



Minnesota State Water Trails History

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, society was changing. People had more leisure time, more mobility, and more dispensable income than ever before.ⁱ The baby boom era, it seemed, was also the beginning of a recreation boom as a rapidly increasing population turned to recreational activities both new and old. Attendance at State and National Parks skyrocketed, purchases of hunting and fishing licenses continued to rise, and records of travel and leisure expenses showed considerable growth.ⁱⁱ As increased use pushed outdoor recreation facilities to or past capacity, research into the expansion of outdoor recreation received a stamp of approval from President Kennedy, and states worked to identify their own outdoor recreation potential.



In Minnesota, water recreation was predominantly on the lakes for which the state is known. With a growing population, use of the lakes increased to the point of crowding, and competing uses posed a safety risk.ⁱⁱⁱ Minnesotans began to seek out new bodies of water, recognizing a need to expand beyond the current recreation system. Nationally, the stage had been set to facilitate system expansion. In Minnesota, a group of citizens passionate about the rivers and canoeing—with the ardent support of numerous elected and appointed officials from various levels of government—led the charge.



The large and highly developed access areas would probably be hard surfaced, have unloading ramps if necessary, and have ample parking.

Support for Outdoor Recreation

In 1958, the US Congress established the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRRC), with the goals of developing a strategic plan for assessing current needs, future demand, and the policies and programs that would build a nation-wide outdoor recreation system accordingly. This notably bipartisan effort required review of documents and information already available, analysis of trend data, and solicitation of public opinion. The ORRRC's report, presented to President Kennedy in January of 1962, listed more than 30 detailed

recommendations for outdoor recreation. Specifically pertaining to the future Canoe and Boating Routes program, the report included strong recommendations highlighting water as a “focal point for outdoor recreation”, the economic benefits associated with outdoor recreation, and the growing demand for outdoor recreation as a leisure activity.^{iv} Furthermore, the federal Outdoor Recreation and Resources Review Commission during the same time had called for each state to prepare a long-range plan for the development of outdoor recreation opportunities, and the creation of dedicated funds for these purposes.^v

Passed in 1961, the federal Area Redevelopment Act (ARA) sought to stimulate those parts of the nation significantly impacted by unemployment and underemployment. Some of the funds made available through the ARA were to be allocated to the development of public facilities in areas with expanding industries. As such, ARA funds could be applied to the expansion of the outdoor recreation system. Clyde Ryberg—a Minnesotan who deserves considerable credit and acclaim for his work to establish the Canoe and Boating Routes program (today's Minnesota State Water Trails)—and Governor Karl Rolvaag, a canoe enthusiast himself, recognized the benefit ARA funds could bring to the state. Their attention focused specifically on the Big Fork and Little Fork Rivers in northeastern Minnesota where one in four workers was unemployed in 1963.^{vi}

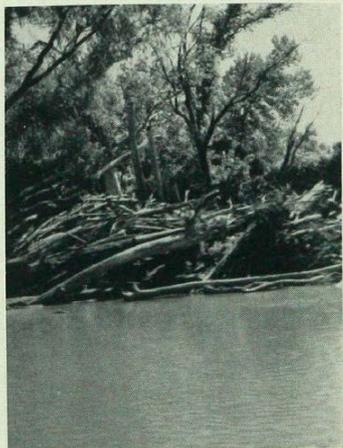


One of the smaller access areas is on the St. Croix River provided by a public power company.

Here in Minnesota, conservation-minded Governor Elmer Anderson appointed the Minnesota Natural Resources Council (MNRC) in 1961, chaired by Senator Henry McKnight of Wayzata. A finding from the MNRC's 1962 report was for an advisory council to be created to make recommendations to the Legislature in the development, use and management of the state's natural resources.^{vii} Combined with the ORRRC report and ARA, the door was opened for the development of a stronger and more diversified outdoor recreation system in Minnesota, with significant emphasis on utilizing rivers that had otherwise received "little more than a passing nod".^{viii}

"Arouse this Sleeping Recreational Giant—Canoeing!"

