

# Allagash Wilderness Waterway

**THREAT: REMOVAL FROM THE WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS SYSTEM;  
LOSS OF WILDERNESS VALUES**

## Summary

Once the crown jewel of the nation's Wild and Scenic Rivers System, the Allagash Wilderness Waterway has lost much of its primitive character to decades of neglectful management. Some Maine legislators have introduced an unprecedented proposal to strip away the protections that federal wild and scenic river designation affords. Unless the state renews its commitment to preserve the river as a vestige of primitive America, the public will lose the best opportunity for a true wilderness experience in the crowded Northeast, and the nation's legal framework for protecting its most special rivers will be seriously compromised.

## The River

From its headwaters in Allagash, Chamberlain, and Telos lakes, the 92-mile Allagash Wilderness Waterway flows north through wooded, hilly country into the St. John River on the Canada border. The banks of the Allagash are home to rare mammals such as the lynx and pine marten, as well as river otter, moose, and black bear. A large variety of birds nest along its shores, and the clear, cold water provides ideal habitat for native brook trout.

The Allagash was designated a state wilderness river in 1966. In 1970, it became the first of just 17 rivers in the national Wild and Scenic Rivers System to be administered by a

state with oversight from a federal agency – most are administered directly by a federal agency. The Allagash's designation as "wild" is reserved for rivers that are generally accessible only by trail, and "represent vestiges of primitive America." The state and the National Park Service (NPS) have since worked together to purchase a narrow corridor of forest along the river that otherwise would have been commercially harvested for timber.

Henry David Thoreau chronicled a vivid experience on the Allagash in his classic book *The Maine Woods*, and today the Allagash Wilderness Waterway is one of the top destinations for multi-day wilderness canoeing trips in the lower 48 states. A thriving industry of outfitters and guides serves visitors from across the country who wish to float along a river that shows few signs of civilization.

## The Risk

Over time, the Maine Department of Conservation (DOC) has increasingly chafed at its mandate to protect the waterway's unique wilderness values. The DOC has constructed, or looked the other way as others constructed, a growing number of drive-up access points, riverside parking lots, boat launches, and other structures in the formerly pristine landscape of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway despite a mandate to manage for "maximum wilderness character."

In 1998, the DOC demolished a historically significant timber crib dam on the river that had been grandfathered into the wild and scenic river designation, replacing it with an unsightly concrete and steel structure at Churchill Depot that doubles as a bridge for commercial logging trucks. The state broke the law by neglecting to apply for a Clean



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THE MAINE DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION IS INCREASINGLY ALLOWING CIVILIZATION TO INTRUDE ON THE ALLAGASH, WHICH IT IS SUPPOSED TO MANAGE AS A "VESTIGE OF PRIMITIVE AMERICA."



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Water Act permit from the Corps of Engineers, thereby failing to provide the agency an opportunity to consult with the NPS about the dam — also required by law.

Alerted to the illegal act, NPS issued a finding in July 2001 that, “the dam constructed at Churchill Depot represents a direct and adverse effect on the values for which the Allagash was designated a wild river.” The Corps subsequently required the DOC to satisfy the Park Service’s required mitigation steps as a condition for a retroactive permit, including on-the-ground efforts to undo some of the damage, and revision of the state’s management plan to strengthen protections for the river’s remaining wild character.

A state legislator has responded to the situation by introducing legislation in December 2001 to de-designate the Allagash Wilderness Waterway. Should this become law, it could be the first time a river has ever been removed from the Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Without federal oversight, the DOC would feel even less compulsion to manage the Allagash as a wild river, and the river would soon lose its remaining wilderness character.

## What Can Be Done

The people of Maine enjoy a great abundance of rivers, lakes, and ponds that are accessible for day use and suitable for all levels of skill and experience. The Maine DOC should use the mitigation plan as an opportunity to recommit to managing the Allagash Wilderness Waterway as something different from that. It should stop the proliferation of construction projects and restore the river to its wild condition for future generations to experience.

The Maine legislature should reject any effort to remove the river from the Wild and Scenic Rivers System or otherwise downgrade protections of the river’s wilderness character.

Members of the public will have a number of opportunities to speak out in the coming months and encourage DOC and the Maine legislature to protect the Allagash Wilderness Waterway. More information and links to take action are posted at <http://www.amrivers.org/mostendangered/allagash2002.htm>

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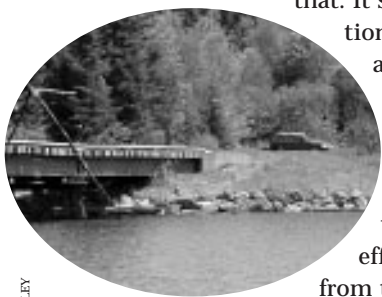
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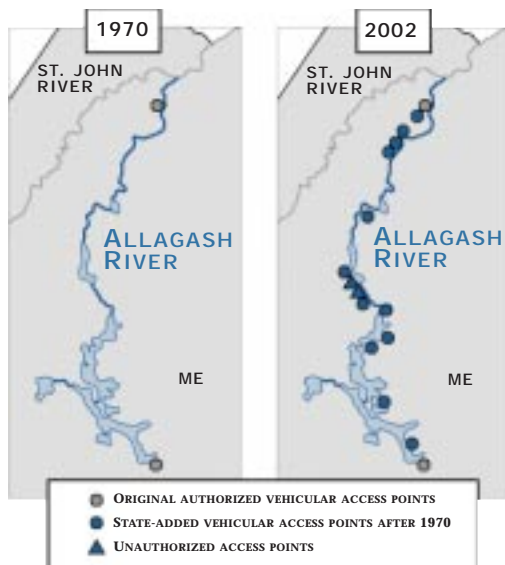
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AN EFFORT TO REMOVE THE ALLAGASH WILDERNESS WATERWAY FROM THE WILD AND SCENIC RIVER SYSTEM THREATENS THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROTECTING AMERICA’S MOST SPECIAL RIVERS.



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FOR LINKS TO MORE INFORMATION OR TO TAKE ACTION: [WWW.AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/MOSTENDANGERED/ALLAGASH2002.HTM](http://WWW.AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/MOSTENDANGERED/ALLAGASH2002.HTM)