

## Recreation Action Plan – Illinois River in Arkansas

### Introduction

On April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022, a group of 45 stakeholders met at the IRWP Learning Center in Cave Springs to envision the future of recreation on the Illinois River in Arkansas (See Annex 1). Participants included elected officials, representatives from county, state, and federal agencies, businesses, non-profits, and streamside landowners (See Annex 2). The discussion centered around the following goals for the Illinois River in Arkansas:

1. To better understand the current challenges and opportunities associated with river recreation.
2. To articulate a vision for recreation values and outcomes.
3. To developing an action plan for realizing that vision and producing those values and outcomes.

As NWA's population grows, recreational use of the Illinois River will inevitably grow as well. To see river recreation managed in an effective way, the group agreed that it is imperative for diverse stakeholders to actively collaborate to foster a river recreation culture that:

- Incentivizes improved watershed management
- Respects streamside landowners
- Be family-oriented
- Embodies a strong conservation ethic
- Prioritizes safety
- Produces economic growth

Participants in the April 5<sup>th</sup> meeting generated recommendations for management strategies and initiatives intended to produce these desired outcomes. This report summarizes those recommendations. It builds on lessons learned from the Oklahoma side of the watershed, includes recommendations for future investments, and identifies opportunities for collaboration and outreach.

Participants split into small groups to discuss recreation issues from three distinct but overlapping perspectives. This report is similarly organized, and includes recommendations for:

1. Building Landowner Relationships
2. Building a Water Trail
3. Building a River Brand

### Building Landowner Relationships

Landowners near existing access sites, particularly the Siloam Springs Kayak Park, have concerns about the current volume of traffic, disrespectful behavior from visitors, and a perceived lack of enforcement presence. Going forward, landowners would like to see a more active management approach that produces recreational values in-line with the group's vision: respect for private property, a family-

friendly environment, and prioritization of safety for everyone. Furthermore, until the management issues at the Siloam Springs Kayak Park are meaningfully addressed by the City of Siloam Springs, the group believes it is unlikely that landowners near other potential access sites will be favorable to public access. Therefore, seeking a speedy and lasting resolution to landowner concerns near the Siloam Springs Kayak Park is critical to building landowner relationships and realizing a vision for river recreation more broadly.

Producing the desired outcomes will require a multi-faceted approach and long-term commitment including strategies such as clear signage, access improvements, enforcement, engagement, and general river etiquette education. Recommendations for improving landowner relationships included:

1. Improve educational signage at all access points and potentially along the river. Signs should include information about laws, river etiquette, maps and mile markers, safety, and conservation values.
2. Improve recreational access points using Marine Fuel Tax (MFT) and other funding sources at high priority locations including Highway 16 at Savoy, Robinson Road, Kincheloe Road, Chamber Springs, Siloam Springs Kayak Park<sup>1</sup>, and HWY 59 bridge with a clear focus on effective crowd management, sanitation and trash, education, parking limitations, enforcement, and user experience.
3. Make available resources for enforcement at public access locations, including but not limited Siloam Springs Kayak Park and Chamber Springs access points. Enforcement partners include Washington and Benton County Sheriff's Offices, Siloam Springs Police Department, U.S. Forest Service, and Arkansas Game and Fish. Informal river etiquette enforcement by members of the Arkansas Canoe Club, outfitters, landowners, and others can also help.
4. Engage the recreational stewards/champions on the river through an "education day" or "adopt the river year" led by Arkansas Canoe Club or other entities. Develop educational videos and pamphlets that cover laws, responsibilities, and conservation values as needed.
5. Provide voluntary certification opportunities for recreational outfitters and the general public on safety, laws, and river etiquette with solutions for addressing problematic situations.

## **Building a Water Trail**

Participants at the April 5th meeting were unanimous about the importance of improving sanitation, safety, and signage at our existing public access sites in Arkansas. It was also the consensus view that a Master Plan for Recreation should be developed before constructing any additional public river access.

Stakeholders were quick to note that in the absence of an official administrative entity or statutory protections on the Arkansas side of the Illinois River, options for increased river management are somewhat limited. Building public access without a commitment to the regulation and enforcement of both commercial and private boaters could result in more of the negative outcomes (drunkenness, littering, overcrowding, trespassing) that all stakeholders agreed should be avoided. To achieve the

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<sup>1</sup> The Siloam Springs Kayak Park is of significant concern to landowners and other stakeholders. The City of Siloam Springs should explore management strategies that provide a more consistent enforcement presence at the Siloam Springs Kayak Park. Suggestions at this meeting included contracting with a "camp host" during the summer season to collect fees, advise recreators on rules and laws, and call enforcement when necessary.

recreational values identified, it will be necessary to either delegate management and enforcement to a single entity or else enter into some sort of multi-jurisdictional agreement to regulate recreational use of the river in the future. For instance, there is nothing currently preventing an unlimited number of concessioners from strategically buying property between public access points and running high frequency shuttles, thus creating the potential for undesirable recreational outcomes.

