

# 2020 AT A GLANCE

## CONSERVATION

**1194** letters sent to federal delegation

**1557** letters to Idaho's Governor

**1359** letters submitted to the USFS on proposed projects

**1788** letters to state legislators

**3488** River Advocacy Training attendees

**69** Guide Education attendees

## ADVOCACY

**940** river miles defended for Wild & Scenic values in North Idaho

**88%** reduction of mining project footprint in the Jarbidge River headwaters

## COMMUNITY

**2138** members & supporters

**137** business partners

For a full list of our members, supporters, & partners please visit [idahorivers.org/partners](http://idahorivers.org/partners)

## Protecting Rivers from Mining Impacts

The great state of Idaho has a complicated history with mining. From the gold rush in the central mountains to silver mining in northern Idaho and the Owyhees, it is part of this state's modern history. Idaho has a much longer and deeper history with its great rivers. Recent findings on the Salmon River show evidence of human presence dating to more the 16,000 years ago. Idaho's rivers sustained indigenous people for thousands of years and were the pathway of the earliest European explorers, Lewis and Clark, to the Pacific.

When valuable minerals were discovered throughout Idaho in the late 19th century, the ensuing rush to extract gold and silver came at direct odds with the health of our rivers and indigenous communities. Horrific environmental and human rights tragedies occurred. Many of our rivers remain damaged by historic mining, and the impacts of injustices against indigenous communities continue to resonate.

Today, Idaho still faces the same conflict between mining, the health of rivers, and indigenous rights. Though modern mining practices may be different than historic techniques, there is no question that mining still causes large scale disturbance to public lands, harms water quality, aquatic and riparian ecology, and poses immense risk downstream. Recent large-scale mining disasters in Brazil and Canada are evidence of this reality.

This year, IRU's efforts focused on protecting the South Fork Salmon River watershed from the Stibnite Gold Project proposal. After several years of analysis by multiple agencies, the U.S. Forest Service released the Draft Environmental Impact Statement in August of 2020. IRU, along with partner organizations and contracted scientists, submitted comments highlighting the document's inadequacies and stressed the importance of protecting this invaluable watershed. Through outreach efforts to our members and beyond, over 1500 individual comment letters were submitted to the Forest Service by concerned citizens through IRU's website; highlighting the direct harm and immense risk to water quality, aquatic and riparian habitat, ESA listed fish, and outdoor recreation posed by this mining project.

IRU also worked with partners to protect the headwaters of the Wild and Scenic Jarbidge River, a cherished desert canyon whitewater river that provides critical habitat for Bull Trout. Newcrest Resources Inc. proposed mineral exploration activities in the headwaters of the Jarbidge River, and the US Forest Service was too quick to give them a green light without sufficient oversight or bounds to the scale of exploration. **IRU and partners raised concerns about the scale and impacts of the project and successfully negotiated with Newcrest and the US Forest Service to reduce the project acreage by 88% and ensure further measures to protect water quality and bull trout habitat.**

Projects that are proposed by private companies on public lands deserve attention and scrutiny. In doing so, it encourages the mining industry to improve their practices, so that mineral extraction and healthy rivers can coincide. The work is far from done, but successes over the past year will help IRU hit the ground running into 2021.

*“. . . the time has also come to identify and preserve free-flowing stretches of our great rivers before growth and development make the beauty of the unspoiled waterway a memory.”*

*– President Lyndon B. Johnson's Natural Beauty Message*

## Wild & Scenic Stewardship Guide Education Program

For several years, IRU has been providing in-person educational opportunities for the outfitting and guiding community on salmon and steelhead, known as the Guide Education Program. These programs have been highly successful, and help river guides incorporate education and activism into their river trips. With the pandemic this year, IRU's ability to safely bring these programs to the guiding community became limited.

IRU has held a long-standing vision to improve and expand the Guide Education Program, and this year's challenges served as a catalyst to bring it to fruition. To make the program more robust, accessible, and valuable to guides, IRU developed the "Wild & Scenic Stewardship Guide Education Program," a remote online curriculum focused on Wild and Scenic river management, salmon and steelhead conservation, and the Middle Fork Salmon River. The goal of this accessible and equitable education project is to increase environmental literacy and awareness, and further action in protecting wild rivers and fish.

The development of this program was made possible through partnership with the US Forest Service and a grant from the River Network. IRU's first graduate fellow, Tess McEnroe, developed the curriculum and online learning platform, and the program will officially launch in January 2021.

Guides will receive a "Wild & Scenic Stewardship Guide" certificate upon completion of the program. IRU is excited to grow guide education into a more formal and developed professional development opportunity. It will serve as an avenue for guides to build their knowledge base and interpretive skills, and grow in their ability to educate their clients about Wild and Scenic protections and salmon and steelhead in the Middle Fork drainage and throughout the Pacific Northwest.

## Defending Idaho's Wild & Scenic Rivers

Idaho Rivers United's work to protect both potential and designated Wild and Scenic Rivers this year brought our focus on central and north-central Idaho.

