I can tell you that it looks good right now for getting some easements on some of the real prime stretches of the river," he said.

"The new spirit of cooperation has been very gratifying to all of us," according to Dan Vincent. "People have been coming out of the bushes to help on this."

Along with the improvements, the river ranger collected user data from floaters on the river. This data made it clear to all involved that despite improvements in the situation, the major problem still had not been addressed. More and more people used the Smith each year, and at some point the number of people would

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exceed the capacity of the river to handle them without permanent environmental damage.

At the recommendation of the committee, the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks contracted with Joel Shouse, a Bozeman environmental planner, to conduct a study and prepare a management plan for the Smith River. The goals of the study were to collect accurate figures on the use of the river, determine the capacity of the river to absorb use and develop a plan to afford maximum public use of the stream while protecting the environmental values that make the Smith unique.

"I was pretty much starting from scratch," Shouse said.

"They had some data and they had made some improvements, but mainly they had this problem, too many people and what to do about it."

"We thought we had a pretty good example of what we wanted in the Blackfoot recreation corridor in western Montana, but the Blackfoot is much more accessible," Vincent said.

"It became quickly apparent that accessibility was the big limiting factor on the Smith," Shouse said. "Once you get on the Smith, you stay on it for three to five days. Landowners were not about to open up new public access sites, and I'm not sure that increased access would benefit the river in the long run

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anyway."

Shouse enlisted the support of the Helena Good Sam Club to collect user data at both ends of the float every day throughout the 1984 and 1985 floating seasons.

Every party that floated the river provided information that Shouse used to evaluate the situation.

"People were very cooperative. Many were glad to see some interest finally being shown in the problem. We even enlisted some new volunteer help that way," he said.

When Shouse was finished examining the data he had made some interesting discoveries:

- * Nearly 70% of floaters had floated the Smith before.
- * Outfitters accounted for only 4% of total river use.
- * Complaints of crowding increase drastically on days with more than 100 floaters starting out down the river.
- * Outfitter use is almost negligible during peak use periods.
- * Only 13% of the floaters were not Montana residents.
- * Montana counties most commonly represented by floaters included Lewis and Clark (26%), Cascade (14%), and Missoula (12%).

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Shouse's study concluded that the major problem for floaters was the lack of adequate camping space in the first 15 and last 20 miles of the trip.

"We only have room for 75 campers on the first and last nights of the trip. This is the single most important factor in both floater dissatisfaction and landowner/floater conflicts," Shouse said. "When floaters can't find a campsite on public land they choose private land as a last resort. The areas where trespassing and vandalism most commonly occur are at the beginning and the end of the trip."

"We are now trying to find ways to increase camp capacity in those areas to 100 persons, but we don't want to go any further than that," Vincent said.

"Shouse's studies combined with our own fisheries and wildlife surveys have shown that the problems on the Smith are essentially social, not biological at this point, and we don't want to encourage more than 100 floaters to launch on any given day by making more space available."

Expanding on this idea, Vincent explained that fisheries studies have shown that trout populations have not been adversely affected by increased use of the river. Vincent speculated that the number of boats made fish more wary and difficult to catch,

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thus the perception among long time floaters that the fishery was in decline.

He also pointed out that big game populations along the Smith get almost no impact from floaters because hunting and floating seasons do not coincide.

Based on Shouse's work, the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks has developed a management plan for the Smith River for the 1986 season. The main element of the plan is a new voluntary reservation system for Smith River users. Vincent hopes that a voluntary system will work well enough to ease the problems of crowding during peak periods on the river.

The reservation book will be kept at the Great Falls office of the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Floaters are encouraged to call in and register for the dates they wish to float. Callers will be informed of how many floaters have signed up to launch on any given day and will be encouraged to select other days when the number approaches 100 floaters. The number to call in Great Falls is 454-3411.

In addition to the voluntary reservation system, floaters will be asked to select campsites at the beginning of the float. This will allow floaters to know a campsite will be available and hopefully prevent trespassing or overcrowding in established

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camps.

Data collection will continue along the Smith, with the Good Sam Club again providing volunteers. A new Smith River map and guide will be distributed to floaters and the river ranger will visit many of them during floats.

"If the voluntary system doesn't work, we'll have to start seriously considering a mandatory reservation or permit system," Vincent said. "The department doesn't want that to happen; we don't like excess regulation any more than anyone else."

In April of 1986, public meetings were held in Great Falls, Helena, and Bozeman to explain the new program to the public, and respond to questions and comments. The turnout for the meetings was not overwhelming, according to Dave Todd.

"Most of the people who showed up are people we've been working with all along. I'll bet we didn't get 100 people at all three meetings," he said.

Todd and the others are concerned that people understand that complying with the voluntary system will be necessary to prevent stricter regulation.

Many in attendance at the meetings were skeptical about the possibility for success of the program.

Lisa Bay, an outfitter on the Smith along with her husband

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Mike, summed up the sentiments expressed by many at the meeting in Helena.

"It's pretty obvious to me that a mandatory permit system is going to be necessary before too long. A voluntary system is a nice idea, but have you ever seen one work?" she asked.

George Erickson, a Great Falls businessman who first floated up the Smith in 1948, echoed Bay's sentiments. "The sooner the better on mandatory permits, as far as I'm concerned," he said.

Whether or not the voluntary system will work remains to be seen. According to Dave Todd, early results are encouraging.

"Quite a number of people have already used the voluntary reservation system, and as the word gets out, we expect more," he said.

Regardless of the success or failure of the voluntary program, many of those involved are encouraged by what's going on. Gary Anderson is one of those who is hopeful about the future of the Smith.

"We have finally got people doing something about the river, not just complaining about it," he said.

The Smith will continue to flow and people will continue to float it. As with most things of beauty in our world, the effort to protect it will require lots of hard work for a few people for a long time to come.

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SIDEBAR #1

FLOATING THE SMITH: WHAT A FLOATER NEEDS TO KNOW

For information on the Smith River, including copies of the Smith River Guide, contact:

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Region Four Headquarters
Rt. 4041
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-3441

To find out about water conditions and make a voluntary reservation, call the same office.

Make arrangements to shuttle your vehicle from Camp Baker to Eden Bridge. Some shuttle services are available in White Sulphur Springs for about \$50. If you plan to do it yourself allow at least 5 hours in good weather. The county road along the Smith is often impassable to passenger vehicles during rainy periods.

Make sure your equipment is adequate for the trip. If you have any question, don't use it.

Equipment, Clothing and Food:

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- * Stable, sturdy raft, boat or canoe, capable of withstanding abrasions and collisions with rocks, trees and other hazards.
- * Spare oars or paddles and boat repair kit including pump for rafts.
- * First Aid kit.
- * Warm clothing and good rain gear.
- * Sleeping bags, pads and tents.
- * Food adequate for five days (even if a shorter trip is planned).
- * Sunscreen.
- * Good life jackets for each floater.
- * At least 100 ft. of strong rope.
- * Maps, fishing gear and cameras
- * Shovel, axe, toilet paper, garbage bags (pack out all garbage that is not burned).
- * Camp stove and fuel (use of open fires for cooking should be avoided if possible).
- * Fresh water and other beverages adequate for the entire trip.
- * Cooking utensils.