

Wild River Management Report Hells Canyon

Submitted by: Arthur Pope

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Report Title: Hells Canyon

Route: Where did you go? How many days were you camping?

Launched at Hells Canyon Dam and took out at Heller Bar six days later.

Summary: 250 word max

Hells Canyon Recreation Area, the Wild and Scenic river corridor and neighboring wilderness areas constitute a complicated management unit and, for the user, understanding the various regulations and management boundaries can be a challenge. River was flowing about 30,000 cfs; we found Wild Sheep and Granite significant.

Wilderness or Wild River: Snake River though Hells canyon.

Management Unit: Wallowa-Whitman National Forest

Administrative Location: Baker City, OR

Head of Administrative Unit: Jayson Jacoby, Forest Supervisor

Trip Report: Grade the success of the management agency with an A to F letter grade. Comments must support letter grades in each category; skip any category on which you do not want to comment.

B Access; is resource damage occurring at campsites on trails or at trailheads?

Campsites were not in as good a condition as a boater might find on other rivers and campsites dotted with firepits and evidence of poor sanitation practices were not uncommon. Perhaps this should not be unexpected on a river where much of the use arrives by jet boat and users have not been subjected to the years of education efforts common on many wilderness rivers. The management agency could and should be doing more to educate a broad spectrum of the user public about ways to minimize the impacts of their visit.

D Management; regulations, permit systems, education, enforcement actions.

The permit system of restrictive Hells Canyon is pretty restrictive for those interested in doing a wilderness river trip; only one public party and one commercial party are allowed to launch each day. Interestingly enough, a much more significant number of jet boaters and jet boat tour groups are allowed on the river on a daily basis. One must wonder at the political pressures behind this division of access.

Although there is an impressive, expensive and fully staffed visitor center at the launch site, where users are required to stop and physically pick up their river permit, there is little to no focus by staff on educating users about ways to minimize their impacts on the resource. Beyond a quick check for portable toilets there is no other educational focus though a better venue and better opportunity would be hard to imagine.

D Stewardship; are management actions in accord with wilderness values and best practices in wilderness management?

Management decisions that favor the use of motorized recreation in Hells Canyon over human powered options certainly do not indicate management policy sympathetic to the enhancement or protection of wilderness values. One must wonder at the history that limits float use to two launches a day while significantly greater numbers of jet boats regularly grind their way through the canyon. A recent review of open permits for overnight jet boat use and float trip launches indicated a significantly greater number of open dates available for jet boats.

D Wilderness; how well is management protecting the wilderness resource.

Today Hells Canyon is a major jet boat corridor and jet boat traffic can be fast and frequent and boats can be big and fully loaded with camera snapping tourists. I am unclear as to how and when Hells Canyon evolved from a wilderness river to a motorized highway but over time management has clearly given horsepower priority over human power. That said, the managing agency has attempted to reach a balance of sorts by offering three day periods, six times during the summer, when jet boats are not allowed on a 21 mile section of river between Kirkwood and Wild Sheep Rapid. This section of river from Hells Canyon to Heller Bar is 80 miles.

As defined by the Snake River Boater Guide; "The 31.5 mile section from Hells Canyon Dam to Upper Pittsburg landing is designated as Wild which is defined as "free of impoundments and generally accessible only by trail" and representing 'vestiges of primitive America.'" The Guide makes no mention of access by boat—either motor powered or human powered.

The Guide further states, 'The river corridor itself is not Wilderness and Wilderness regulations do not apply. However, some areas on either side of the corridor are designated Wilderness and are closed to all mechanized travel and motorized equipment.'" So, there is designated Wilderness on both sides of the river but Wilderness statues does not include the river corridor itself. All rather confusing indeed.

C Fire Management, Range Management Wildlife, Management, Other

One campsite was completely unusable due to heavy impacts by cattle. Dung was everywhere. Precious areas of shade were churned and torn up by hooves and the entire site had a foul odor.