

## Should personal watercraft be allowed in national parks?

Sean Smith, Bluewater Network

National parks are required by law to serve two purposes: conservation and public enjoyment of our country's scenic, natural and historic resources. That is to say, parks are preserves for beauty and wildlife, but also for people of this and future generations. Parks must therefore prohibit activities that cause harm to these resources or inhibit the public's ability to enjoy them. Personal watercraft (PWC) such as Jet Skis®, Wave Runners®, etc., do both.

Personal watercraft are designed for speed and thrills, not for the enjoyment of scenery and natural wonders. PWC release between 25 and 30 percent of their fuel unburned into the environment. Many PWC emit noise at levels that threaten public health and safety. This water, air, and noise pollution has negative effects on wildlife and other natural resources and impairs

the experience of other park visitors.

The National Park Service recognizes these negative impacts and Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore is currently the only park unit in the Great Lakes region still considering opening its boundaries to PWC damage. With such overwhelming support from both scientific research and the public, it is clearly the mandate of the National Park Service to ban all PWC use at Pictured Rocks.

PWC users insist they have the right to enjoy the parks as much as anyone else does. But as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. famously observed, "The right to swing my fist ends where the other man's nose begins." So too does the right to ride a PWC in a national park end where the impacts are intolerable to other visitors and threaten the very resources the park is entrusted with protecting.

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Sean Smith is public lands director for Bluewater Network, which was a plaintiff in a legal action that resulted in the National Park Service permanently banning personal watercraft from most national parks in 2001. See [www.bluewater-network.org](http://www.bluewater-network.org)

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The National Park Service has the unique challenge of managing some of America's most beautiful and pristine wilderness areas. Places like Yellowstone National Park and Yosemite are perhaps the first places that come to mind when people think of "national parks."

However, the reality is that the National Park Service manages hundreds of different "units" (as the parks are referred to), some which are huge, like the Grand Canyon, and some of which are smaller and more obscure. In between, there are national recreation areas, seashores and lakeshores, which host activities ranging from motor boating to air tours.

In those few National Park units that do allow motor boating, personal watercraft (PWC) should be allowed access. These are places like the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, a man-made lake just outside of Las Vegas, which allows just about every type of motorboat imaginable.

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore is another unit that should allow for continued use of PWC. All types of boats are allowed access to this national treasure – in addition to every conceivable type of vessel allowed on Lake Superior. This opinion is shared by park administrators at Pictured Rocks, who recently released their PWC management proposal that includes continued PWC access.

PWC owners do not want carte blanche access to all national parks. They are merely asking to be managed as other motorboats are. After all, PWC are subject to the same rules and regulations as other "traditional" motorboats, and are considered boats by the Coast Guard.

Today's PWC are safer and more environmentally friendly than most of the "conventional" boats on the water. And the National Park Service has taken note of this, allowing PWC owners back into many of the units.

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For further information, see related story on page 10.