It may have taken a number of years to establish a program to expand outdoor recreation in Minnesota if it had not been for the work already done by ordinary citizens, especially those in the Minnesota River Valley. The Minnesota River Recreation Development Association (MRRDA), established in 1960, was directed by William F. Dietrich and included among its ranks such notable participants as Clyde Ryberg. In its first year, the organization developed a relationship and rapport with Commissioner of Conservation George A. Selke, Director of the Division of Waters S. A. Frellsen, State Senator Val Imm of Mankato, Colonel William B. Strandberg of the Army Corps of Engineers, and many others interested in improving the Minnesota River Valley.^{ix} While Dietrich corresponded and developed ideas and plans with these stakeholders, Ryberg worked with his wife, Shirley, and MRRDA committee members to develop and share a film that would demonstrate the potential for a recreational paradise on the Minnesota River. This film was responsible for significant local interest in the recreational future of the river.^x



Debris piled along the banks of the Minnesota was evidence of the wild rampages of the river.

As public and legislative support continued to rise, MRRDA coordinated with the Department of Conservation and State Legislature to begin woody debris (snag) removal on the Minnesota from Mankato to the confluence with the Mississippi—an effort funded at \$20,000 from the State Legislature.^{xi} This effort was carried out during 1961 by Ryberg and a crew he trained. Likewise in 1961, snag removal operations were also in effect on the St. Croix, where they were carried out by the Army Corps of Engineers.^{xii} The St. Croix had also received considerable attention from locals in preceding years and stewarded to a significant extent by the St. Croix River Association, founded in 1911.^{xiii} A stroke of luck would have it that high waters in 1962, combined with recently cleared rivers, would lead to an increase of boaters and interest in boating in the summer of that year, further setting the stage for the development of a river

recreation system.^{xiv}

Cognizant of the popular and political support for expanding outdoor recreation on the rivers, Governor Rolvaag, at the Land and Peoples Conference in Duluth in the fall of 1962, called on the citizens of Minnesota to "arouse this sleeping recreational giant—canoeing!"^{xv} At the start of 1963, with momentum from the national outdoor recreation movement and the progress made in the last few years in Minnesota, the time was right. The economic, environmental, and recreational benefits were tangible, and the excitement palpable. In April, Senator Clifford Lofvegren of Alexandria and Representative Leslie J. Edlund of St. Paul co-authored a bill in which they selected four rivers—the Minnesota, the St. Croix, the Big Fork, and the Little Fork—to be established as Canoe and Boating Routes and authorized the Commissioner of Conservation to develop the rivers for recreational purposes.^{xvi}

The Commissioner was given the authority to mark the routes and work with agencies and private owners to secure land and develop recreational facilities.^{xvii} While the bill reflected the national and statewide support for the expansion of outdoor recreation, it was an unfunded mandate. The Commissioner believed this was still a step in the right direction, as it laid the groundwork for the development of a recreation system on rivers, which, previously, had primarily been considered only for their utilitarian uses.^{xviii} Additionally, the



40 years to get to the lake?

1963 Legislature enacted a one-cent-per-pack cigarette tax for the dedicated natural resources fund, along with creating the Minnesota Outdoor Recreation and Resources Commission (MORRC), composed of seven senators and seven representatives, to make recommendations for projects from the new fund.^{xix}

In addition to lack of immediate funding, the first years proved difficult because little was known about the rivers, such as how many people already used them, locations of access points, and potential public safety hazards. Again, it was the effort of citizens who helped fill this void of missing information. After removing a significant amount of woody debris (snags) from the Minnesota River, Ryberg set out on a mission to find funds which would allow him to survey the four designated rivers.^{xx}

Funds were thin, but the river bug had bitten a lot of folks hard. Now Ryberg turned his attention to other streams, noting that the state legislature, while providing no money, had officially blessed four rivers as "canoe routes." Ryberg visited the Volunteer office, went away armed with copy reflecting Governor Rolvaag's interest in canoeing, as well as the blessings of Commissioner Olson. That was enough. His next stop was a personal appearance before the North Central Marine Association which pondered Ryberg's sales talk of canoeing for a matter of minutes. Then the Marine dealers board of directors primed the recreational development kitty with \$2,000 and sent Ryberg off on a paddling survey of the aforementioned rivers.^{xxi}



