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Commentary: Utah's outstanding rivers deserve recognition

By Tim Palmer and Dan McCool | For The Tribune

The National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 is the nation's premier law for river protection. The upcoming 50th anniversary of this measure offers an opportunity to take stock of what we've done — and failed to do — regarding the fate of our best waterways for all the generations to come.

Inspired by the need for balance when dams were halting the free-flow of streams all over the country, the Senate approved the Wild and Scenic Act unanimously, while the House voted 265-7 in a bygone age of bipartisanship. For specified rivers with outstanding natural values, the act banned new dams and it directed federal agencies to safeguard those waterways where acreage was federally owned.

An initial list of eight enrolled rivers has grown to 300. But that totals only 0.4 percent of the mileage of rivers and streams nationwide. We're still a long way from achieving "balance," as intended by the program's founders

Though Utah is blessed with a large inventory of spectacular recreational and life-giving streams, none was designated Wild and Scenic until 2009, when short portions of the Virgin River, already in Zion National Park or wilderness areas, were included. Utah is distinguished as the state with the most-deserving but least-protected estate of rivers in the nation.

Take the case of the Green River. From the bustling ramp below Flaming Gorge Dam through legendary canyons of Lodore and Split Mountain, the Green draws tens of thousands of visitors. Then through Desolation Canyon it resembles a scaled-down Grand Canyon itself. Onward, sublime sculpturing formed Labyrinth Canyon. Finally the Green merges with the Colorado, and the combined waters accelerate from serene to tumultuous in Cataract Canyon before stalling terminally behind Glen Canyon Dam.

Recognizing that dams had already been built upstream on the Green River, and downstream on the Colorado, federal planners in 1964 recommended this extraordinary waterway for protection in their first deliberations about a wild and scenic rivers system. Protection of the Green failed to gain political support, but recognition of it is again timely as the recreation economy grows, and as people all over the West become more dependent on it.

Consider the boon to business that derives from Utah's other protected landscapes, such as the red-rock terrain surrounding Moab and parklands of Zion and Dinosaur. Statewide, outdoor

recreation accounts for 122,000 jobs, \$3.6 billion in wages and \$12 billion in spending annually — much of it dependent on our public land and on rivers including the Green.

Wild and Scenic status for the Green would help shift the state's image into one of caring for its splendid natural features with a simple public message having no down-side whatsoever: Leave this beautiful river the way it is. Inclusion of the Green as a National Wild and Scenic River would be a fitting celebration for the 50th anniversary of America's flagship rivers program. It's time to recognize that our finest free-flowing waterways — even in Utah — should remain just as they were created.

And it's not just about the economy. Eighty percent of Utah wildlife needs riverfront habitat, according to the state Division of Wildlife Resources. If wildlife in America's second-driest state is to survive, and be available for hunting and fishing, that wildlife needs living space near our rivers and streams.

Our rivers have served us well, and a few of the very best deserve an honored and protected place in the culture, the economy, and the future of Utah and the West.

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