Recommendations for building a water trail on the Arkansas side of the Illinois River included:

1. Develop a Master Plan/Management Plan and comprehensive vision for recreation on the Illinois River in Arkansas. This Master Plan/Management Plan should include:
  - a. A clear description of the kinds cultural, economic, and ecological outcomes hoped to be produced by increased recreation opportunities on the Illinois River in Arkansas.
  - b. An enumeration of responsibilities for maintenance and enforcement at each access site, as well as plans for long-term funding of maintenance and enforcement.
  - c. A prioritization of potential public access sites in-line with the established vision for the water trail, as well as conceptual designs for each proposed access.
  - d. Digital and printed maps, and designs for signage at access sites.
2. Within the next two years, in partnership with GRDA, perform a carrying capacity study to assess the acceptable level of recreation that the Illinois River in Arkansas can realistically support.
3. As a pilot project, engage AGFC, ARDOT, and Ecological Design Group on the design and construction of the newly approved public access at the AR 59 bridge to build an access that directly encourages and embodies values and produces the outcomes in the Master Plan.
4. Convene the core stakeholders responsible for maintenance, construction, and enforcement at public access sites to harmonize management practices, coordinate resources, and streamline communication. Partners may include, but are not limited to: the City of Siloam Springs, Benton County Roads Department, Benton County Sheriff's Department, Washington County Sheriff's Department, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, US Forest Service, Grand River Dam Authority, Arkansas Department of Transportation, and Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism.

## **Building a River Brand**

Participants in the Illinois River branding discussion focused on answering two broad questions:

1. What is the current public perception of the Illinois River in Arkansas?
2. What can be done to increase awareness of the Illinois River as a recreation destination, reinforce the positive aspects of the public perception, and address potentially negative aspects of the public perception?

During the breakout session, the branding and marketing small group developed the following narrative about public perception of the Illinois River:

*For anglers who want to chase smallmouth and spotted bass, the Illinois River is perhaps the best-kept secret in the State of Arkansas. The Illinois River also boasts amazing birding opportunities and beautiful scenic views. Consistent baseflow makes it floatable year-round, when better-known rivers like the Buffalo and the Kings are too low to float.*

*Unfortunately, public perception of the river is marred by court cases surrounding Phosphorus pollution and poultry litter. The fact that the four major cities in Northwest Arkansas discharge their wastewater effluent into the Illinois River and its tributaries also contributes to public perception of the Illinois River as dirty or unsuitable for swimming and boating.*

This group agreed that we can address negative perceptions of the river and increase public awareness through multiple initiatives:

1. Connect Outfitters. Create a cohort of outfitters who work together to promote the river, reinforce good behavior, and sell river-branded merchandise. This will ensure that the public is receiving a consistent message. It also signals professionalism and care.
2. Better signage. Use signage at access points to educate floaters and build a brand identity.
3. Get people on the water. Creating a connection with the river is one of the most important ways to push people in the direction of natural resources stewardship. Programs don't have to simply be youth-focused or focused on environmental education— any program that helps get someone on a kayak or canoe for the first time, teaches adults how to paddle, or uses the river as a resource (even passively), helps promote the vision. Similarly, the same on-water programming should happen with our elected officials and especially local decision-makers.

Other ideas for promoting the Illinois River include featuring the river in the Travel Arkansas/Arkansas Outdoors Show. OZ Trails has branded the regional network of MTB trails to create a larger experience of MTB trails in NWA. A similar approach could also work to promote the many water trails accessible within a couple of hours from the urban centers in NWA— each boasting of a different experience to gain while exploring the Natural State.

With the opening of WOKA in 2023 and the economic potential that the Illinois River could bring to the City of Siloam Springs, Main Street Siloam Springs proposed hosting events that could educate and rally residents around the river. Arkansas Tourism may be able to promote Illinois River Recreation through a few of the standard digital media and outreach channels. Further focus group work is needed to determine the best branding strategy for the river.



