The Uneven Geography of River Conservation In The U.S.: Insights From The Application Of The Wild And Scenic Rivers Act
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Rivers are vital for sustaining biodiversity and human development, yet globally only a small fraction of rivers enjoy protection and those with protections are often impaired or modified. Rapid rates of freshwater species’ extinctions indicate current conservation practices are failing. Despite over fifty years of scientific evidence justifying river conservation, it remains that less attention is focused on protecting ecosystems than on developing water resources for economic growth. This disparity is indicative of the ‘nature as resource’ versus ‘conservation of nature’ paradigm. Today, this paradigm is complicated by new attentions centering both on water resource development projects and conservation policy as climate change adaptation strategies. Policies protecting rivers are recommended for contending with more intense storms and flooding, increasing resilience for species, forests, and agricultural areas, and fostering some types of water security. Creating, implementing, and managing climate adaptation policies will require a strong state presence in water resource governance. We know, however, the aforementioned paradigm hinders conservation policymaking. Therefore, understanding how conservation policy has already been rationalized, implemented, and managed is critical to advancing climate adaptation policymaking. Yet, little empirical research has been conducted on federal river conservation policy creation or application across the U.S.

To that end, this dissertation, presented in three discrete original research articles, examines the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Specifically, this study investigates the socio-ecological drivers behind the creation of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 and the spatial dimensions of the policy’s application and management over time. This study is grounded empirically in extensive archival materials, interviews with federal land management agency personnel, conservation advocates, and technical experts, as well as spatial and temporal analysis of a geodatabase. Together, these methods were employed to answer the following research questions which guide this study:
(1) What factors influence the temporal and spatial distribution of river segments protected under the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act?
(2) What does the history of management in designated segments suggest about emerging trends and patterns in river conservation?
(3) How are competing environmental values and ideologies understood and reconciled in the context of river conservation?