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OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI



**NETWORKS &
COLLABORATION**

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of a Healing Place Collaborative network diagram. Members are listed around the outside of the circle and each line between them indicates a collaboration or work done between those two members. Image courtesy of Mona Smith.

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PERSPECTIVES

THE NATIONAL RIVER ORGANIZATIONS

By John Helland

Citizens who appreciate the importance and preservation of our country's natural resources know that governmental agencies need assistance to do their jobs. That's why in the conservation arena so many not-for-profit or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are acting to augment and monitor the work of the government agencies.

When it comes to rivers—recreation, management, governance, protection, restoration—national nonprofit river groups make a significant contribution. What follows is a description of the five major NGOs active on rivers in the United States.



*The Mississippi River in Minnesota, by Ken Ratclif (Flickr)
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American Rivers

American Rivers is a Washington, D. C.-based nonprofit with the largest board and staff of the five NGOs, 26 board members and 80 full-time staff. Some of the staff are situated in nine regional offices around the country.

Created in 1973 by river advocates, it can be called “the Granddaddy” of national river organizations in size. American Rivers was formed initially to fight unnecessary dams on the nation’s free-flowing rivers and to add new rivers to the Wild and Scenic Rivers System, which was created by Congress in 1968. American Rivers’ goal is to help maintain for the nation clean, healthy rivers that sustain and connect U. S. citizens. The members and staff serve as advocates to protect wild and scenic rivers, restore damaged rivers, and conserve clean waterways.

Working with Congress and federal agencies, such as the Department of the Interior and the U.S. Forest Service, American Rivers advocacy also utilizes field work on particular threatened

ivers. They have an annual program that identifies the ten rivers in the country most under threat to be impaired or endangered. This garners a lot of media attention in April each year.

The increasing concern about the effects of climate change on natural resource systems has caused American Rivers to identify the potential impacts on river systems. They also have studied and explained the benefits of restoring flood plains, the toxic legacy of fracking and mining, and the damage caused by pipeline failures on rivers.

Lately, American Rivers has been promoting integrated water management, which is a system to manage water as a single resource, along with adopting proven technology and policies to promote the natural water cycle. Their work in this area is mostly with cities and water utilities to embrace and utilize the integrated water management approach locally.

River Network

River Network is a group created in 1988 in Portland, Oregon, but now based in Boulder, Colorado. It works on the local level with river advocates more than American Rivers does, and has a board of 15 members and a staff of 11.

River Network believes in three key ingredients for healthy rivers: clean water, ample water, and strong champions. The organization primarily serves as a helping network to empower and unite citizens and communities to protect and restore rivers.

River Network helps move the local effort on river issues with a bottom-up approach through different levels of government—local, regional, state, and federal. They work to encourage local friends’ groups of river advocates by providing a wide variety of services to advance the cause of healthy rivers. These services include mentoring, consulting, training, technical assistance, scientific support, and hands-on facilitation to strengthen the local effort. They also sponsor events and conferences.

River Network offers small grants and training in the use of best practices on rivers. Each year they sponsor a large River Rally to bring local groups and river advocates together, and to provide educational presentations and individual

awards for success in their effort. The rally always takes place in a part of the country that is near an iconic river, so the participants can enjoy paddling fun.

The River Management Society

The River Management Society (RMS) is a group of river professionals and supporters who study, protect, and manage North American rivers. Created in 1996 from two groups formed in the 1980s, RMS has a board of 13 and a staff of 2, with offices in Washington, D. C.

The goals of RMS are to provide professional development, scientific information and education, communication on policy development and decision-making at all levels, and capacity building through collaboration.

There are eight regional chapters of RMS, including one in Canada, that hold meetings and regional field trips to discuss river management issues. RMS prides itself on using a wide variety of forums to share information and connect river professionals regarding the appropriate use and management of river resources.

RMS works on hydropower reform and relicensing that emphasizes recreation and carrying capacity for river allocation. They conduct

several online workshops and webinars annually. They also keep tabs on which rivers require governmental permits for access, or which have bathroom waste disposal requirements.

