

LOWER COLUMBIA RIVER

Water Trail

A 146-mile water trail from Bonneville Dam to the Pacific Ocean that people in non-motorized boats can safely travel for day or overnight explorations . . . a decades-long idea is in the process of becoming a reality

Paddle past craggy monoliths and rushing waterfalls, wind through a maze of wildlife refuge islands, cruise by abandoned salmon canneries, explore Lewis & Clark landing sites, marvel as thousands of snow geese lift off in flight, gaze at immense cargo ships docked in working harbors, encounter contemporary Native American fishing sites . . .

Neil Schulman



Linda Starr

For as long as people have lived on the shores of the lower Columbia, the river has been a water trail. Along this liquid highway traveled finely crafted Native American canoes, the high-prowed bateau of the French fur-trading voyageurs, the rough dugouts of Lewis & Clark's Corps of Discovery, steamboats transporting gold-seekers and gamblers, and today's international cargo ships.

A journey along its length today is spectacular and fascinating, a rich melange of gorgeous landscapes, historical sites and working ports of call.

The river flows through the magnificent Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area and its volcanic cliffs, along the waterfowl refuges at Sauvie Island and Ridgefield, past a Columbian white-tailed deer refuge, and around the multitude of marshes and islands of the Lewis & Clark National Wildlife Refuge.

Cultural and educational attractions along the river corridor include historical and maritime museums, abandoned riverfront towns, Fort Clatsop, Fort Vancouver, and former Native American village sites.

The Columbia is a popular place. Paddlers in kayaks, canoes, and rowboats share the waterway with sailboats, windsurfers, parasailors, swimmers, water-skiers, and power boaters. Along the shore people fish, swim, camp, picnic, hike, climb, bike, bird-watch, and play on beaches.

Building the Trail

The Lower Columbia River Water Trail Committee was formed in September 2001, as a bi-state coalition of people with a diversity of interests and connections to the river.

The Committee includes representatives from state and federal agencies, local governments, environmental groups, paddling organizations and businesses, historical associations, economic development councils, trail associations, as well as interested citizens.

The group works as an ad-hoc committee of the Lower Columbia River Estuary Partnership, a non-profit bi-state organization funded through the US Environmental Protection Agency and the states of Oregon and Washington.

Through the Estuary Partnership, the committee was awarded a technical assistance grant from the National Park Service Rivers and Trails Program.

The success of the Water Trail will depend on a strong partnership with many affiliates—national parks and wildlife refuges, state county and city parks, local businesses, and the nearly thirty communities located along the shorelines of the mighty river.



Jonathan Walpole

Goals for the Water Trail

- To physically, intellectually and spiritually connect people with the lower Columbia River
- To promote the water trail as a valuable resource for recreation, education and stewardship
- To increase and improve public access and environmentally sensitive launch, landing and campsites for non-motorized boats along the water trail
- To acknowledge both historic and modern-day water trail stories by promoting places of historical, cultural and recreational interest along the river
- To encourage communities, counties, businesses and individuals to support, promote and connect to the water trail
- To coordinate with planning efforts and events for the 2003–2006 Lewis and Clark Bicentennial

Water Trail Action Plan

The next two years will focus on planning and coordination with local partners, trail promotion, identifying the resources and facilities currently along the trail, and development of detailed maps.

2002

- Contact each community along the river to introduce the concept, ask for ideas, collect resource information and seek support
- Inventory waypoints for launching, landing, resting and camping
- Identify local partners and request letters of support
- Design and establish a website

2003

- Publish maps for the water trail
- Recognize the trail through special events and other activities





Lower Columbia River Water Trail Committee

- Alder Creek Kayak and Canoe
- American Rivers
- Citizen Advocates
- City of Longview
- Columbia Pacific Economic Development District
- Columbia River Kayaking
- Columbia Riverkeeper
- Congressman Brian Baird's Office
- Lewis and Clark Bicentennial of Oregon
- Lewis and Clark College
- Lower Columbia River Estuary Partnership
- National Coast Trails Association
- National Park Service Rivers and Trails Program
- Oregon Ocean Paddling Society
- Oregon Parks and Recreation Department
- Sauvie Island Conservancy
- Scappoose Bay Kayaking
- Skamokawa Paddle Center
- Vancouver/Clark Co. LC Bicentennial Committee
- Washington Water Trails Association

For more information on the Lower Columbia River Water Trail, please contact the Lower Columbia River Estuary Partnership.

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Steps toward a Successful Trail

For the water trail to be successful, it needs to have enough launch, landing, and rest sites, along with appropriate support facilities for people in small, non-motorized boats to travel safely on for day or overnight paddles.

The Water Trail Committee has divided the 146-mile long trail into seven "reaches," or sections, each approximately 20 miles long—the distance of a two-day paddle.

Sixty-one public access sites have been identified and a trail database called WAYPOINTS is being developed for collecting information for these and other potential sites.

Many rivers flow into the lower Columbia River, making additional travel and exploration by non-motorized boats almost limitless. The US Army Corps of Engineers is currently planning a Northwest Discovery Water Trail from the Clearwater River in Idaho to Bonneville Dam—adding another 355 miles of water trail to the region!

Benefits of a Water Trail

Thousands of people launch small boats on the lower Columbia River every year. Why establish a water trail?

- A water trail linking communities along both shorelines in two states can help people become better acquainted with their river heritage.
- People along the river can discover a whole new perspective of both their communities and the river.
- A water trail system with identified launch and landing sites, resting places, maps, and safety information can help people find the best places to paddle based on their experience and available time.
- An identified trail can help protect natural and cultural resources from degradation by dispersing use and limiting access to sensitive areas. Trail information can provide guidelines for low-impact use.
- Trail maps and guidebooks can direct paddlers to local communities for campgrounds, grocery stores, B&Bs and other amenities, thus enhancing local economies.
- A sense of stewardship can be nurtured through public education and coordinated volunteer activities such as cleanups and water quality monitoring.
- An officially recognized water trail can be eligible for regional and national resources and funding.

Safety on the Water Trail

The Columbia River might one minute be mellow and placid, then transform quickly into breaking waves with the powerful winds that make the region a windsurfer's paradise. Because the river is so wide, it is generally classified as "open water," where wind and waves can build with great ferocity. Shipping lanes pose a danger from the heavy traffic of commercial cargo ships and long barges that move quietly and deceptively fast.

Islands can appear and disappear with the changing of the tides, making navigation confusing. Strong currents can make paddling very difficult.

Environmental Stewardship and River Etiquette

Much of the shoreline along the water trail is owned by private landowners, and public agencies who manage the land to benefit wildlife. It is critically important that small boaters along the trail respect private property rights and obey agency regulations. Stewardship of the river's environmental resources is a long-standing interest of many paddlers currently travelling the waterways of the lower Columbia River. Establishment of the water trail will provide more opportunities for citizens and trail users to improve the special places and resources along the river's course.

Paddlers should never launch small boats on the Columbia River without first checking local weather conditions, navigational charts, and other resource information. In addition, boaters should know current boating regulations and must always wear properly-fitting life jackets while on the water.

The Committee is working with the US Coast Guard, US Army Corps of Engineers, sheriffs' departments, ports, parks, outfitters and pilots associations to address safety issues, water hazards, education efforts, and rescue resources.

