



**Official Comment on the NPS draft GMP for the Ozark National Scenic Riverways
12.19.2013**

On behalf of Environment Missouri's more than 13,000 supporters, activists, and members, we applaud the National Park Service for releasing a draft General Management Plan that offers the potential for the restoration and protection of the Ozark National Scenic Riverways and we urge them to adopt Alternative "A" in lieu of their preferred alternative.

Nearly fifty years ago, the people of Missouri entrusted two of their most spectacular rivers to the NPS. The agency established the Ozark National Scenic Riverways, the first-ever national park created exclusively to protect a river and its watershed. The NPS promised to take a snapshot of the rivers in 1964 and preserve them in that condition for future generations.

Unfortunately, that didn't happen. Decades of mismanagement and neglect have taken their toll on the parks. According to current estimates, access points on the rivers—places where the foliage has been broken in order to allow access by trucks, ATVs and RVs—have proliferated from the original dozen or so official points to over 130. Rather than use the 23 miles of park-designated horse trails, designed to minimize equestrian impact on water quality and maximize the safety and enjoyment of all park visitors, local horse operators guide tours on over 80 miles of trails. This has resulted in e. Coli impairment on the Jacks Fork. Overcrowding, scenic easement violations, and a general "anything goes" atmosphere all contribute to the degradation of the wilderness surrounding the rivers, the quality of the water in the rivers, and the overall park experience.

This is unacceptable. These are among the most beautiful rivers on the planet, and the park is one of the few wild places where people can explore a world-class spring system. The NPS is supposed to protect and preserve the beautiful places that make America such a natural wonderland. Their failures to enforce the previous management plan, and the overall inadequacy of the 1984 plan itself, are a failure to respect the wishes of the citizens of Missouri, who consider these rivers the gems of the state; and the wishes of all Americans, who rely on the NPS to ensure that our nation's special places remain special.

Visitors to the park—the vast majority of them from outside the Ozarks and outside of the state—are the single biggest contributors to the economies of Shannon, Carter and Dent counties, which rank among the most impoverished in the state. Should the rivers lose their natural charm, people will stop visiting. And if people stop visiting, the communities that live along the river will suffer economically.

Further, the park provides critical habitat for the Ozark Hellbender, an endangered salamander unique to Southern Missouri. Worsening water quality (an unavoidable result should the NPS fail to take adequate action) could result in the extinction of this 65 million year old species.

Fortunately, the NPS has listened to community leaders, small businesses, environmental groups, and nearly 15,000 petitions from locals, Missourians, and people from across the country, who have asked for stronger protections for Missouri's river gems.

We congratulate the NPS on their decision to appoint Bill Black as Superintendent of the Ozark National Scenic Riverways. Superintendent Black has done an excellent job righting some of the long-standing wrongs that have tarnished the park's reputation. However, his ability to do so is hampered by the 1984 GMP, which was inadequate when it went into effect nearly 30 years ago and is seriously outdated now.

The draft GMP that the NPS has released shows that they've heard what we've known for years—that the vast majority of Missourians think that the Current and Jacks Fork rivers deserve the protection and preservation that the NPS promised when they established the park. We urge the NPS to make their first priority in choosing an alternative the restoration of the Current and Jacks Fork to their 1964 conditions. We urge them to focus on preserving the wild nature of the rivers and traditional Ozarks heritage, as well as fostering deeper communication and understanding between park staff, the locals, and the people who travel from around the world to enjoy the park's spectacular beauty.

We urge the NPS to adopt Alternative "A", which provides the strongest protections for the rivers and does the most to establish deeper, more meaningful connections between the NPS, the region, and the park's visitors.

Alternative "A" does the least violence to the National Environmental Protection Act and conforms more closely to the original intent of the NPS to "take a snapshot of the river" and keep it in a similar state for future generations to enjoy. Further, Alternative "A" does the most to address many long-standing issues with the park, and puts into place protections that will ensure that the rivers are as beautiful twenty years from now as they were twenty years ago.

Alternative “A” accomplishes these goals through an aggressive plan to close roads and illegal access points and to provide equestrian experiences that allow horse-riders and boaters alike safe enjoyment of the park. Alternative “A” provides for the management of almost 3,500 acres of the Big Springs area as wilderness and places sensible limits on boat horsepower on ecologically-sensitive parts of the river. Alternative A better manages access points on the river, increases the number of hiking trails in the park, and provides the most cultural engagement with traditional Ozarks folkways.

Further, Alternative “A” does the most to engage the public with the park, by providing a large number of experiences designed to educate visitors on natural features and Ozarks heritage. Alternative “A” allocates the most resources to the enforcement of the rules that keep the park the special, safe and beautiful place that attracts millions of people from around the world each year to the Ozarks. Alternative “A” also seeks to develop an official “friends group” that would foster greater communication between the NPS, the communities that live along the rivers, and people that return to the Ozark National Scenic Riverways year after year.

Our more than 13,000 members, supporters, and activists we thank the NPS for taking the first steps towards addressing serious issues that have plagued one of our nation’s greatest natural parks for decades. On behalf of those who have enjoyed the park since its establishment and on behalf of the future generations of Americans who will come to the Current and Jacks Fork rivers to canoe, hike, swim, fish, and experience the Ozarks, we urge the NPS to adopt Alternative “A” and protect the Ozark National Scenic Riverways for the next twenty years.

Sincerely and with great appreciation,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. Keating". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "S" and a long, sweeping underline.

Stuart P. Keating
State Advocate
Environment Missouri