Currently, IRU is working to protect nearly 940 miles of rivers that are eligible for designation under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) in the Nez Perce - Clearwater National Forests (NP-CW).

The US Forest Service is conducting a plan revision process for the Nez Perce - Clearwater National Forests which will dictate the management of 1,460 rivers and 4 million acres of public lands. Of the 1,460 rivers inventoried within the forests, 89 were found to be free-flowing and have 1 or more outstandingly remarkable values, making them eligible for designation under the WSRA. The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the plan revision, however, included a suitability study of these 89 rivers. Within the various plans included in the DEIS, 0 to 37 rivers were considered suitable for protection under the WSRA. All other rivers were deemed "non-suitable". According to the Forest Service, once a suitability study is completed, any river that is deemed "non-suitable" is no longer protected or eligible for designation under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. IRU submitted comments asking the Forest Service to reconsider their plans that would end protections for hundreds of miles of rivers in the Clearwater and Salmon watersheds.

Less than 1% of Idaho's 107,651 river miles are designated as Wild and Scenic. IRU will continue to advocate for the rivers of the Nez Perce - Clearwater to ensure that we protect these irreplaceable watersheds for fish, wildlife, and recreation.

On the South Fork Salmon River, the Stibnite Gold Project seeks to mine the riverbed upstream of potential and designated Wild and Scenic Rivers, and travel with heavy mining traffic adjacent to and across these rivers. Rivers that would be affected by the project include the North Fork and Main Payette, South Fork Salmon River, Johnson Creek and tributaries, and the designated Wild and Scenic Middle Fork and Main Salmon Rivers. The Forest Service is required to protect wild and scenic values, and to ensure that any project is thoroughly analyzed that may impact a river's qualities that make it eligible for future designation.



Photo: South Fork Salmon, by Caitlin Baird



IDAHO RIVERS UNITED  
**30**  
YEARS  
PROTECTING THE RIVERS  
WE LOVE.



IDAHO RIVERS UNITED  
**ANNUAL REPORT | 2020**

Photo: Buffalo River, by Brian Klinghorn

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## A Message from the Executive Director

As we close out our first 30 years, Idaho Rivers United continues to be the standard-bearer for river conservation, not just in Idaho, but as a National leader in the effort to protect and restore the rivers and fisheries of our region's waterways. Through our dedicated work on the national, state, and local levels, this year proved especially significant.

Our persistence, expertise, and ability to bring people together resulted in several significant victories. We won protections for migrating salmon and steelhead from hot water in the Columbia River system and forced the Environmental Protection Agency, for the first time, to address hot water pollution that has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of adult salmon. We fought efforts to roll back the Clean Water Act, standing up for state's rights to manage their own waters; we've championed efforts to stop the erosion of the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and the public's rights to have their voices heard. None of our work would be possible without the firm commitment and defense of our rivers from our membership and volunteers. It's this love of Idaho's greatest treasure, our unparalleled river system, that makes us so effective as defenders of our rivers.

As we continue to address today's most urgent river conservation issues, we are still guided by the same overarching goal: a future in which rivers are clean, healthy, free-flowing, and full of wild fish, providing a host of social, economic, and ecological benefits to Idaho.

While 2020 has certainly been a year of uncertainty, IRU's commitment to our mission has never been more resolute. We have made great strides and headway in the regional effort to remove the 4 Lower Snake River Dams. For the first time for many who've been involved in these decades-long fight, there is a hopeful optimism. We remain committed to seeing this effort through, **culminating with the largest river restoration in history.** We were at the forefront of coalescing a large local, state, and national presence to fight the destructive Stibnite mine project; opposition that blossomed into tens of thousands of people who voiced their opinion opposing the mine.

Those of us who battle for our rivers face many obstacles, and this year provided plenty, but we always fight for results that will benefit all. While our staff pivoted to remote work, the ability of this team to productively tackle the multitude of river issues that came to bear was astounding. This report showcases not only how IRU has thrived despite the challenges that 2020 has brought, but also highlights how we plan to build upon the successes that we've seen. Despite all that 2020 has meant for so many, IRU will look back at this year as one not only of success, but as a harbinger of hope for the years to come. We know that with each of you, we have the people, patience, and perseverance to accomplish even greater things.

Thank you all for your continued support!

For Our Rivers,

Nic Nelson  
Executive Director



Photo: Middle Fork Salmon, by Kaitlin Hoepner



Photo: Big Falls, by John Ward

## Hydropower Reform

For over 20 years, IRU has worked to improve ecological and recreational conditions during the relicensing of hydropower projects. IRU has also been successful in blocking the construction of new hydropower projects that would have greatly degraded some of Idaho's most prized rivers.

In addition, IRU holds a position on the steering committee of the Hydropower Reform Coalition (HRC). The HRC works at the national level to improve relicensing processes with a focus toward increased scrutiny of the environmental, social, and economic impacts of relicensing and new project proposals.