# ANNEX 1:

## Illinois River Recreation Discussion

221 S. Main Street, Cave Springs, AR 72718

April 5th, 2022, 12PM-5PM

### MEETING AGENDA

TIME	DURATION	ITEM	PRESENTER
NOON	30 MIN	LUNCH SERVED	
12:30	20 MIN	Welcome, Opening Remarks, Framing the Discussion	Leif Kindberg, IRWP
12:50	30 MIN	Meeting Overview, Vision for the Illinois River in Arkansas	Travis Chaney, IRWP
1:20	10 MIN	<i>BREAK</i>	
1:30	5 MIN	Present Golden Paddle to GRDA	Leif Kindberg, IRWP
1:35	10 MIN	A Brief History of Conservation and Recreation on the Illinois River in Oklahoma	Ed Fite, GRDA
1:45	25 MIN	Recreation on the Illinois River in Oklahoma: successes, challenges, lessons learned, and where we're headed	Jared Skaggs, GRDA
2:10	10 MIN	Status of Fisheries in Illinois River, Arkansas	Jon Stein, AGFC
2:20	5 MIN	SMALL GROUP ASSIGNMENTS	Travis Chaney, IRWP
2:25	5 MIN	<i>BREAK</i>	
2:30	90 MIN	Action Plan Development	IRWP Staff
4:00	10 MIN	<i>BREAK</i>	
4:10	50 MIN	Reconvene, Present Action Plans (15 minutes per group)	IRWP Staff
5:00		Dismiss	

# ANNEX 2:

Participant Invite List			
LAST NAME	FIRST NAME	ORGANIZATION	TITLE
Andrews	Katherine	Arkansas Office of Outdoor Recreation	Director
Bartlow	Kirsten	AGFC	Arkansas Water Trails Coordinator
Batten	Ben	AGFC	Chief of Fisheries
Bergstrom	Meredith	Walton Family Foundation	Program Officer, Home Region
Booth	Austin	AGFC	Director
Bowen	Elizabeth	NWA RPC	Project Manager
Bowman	Darrell	AGFC	Assistant Chief of Fisheries Management
Brickley	David	US Forest Service	Recreation Program Coordinator
Brown	Mike	Walton Enterprises	Project Administrator
Burbidge	Jenny	Ecological Design Group	Landscape Architect
Cantrell	Mike	AGFC	Chief of Operations
Carney	Scott	IRWP/SWEPCO	Board Member
Chaney	Travis	IRWP	Restoration Specialist
Clark	Don	City of Siloam Springs	Director of Community Development
Crowder	Jeff	Washington County Roads Department	Director
Doss	Debbie	Director	Arkansas Watertrails Partnership
Dutton	Kim	TNC	Director of NWA
Ewing	Kayti	ARDOT	Section Head, Environmental
Fite	Ed	GRDA	VP for Rivers Operations and Water Quality
Fletcher	John	Arkansas Canoe Club	Conservation Chair
Formica	Sandi	WCRC	Executive Director
Frahm	Jessica	Arkansas Department of Tourism	Director of Marketing
Frasier	Jay	Benton County Roads Department	Director
Gelinas	Jerrid	Gypsy Camp & Canoe	Owner - Operator
Gibbs	Cliff	Arvest/IRWP	Board President
Haak	Delia	Arkansas Representative	District 91
Hopper	Tom	IRWP	Board Member
Hulbert	Arthur	Siloam Springs Chamber of Commerce	CEO
Johnson	John	U of A	Dept. of Strategy, Entrepreneurship & Venture Innovation
Jordan	Ammen	U of A	Active Transportation Coordinator

Keeling	Morgan	IRWP	Community Relations Manager
Kindberg	Leif	IRWP	Executive Director
King	David	Mossback Fish Habitat	CEO
Knopp	Mike	Riversport OKC	Executive Director
Letellier	Casey	Ivory Bill Brewing	Owner - Operator
Mangham	Roger	AGFC	Assistant Director
Mardis	Jimmy	IRWP/Denali Water Solutions	Board Member
Martin	Bobby	AGFC	Commission Chairman
McNair	Matt	Arkansas State Parks	Director of Outdoor Recreation Grants
Moehring	Barry	Benton County	County Judge
Moody	Rob	AR Canoe Club	Consultant
Morris	Stacy	Main Street Siloam Springs	Executive Director
Nance	Marson	NWA Land Trust	Director of Stewardship & Research
Neil	Mike	NACA	Plant Manager
Nelson	Pam	Northwest Arkansas Land Trust	Land Protection Coordinator
Patterson	Phillip	City of Siloam Springs	City Administrator
Rogers	James	AGFC	Construction Coordinator
Saunders	Sean	AGFC	Stream Team Coordinator
Skaggs	Jared	GRDA	Director - Outdoor Experience
Smith	Allen	US Forest Service	Forest Ranger, Wedington
Smith	Martin	Ecological Design Group	Principal
Stein	Jon	AGFC	District Fisheries Supervisor
Weber	Ralph	IRWP/AR Master Naturalists	Board Member
Wentz	Tate	ANRD	Water Quality Division Manager