



The Rio Grande flows from its headwaters in the San Juan Mountains of southern Colorado for 1865 miles to the Gulf of Mexico near Brownsville, Texas. Downstream from a wild and rugged section in northern New Mexico, the river is diverted into canals and trapped behind dams for agricultural and municipal uses. For 1250 miles, the Rio Grande is the boundary between the United States and Mexico. In a remote stretch in west Texas, the river makes a curve to the northeast to form the "big bend." It is here that the wild character of the river lives on.

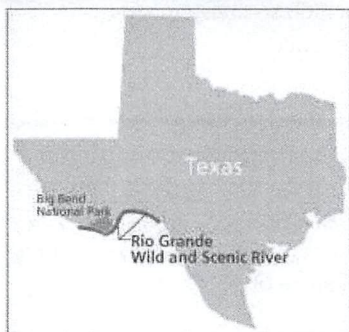
The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

In October 1968, Congress passed the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The Act states that designated rivers "...be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations." The Act serves to protect free-flowing rivers with "outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural or other similar values."

Today, 225 rivers have been designated as National Wild and Scenic Rivers. Of the country's 3.5 million miles of rivers, however, only 13,412 miles are designated. In fact, only 2% of the rivers in the United States are free-flowing and pristine enough to qualify for wild and scenic designation.

The National Park Service manages 53 designated wild and scenic rivers. Other designated rivers are managed by the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, states, or a combination of state and federal agencies.

The Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River

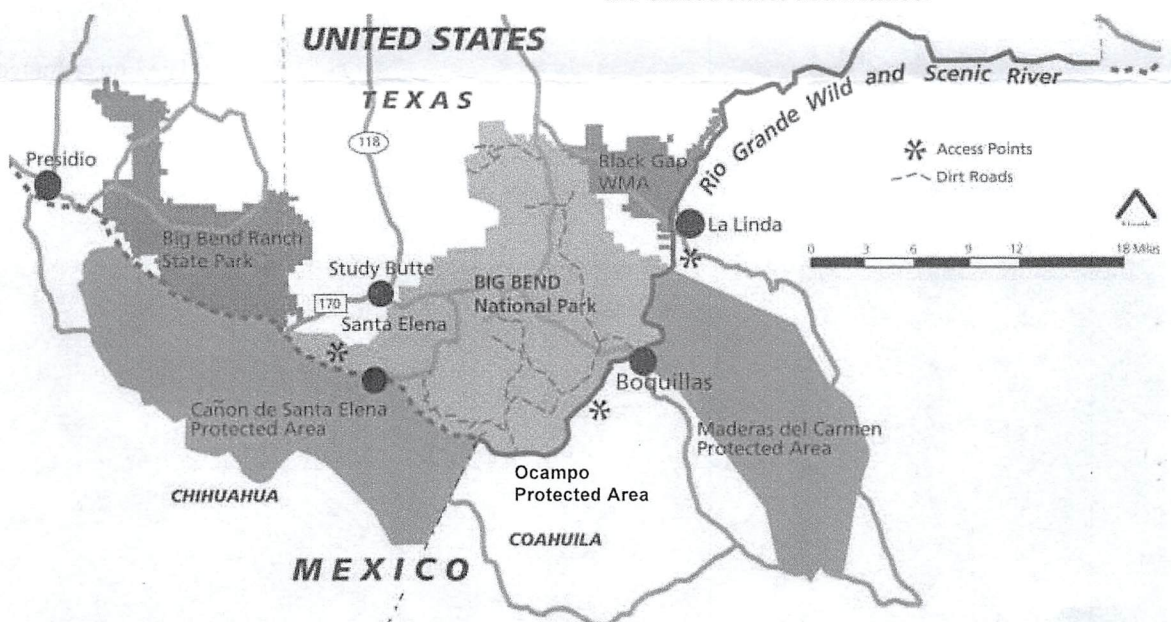


Recognizing the importance of the free-flowing Rio Grande, the rugged canyons, the Chihuahuan Desert scenery, the fish and wildlife habitat, and the outstanding recreational opportunities, Congress established the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River as a separate unit of the National Park System on November 10, 1978. The designation applies to the United States portion of the Rio Grande from the Chihuahua-Coahuila (Mexico) state line above Mariscal Canyon to the Terrell-Val Verde County (Texas) line. The Wild and Scenic River extends for 196 miles, including 69 miles along the southeastern boundary of Big Bend National Park and 127 miles downstream from the park. Upstream sections of the Rio Grande within Big Bend National Park, including Santa Elena Canyon, are not part of the Wild and Scenic River.

