

# The Register-Guard

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## Opinion

# Bob Doppelt: Oregon's 'Wild and Scenic' rivers need more protection

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I'm an old river rat. In the 1980s, my wife and I ran a river outfitting business in Oregon and Idaho. It was always magical to be outdoors fully immersed in nature. During this period, however, we also saw water quality, fisheries, and scenic values decline. This motivated me to co-lead a campaign that led to the passage of the 1988 Omnibus Oregon National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. It remains the largest river protection act in U.S. history for the lower 48 states.

The act protected 40 Oregon rivers totaling 1500 river miles. They range from the Upper McKenzie, South Fork and Middle Fork of the Willamette rivers here in Lane County, to the Upper Rogue near Crater Lake, the Owyhee in southeast, and the Grande Ronde in northeast Oregon.

The Oregon bill was possible because, 50 years ago this month, the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act became law. It protected just 8 rivers, but allowed more to be added. Today there are 300 Wild and Scenic rivers spread across the U.S.

Federal designation prevents dams from being built. Of equal importance, it requires federal agencies to "protect and enhance" river-specific "outstandingly remarkable values," such as water quality, fisheries, wildlife, scenic, recreational and others.

Despite this mandate, studies have found that the health of many Wild and Scenic rivers is declining. Sometimes the problem is poor fisheries, wildlife, or recreation management within the protected corridors. More often the impacts result from harmful logging and forest road building practices, agricultural runoff or urban development outside the protected segment. A watershed approach is needed in all Oregon river basins to prevent damaging activities and restore degraded functions and species.

The experience of river users must also be protected. My wife and I rafted the wild section of the lower Rogue last October and were appalled to see its natural beauty tarnished by hundreds of pumpkins placed on rocks and ledges. What apparently started as a Halloween gag has grown into a silly and detrimental contest to see who can put pumpkins in the most difficult spots.

In June we rafted the Rogue again and were rudely disturbed by loud music emanating from boats floating by. We also had to endure booming music from campers partying late at night far downstream. Numerous people I spoke with afterwards complained about similar experiences. Many were concerned that the wild Rogue was becoming another party river.

There are precious few places left like Oregon's Wild and Scenic rivers where it is possible for fish and wildlife to flourish and for people to hear nothing but the sound of water rushing and birds singing in beautiful landscapes. Activities that desecrate their outstanding and remarkable values must be prohibited.

On the 50th anniversary of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, and 30 anniversary of the Oregon Omnibus rivers bill, it is important to appreciate what we have. It is also important to increase our efforts to conserve the integrity of these gems, and protect more.

*Bob Doppelt is executive director of the [Resource Innovation Group](#) and writes a monthly column for the Register-Guard on climate change and sustainability-related issues.*