The survey would identify the feasibility of canoeing the rivers; existing services from area towns; potential access points, campsites, portages, and other canoe route facilities; and also provide the information necessary to develop boating charts of these "river highways". But Ryberg was not alone in adopting a "Do It Yourself" approach. All along the rivers, he encountered others already mapping the designated routes and, where he did not, he inspired local communities to not wait for the state but utilize their own resources to tap into the recreational and economic potential of the designated rivers.^{xxii}

In 1964, the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund Act made available 50-50 matching funds for the development of outdoor recreation systems. Minnesota—thanks to the foresight of the 1963 Legislature and their efforts to establish MORRC and the cigarette tax—was able to take advantage of the matching funds.^{xxiii}



Suddenly, Minnesota was in a much different situation: the studies of the rivers provided needed information, and funds were available for development. Commissioner Olson's 1963 presumption that just getting the program started would be a step in the right direction was correct. The period from 1963 to 1965 laid the groundwork for the newly established Canoe and Boating Routes program. The following two years would build upon the grassroots work done by Minnesotans across the state, and fully launch half the system in place today when an additional 12 rivers received designation in 1967 (all of which had been part of the 1965 study described above). A recreational giant of 2,700 miles of recreational routes on rivers was indeed unleashed, and "The Voyageur's State"

still boasts the largest water trails system in the nation, with more paddlers adding their names to the ranks every day.

The Minnesota DNR will continue to study the 50-year history of the Minnesota State Water Trails system later this year. Continue to check back for new information and updates as they become available.

Research compiled by 2013 Conservation Corps of Minnesota and Iowa members Brian Strandberg, Alison Engle, John Kenney, Sean Fleming, and Jen Wendland with assistance from Water Trails Advisory Committee Chair John Helland. Composition by Jen Wendland.

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- ⁱ George A. Siehl, "The Policy Path to the Great Outdoors: A History of the Outdoor Recreation Review Commission" (paper prepared for the Outdoor Resources Review Group Resources for the Future, Washington, D.C., October 2008), 1.
- ⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ⁱⁱⁱ "A Study of Recreational Use of Rivers and Streams in Minnesota" (report from the Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Resources Commission, St. Paul, MN, 1966) 2.
- ^{iv} Siehl, "Policy Path", 3.
- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} Governor Karl F. Rolvaag, "The Needs of Northeastern Minnesota: a special message to the sixty-third legislative session" (St. Paul, MN, 1963).
- ^{vii} Minnesota Natural Resources Council, "Natural Resources of Minnesota: 1962" (Minneapolis, MN, 1962), 16-17.
- ^{viii} John G. McKane, "Canoeing—Our Sleeping Recreational Giant!" *Conservation Volunteer*, November-December 1963, 1.
- ^{ix} Minnesota River Recreation Development Association Records, 1960-1973.
- ^x William F. Dietrich, letter to Commissioner of Conservation Selke, Ibid., July 23. 1960.
- ^{xi} Minnesota River Recreation Development Association Records, 1960-1973
- ^{xii} James Taylor Dunn, *Saving the River: The Story of the St. Croix River Association, 1911-1986* (St. Paul, MN, 1986).
- ^{xiii} Ibid.
- ^{xiv} Minnesota River Recreation Development Association Records, 1960-1973.
- ^{xv} Rolvaag, "About Our Cover," *Conservation Volunteer*, November-December 1963.
- ^{xvi} "A Study of Recreational Use", 1966, 1; Minnesota River Recreation Development Association Records, 1960-1973; Siehl, "Policy Path."
- ^{xvii} "Study of Recreational Use", 1966, 3.
- ^{xviii} Ibid.
- ^{xix} Robert F. Edman, "Progress Report on MORRC," *Conservation Volunteer*, November-December, 1964, 23.
- ^{xx} McKane, "Canoeing—Our Sleeping Recreational Giant!" 1963, 4.
- ^{xxi} Ibid.
- ^{xxii} Ibid., 4-5.
- ^{xxiii} Edman, "Progress Report on MORRC", 24-25.