Since the Rio Grande forms part of the international boundary with Mexico, the Wild and Scenic designation in Texas applies to the U.S. half of the river from the center of the deepest channel to just above the river's edge. Most of the land on both sides of the river, downstream from Big Bend National Park, is privately owned. Rights of private landowners must be respected.

Sections of the river are designated as either wild or scenic. The sections of river encompassing Mariscal Canyon, Boquillas Canyon, and most of the Lower Canyons downstream from Big Bend National Park are designated as wild. The remainder of the Wild and Scenic River is classified as scenic.

Together, Big Bend National Park and the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River protect 245 miles of river—one fifth of the section of the river shared by the United States and Mexico.



Visiting the Wild and Scenic River

The Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River is easily accessible from several locations in Big Bend National Park. Stand on the riverbank at Rio Grande Village, at the Hot Springs Historic Area, or at the Boquillas Canyon Nature Trail and you will view a portion of the free-flowing Rio Grande.

However, the only way to truly experience the river is to float it. You may experience the Wild and Scenic River by taking a 1-2 day float trip through Mariscal Canyon, or a 2-3 day trip through Boquillas Canyon. You can experience a small portion of the river in less than a day by floating through Hot Springs Canyon, or through one of the quiet stretches downstream from Mariscal Canyon.

The Lower Canyons between Heath Canyon and Dryden, downstream from Big Bend National Park, make up the heart of the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River. Wild and isolated, the canyons provide opportunities for solitude and an outstanding wilderness experience. There are no facilities and access is limited due to rough terrain and constraints of private land. The arduous 83-mile trip takes 5-7 days. Because of the remoteness of the area, help may be many hours or days away. Extensive experience and preparation are absolutely essential.

All river trips require planning and some experience. No matter where you float, you will need to arrange a shuttle for your vehicle. Consult a river guide book and check with a park ranger for current conditions before embarking on any river trip. Permits are required for all float trips, and may be obtained at any visitor center in Big Bend National Park up to 24 hours in advance.

An American Heritage River

On August 5, 1998, President Clinton designated 14 American Heritage Rivers, including the Texas portion of the Rio Grande, to celebrate America's rivers and to recognize and reward grassroots efforts to restore them. The American Heritage River designation is voluntary and locally driven; communities choose to participate and can terminate their participation at any time.

However, the portions of the Rio Grande within Big Bend National Park and the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River are automatically included in the designation by virtue of their Federal status.

Challenges for the Future

The mission of the National Park Service is to preserve the free-flowing and natural condition of the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River and its immediate environment for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. Water quantity and quality, however, are dependent on what happens upstream from the park in both the U.S. and Mexico.

Low water levels due to consumptive water use upstream are of special concern. However, the establishment of two protected areas in Mexico, adjacent to Big Bend National Park and portions of the Wild and Scenic River, has given new life to international cooperation in managing this critical shared resource on which so many species, including humans, depend.

For More Information

The Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River is administered by Big Bend National Park. For more information about the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River, its management, and recreational opportunities, contact:

Superintendent
P.O. Box 129
Big Bend National Park, TX 79834-0129
(432) 477-2251
www.nps.gov/rigr/

The following helpful publications are available at park visitor centers or from the Big Bend Natural History Association, P.O. Box 196, Big Bend National Park, TX 79834; (432) 477-2236 or online at www.bigbendbookstore.org/

River Guide to the Rio Grande:
Colorado Canyon and Santa Elena Canyon.

River Guide to the Rio Grande:
Mariscal Canyon and Boquillas Canyon.

River Guide to the Rio Grande:
The Lower Canyons.

The Lower Canyons of the Rio Grande
by Louis F. Aulbach and Joe Butler.

