

Remember Minnesota's waterways?

They're something to behold. So find a canoe and get to know them up close.

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In a 1963 edition of *Minnesota Conservation Volunteer*, the magazine published by the Department of Natural Resources, Governor Karl Rolvaag wrote that canoeing on Minnesota's streams and rivers was a "recreational sleeping giant."

It still is.

In the same issue, editor John McKane wrote, "Aside from a small and dedicated fraternity of canoeists who know the secret of recreation at its best on state streams outside of the Arrowhead, the majority of Minnesota rivers remain 'forgotten rivers.'"

Those same words could describe the state of paddling today.

That edition of the magazine introduced what would become Minnesota's network of Water Trails. The idea was to inspire folks to explore our 15,000 miles of streams and rivers.

The legislation turned 50 years old in 2013. Today there are 33 designated rivers, marking 4,500 miles of routes. But paddling in Minnesota is still largely invisible, besides the exceptional opportunities in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

Personally, I return often to favorite stretches of my home river, the St. Croix. Too often probably, but it's a marvel of a waterway – so accessible yet so wild. Earlier this month, as soon as eight friends and I got on the water east of Pine City, we could hear rapids ahead. The fast water quickly transported us to a very different state of mind. We spent the afternoon slipping by cedars and stopping at sandbars.

A week later, I took my kayak to a familiar landing closer to the Twin Cities for a Friday afternoon solo outing. I first paddled upriver through a side channel, pushing against the current a couple miles to a sandbar where I got out to fish, then floated back down the main channel past limestone banks seeping spring water, white pines, and sandy beaches, letting the current carry me home.

It's hard to ignore the river I love, but I'm resolved to explore more of the designated trails. By my figuring, I could see all 4,500 miles of water trails if I paddled a new river six days a year for the next 50 years.

The *Conservation Volunteer* recently published an appreciation of the Water Trails by Keith Goetzman and Javier Serna, with lyrical narratives of paddling three of them. It's worth reading for inspiration, and useful information. The DNR has also released online tours of some water trails, with videos, photos and descriptions of river sections.

In 1963, Governor Rolvaag championed our state as the "Voyageur's Highway." Fifty years later, it's time to recapture our voyageur spirit, pull away from computer screens and busy schedules, and explore a river. The words of *Conservation Volunteer* editor McKane hold true today as in 1963: "The canoe provides an ideal outlet from tensions; of escape from the coldness of concrete and steel."

For Minnesotans, getting in a canoe is a way to connect with the place we call home – its history, its nature, its beauty. For visitors, a day spent paddling shows them Minnesota's heart and soul, and is an experience they'll tell their friends about.

Rivers are more than just a sleeping recreational giant, they are a slumbering identity for our state. They are more than waters moving across the land, they are part of Minnesota's, and America's, story – nothing represents freedom quite like a river, a canoe and a paddle.

Our state's rivers have carried Ojibwe and Dakota, explorers and lumberjacks, settlers and missionaries, timber and steamboats. Our cities are built on their banks, and take them as their trademarks. We paddle them, but not enough.

Minnesota's rivers are asleep. Let's go wake them up.

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