Park Service Prepares River Plans

by Fred Thomas
World-Herald Staff Writer

Blue herons fish in wetlands. Tens, coots and other ducks gather early, preparing to migrate south. White-tailed deer come out in the evenings, meandering in alfalfa fields along quiet roads. Wild turkeys roost in trees and walk through prairie grasses. These are scenes along the Missouri River in the 25-mile stretch that Congress recently designated for protection and public use as a national recreation river.

The stretch is from the headwaters of Lewis and Clark Lakes near Astoria, Neb., to the Fort Randall Dam near Pickstown, S.D., a few miles north of the Nebraska border.

Also designated as national recreation river were nearby waterways: an eight-mile segment of Verdigris Creek north from the village of Verdigris to its confluence with the Niobrara River.

A 25-mile stretch of the lower Niobrara River from the western boundary of Knox County to the river's confluence with the Missouri River near the village of Niobrara.

Designation aims to protect the river's natural values from certain types of development.

Congress ordered protection for the Missouri, Verdigris and lower Niobrara in the same law that designated 70 miles east of Valentine as a national scenic river.

Controversy in Nebraska and debate in Congress centered on the 70 miles, and many people are unaware the Missouri, Verdigris and lower Niobrara were included in the law, called the "Missouri River Scenic River Designation Act of 1991."

The National Park Service and others are preparing management plans for the designated stretches.

Warren Hill, who is overseeing the work for the National Park Service, said he envisions minimal development, such as picnic areas and river access points for launching canoes and other boats.

"Not Extravagant"
"We won't consider anything extravagantly," Hill said in his office in Omaha. "We know the budget situation. Our job is to do as much as possible within the budget."

Four endangered and threatened bird species — bald eagles, peregrine falcons and peregrine falcons — are among the species that use the Missouri River in that area.

The National Park Service and others also will develop a management plan for the 59 miles of the Missouri between Gavins Point Dam north of Crofton and Porca State Park near Ponca. That stretch was designated a national recreation river in 1978, but a management plan only now is in the works.

Most of the highlighted river segments were included in this year's Niobrara scenic river bill ... The stretch of the Missouri from Gavins Point Dam to Ponca State Park was designated as a scenic river in 1978, but a management plan was never prepared.

Hill, who is superintendent of the Niobrara-Missouri National Scenic Riverway, which the park service created after the law passed.

The riverway office will be based in O'Neill. The service plans to hire four staff members; a planner for the Missouri River, another for the Niobrara, a resource management specialist and an interpretive specialist.

They are to begin work in O'Neill about Jan. 1.

Like St. Croix, the Niobrara's values have drawn national attention for years, and Hill said the designated stretches of the Missouri and Verdigris Creek also are nationally significant.

He envisaged the stretch of the Niobrara winding as did the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, a 200-mile stretch of the Neosho and St. Croix Rivers bordering Wisconsin and Minnesota. The riverway was designated in 1968.

The park service has acquired several tracts of land, and the stretch remains relatively undeveloped. Primitive camping areas are planned.

"We want to keep it that way," Hill said that when he canceled the St. Croix last fall, he opened a back door swimming across the river well ahead of the canoes. The bear scrambled ashore and watched the canoes. To protect the Missouri and Niobrara Rivers and Verdigris Creek, the park service will buy some land and, buy easements on other land.

Nominations Sought For River Commission

Nebraskans have until Nov. 15 to make nominations for the 11-member Niobrara National Scenic River Advisory Commission.

Commission members will advise U.S. Interior Secretary Manuel Lujan on developing the management plan for the stretch of the Niobrara designated as a national scenic river.

Lujan has requested nominations from 11 canoe outfitters, six conservation organizations, Gov. Nelson, the Native American Natural Resources District and county board of the Black Hills.

The commission is required to be composed of: three landowners in the segment between the Niobrara Bridge and the Highway 127 bridge; two representatives of the affected counties.

National Park Service To Conduct 2 Studies

Under the Niobrara Scenic River Designation Act, the National Park Service is to complete two related studies.

One will designate lands in Knox and Atchison counties as a national recreation area. The lands are generally adjacent to Lewis and Clark Lake and along the Missouri River.

The other will create the Niobrara-Buffalo Prairie National Park. The designated site is roughly a 170,000-acre corridor along the Niobrara River east of the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge near Valentine.

The studies will outline recreational opportunities and evaluate historical, natural, scenic and archaeological resources.

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