During 2020, IRU was engaged with the State of Oregon over water quality certification for the Hells Canyon Hydropower Complex. IRU also challenged the EPA's proposed policy changes that would gut the Clean Water Act, reduce protections for Idaho's rivers and streams, and strip authority from tribes and states on managing their waters. While administrations and policies change, IRU remains committed to advocating for free-flowing rivers, removal of obsolete dams, and maximum protections for rivers during the hydropower relicensing process.

## River RATs: Engaging Citizens in Advocacy

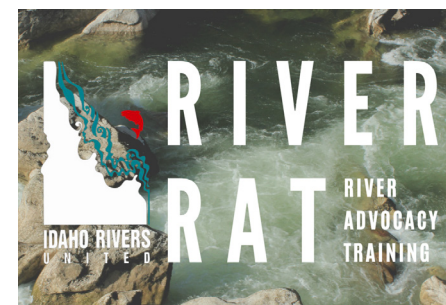
In 2020, Idaho Rivers United launched our River Advocacy Training program, called "River RATs". The vision for this program is to provide workshops and resources that bolster citizen engagement and provide education on various conservation issues critical to our mission.

The program launched in January with sessions in Boise and Coeur d'Alene focused on salmon and steelhead and Wild & Scenic Rivers. Events continued through February with workshops in McCall and Boise with our partners - Friends of the Clearwater and the Kootenai Environmental Alliance - surrounding Wild & Scenic Rivers and the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest plan revisions.

There were big plans for workshops in March, but, the world suddenly changed. As goals for the River RATs program were evaluated in light of COVID-19, IRU looked for new ways to engage citizens in advocacy and provide informational workshops. This year has been a lesson in pivoting, and after some trial runs, the River RATs program was relaunched, virtually!

IRU has had great success connecting with constituents across Idaho and the nation. River RATs workshops have aided the river-loving community with writing public comments on environmental impact statements, crafting statements for the Idaho Governor's Salmon Workgroup, and contacting elected officials in favor of river protections.

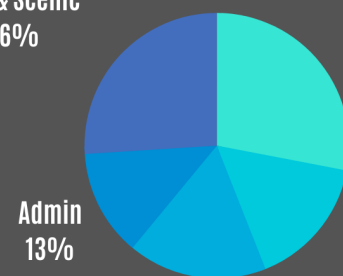
The River RATs program will continue to move forward next year, and IRU plans to resume in-person workshops as soon as it is safe while still offering virtual components. Thank you for coming along this journey with IRU and for advocating for Idaho's rivers!



## YOUR INVESTMENT AT WORK

Wild & Scenic  
26%

Salmon & Steelhead  
28%



Admin  
13%

Clean Water & Policy  
16%

Membership & Development  
17%



Photo by Jim Grossman



Photo: Middle Fork Salmon, by Katie Yeater

## Safeguarding Our Wild Salmon & Steelhead

Idaho Rivers United continued to prioritize the recovery of Idaho's wild Snake River salmon and steelhead throughout 2020. IRU engaged the community in advocacy, worked with regional stakeholders, advocated for the necessity of wild salmon recovery to Idaho elected officials, and provided insight on government reports and meetings.

Salmon advocacy events were primarily virtual this year, providing an opportunity to reach a wide audience from not only Idaho, but across the country as well. River RAT workshops and updates provided individuals, from the well-versed to those seeking to learn more, with tools and opportunities to effectively speak up for wild salmon and steelhead through important advocacy opportunities and public comment. IRU serves as a voice for its members in government decision-making, while also empowering citizens to engage in policymaking and advocacy. These are crucial aspects of furthering a shared vision of restored salmon and strong, vibrant Northwest communities.

The latest federal Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on Columbia-Snake River hydropower operations fell far short of offering a strong path toward viable recovery for salmon. The report spurned the best available science and failed to examine the needs and realities of river stakeholders. There is a dire need for decisive action and development of a salmon recovery plan that follows the best science and comprehensively studies stakeholder needs in the event of Lower Snake River restoration via dam breaching. IRU continues to advocate for dam breaching to restore the Snake River, and reviving our precious wild salmon and steelhead resource in Idaho.

IRU has made it clear over the last three decades that abundant, healthy salmon runs mean stronger Idaho communities and healthier river systems for everyone. Idaho's elected leaders are beginning to publicly agree with this vision. This year, IRU closely monitored Governor Brad Little's Salmon Work Group, and encouraged citizens to engage with this policymaking process and opportunity to tell power brokers in Idaho that the current state of our salmon populations is unacceptable. IRU will continue to support Representative Simpson's goal of Idaho salmon recovery and engage in collaborative dialogue with stakeholders across the Northwest.

During the next year of our Lower Snake River restoration push, IRU will continue to safeguard the existence of Idaho's wild salmon and steelhead, and push for recovery to the point of abundance for these invaluable species. IRU will build on the work of the last 30 years, continuing to raise public support for a plan that returns abundant salmon runs and maintains strong Northwest communities. IRU will continue to engage with our elected leaders until they demonstrate the same care, reverence, and urgency for salmon and steelhead recovery as everyday Idahoans.



*"Everything we do, we can do differently. Salmon need one thing - they need a river."*

— Congressman Mike Simpson