One of the new projects for RMS is a national river recreation database with information for the general public on river access points, paddling difficulty rating, and available campgrounds. Another recent program is the River Studies and Leadership Certificate, which partners with several colleges to offer undergraduates select courses to enable them to join the next generation of river professionals working in the field.

Each year RMS has an annual River Ranger Rendezvous, sponsored by one of the regional chapters, that brings professionals together to combine a river trip and discuss common river management issues. Biennially, RMS conducts a river management symposium on international training related to planning and management topics for its members.

American Whitewater

American Whitewater (AW) formed in 1954 to conserve and restore America's whitewater resources and to enhance opportunities to enjoy the rivers safely. It is a membership organization

of individuals and more than 100 local paddling clubs. Twelve board members and ten full-time staff make up the organization's governance. Their current office is in the town of Cullowhee,

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North Carolina, which offers ample whitewater nearby.

AW seeks to connect the interests of human-powered river recreationists with ecological and science-based data resources. They maintain a national inventory of whitewater rivers, monitor potential threats to the rivers, promote public advocacy for whitewater management and for legislation, and provide technical support for local whitewater clubs. They also pursue and protect access and navigability on whitewater rivers.

In the Midwest, AW proposed concepts of Wisconsin law to protect rivers that U. S. Senator

Gaylord Nelson used in creating the 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers law. Also in Wisconsin, AW pushed a dam removal program and dam relicensing for recreational paddlers.

AW helped create the international scale of whitewater difficulty, Class I–Class VI, for whitewater enthusiasts to know the gradient of various rivers. They regularly sponsor several whitewater festivals and paddling events around the country.



*Arcola Bridge on the St. Croix River, north of Stillwater, Minnesota.
Image from the Metropolitan Design Center Image Bank, Copyright the Regents of the
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American Canoe Association

American Canoe Association (ACA), now 100 years old, is located in Fredericksburg, Virginia. It has 15 board members and 18 staff people. The ACA's mission is to provide people with paddling instruction and education in all its aspects. While this includes paddling any form of water resources—rivers, lakes, oceans, and estuaries—ACA promotes stewardship to protect these environments, and sanctions various events and programs for paddlesport exploration, competition, and recreation. They desire to make paddlesport opportunities both fun and safe for the public.

ACA attempts to make paddling education and instruction accessible to everyone interested,

including underserved communities. They regularly communicate paddlesport benefits as healthy lifetime activities, and create strategic alliances with other groups to expand awareness and knowledge.

A Safety and Education Council and certification program for paddlers is a major part of ACA work. They also provide a regular insurance program for local paddling clubs and events. ACA promotes a system of state directors to establish local programs to increase membership and to facilitate communication with the national office.

Collaboration

The five major national river NGOs play a prominent role in their primary focus areas and common collaboration efforts to assure that Americans know about their river resources and the need to help protect them.

American Rivers serves in a traditional advocate role for river issues, especially on a national level. There is collaboration and communication between American Rivers, American Whitewater, and the River Management Society on hydro-power relicensing and dam removal on certain rivers, but not always on a regular basis. RMS also has used AW's inventory and information on whitewater streams in order to develop their own national river recreation database.

River Network also does advocacy work, but more on the local level in terms of capacity building and education on how to promote river issues for desired results.

Because RMS is mainly composed of river professionals, both government and private, their meetings and symposia provide a wealth of cross-pollination between the major river NGOs and the public agencies active in the field. In the same vein, River Network's annual river rallies attract a lot of participants who may be members of two or three of the other NGOs, and whose networking and communication at the rallies leads to more collaboration possibilities among the NGOs.

Risa Shimoda, the Executive Director of RMS, has said that not only do rivers play a central role in shaping landscapes and creating biologically diverse and unique ecosystems, they also form the foundation of cultures, economies, and communities. Rivers connect us to nature, to our past, and to each other.

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About the Author

John Helland served as the nonpartisan research analyst for two environmental committees in the Minnesota House of Representatives for 36 years. Now retired, John serves on a variety of nongovernmental environment boards. As a longtime river lover, he greatly enjoys paddling on midwestern and western streams.