



**American Rivers**  
RIVERS CONNECT US®



# **Strategic Plan**

FISCAL YEARS

# **2020-2024**



# INTRODUCTION

**RIVERS AND THE CLEAN WATER** they provide are our most indispensable resource. Rivers are vital to life, work and play. They refresh our bodies, support fish and wildlife, grow our food and fiber, power our industry, transport our goods, and, as they roar down steep mountain gorges or meander across meadows, rivers enliven our spirits. In so many ways, rivers connect us.

At American Rivers, we believe everyone, no matter where you live, the color of your skin or how much you earn, should have access to clean water and healthy rivers.

Since our founding in 1973, we have improved the health of our rivers. But too many rivers are still dammed and diverted, polluted and mismanaged. River degradation and its downstream effects hit lower-income communities, indigenous peoples and communities

of color the hardest. And now climate change poses the greatest challenge of all. Extreme droughts and floods and degraded water quality threaten the vitality — and in some cases, the very survival — of rivers and the communities that depend on them.

American Rivers was founded to save America's last wild rivers from the insatiable designs of dam builders, and to permanently protect our last remaining free-flowing rivers as

**“I got involved with American Rivers because I love to fish, and having healthy rivers makes my passion more fun. American Rivers knows how to make positive change happen. With every dam removed, river mile protected and floodplain restored, our quality of life improves in so many ways. This organization is advancing the solutions we need for our environment and economy in communities nationwide.”**

— Eric Dobkin, donor  
New Canaan, Connecticut



PHOTO: GORDON KUCO, OARS

ROGUE RIVER, OREGON

Wild and Scenic Rivers. That mission continues, and, as we approach our 50th anniversary, it has expanded to include restoration of damaged rivers through dam removal, protection of urban rivers and clean water through green infrastructure, and advocacy to improve the laws and policies that protect rivers and clean water. Now, as challenges to river health and water security change and grow, American Rivers continues to evolve to meet them.

Our 2020-2024 Strategic Plan positions American Rivers to meet these challenges and seize opportunities in several new ways, including:

- A greater emphasis on water security, conserving and improving the management of rivers for the environment and for equitable water supply for people and communities, and protecting communities from disastrous flooding.
- A commitment to conserving and restoring rivers and floodplains as a bulwark against the impacts of climate change, weaving climate change adaptation and mitigation more fully into our work.
- An organization-wide emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion, internally and in our conservation work.

## The need for action

Throughout our nation's history, we have mistreated rivers — damming them, diverting their flows and polluting their waters. More than 80,000 dams in the United States block rivers, fragmenting and degrading habitat and harming water quality. Rivers across the nation, from the Chattahoochee to the Colorado, are overtaxed, with demand for their water exceeding supply. Pollution still threatens our drinking water sources and the places our families swim, fish and play. As climate change brings drought and aridification to some areas of the country and major flooding to others, rivers' natural functions and benefits are impaired. When rivers suffer, people who depend on them suffer as well. At American Rivers, we are driven by an urgency to advance river conservation solutions. The safety, security and prosperity of our communities depend on it.



PHOTO: ANDREW DOBSON

**"I like American Rivers because of the holistic approach. It's like homeopathy: You don't just put on a Band-Aid, you have to treat the bigger issue. It doesn't matter what the river, creek or stream is — they're all connected. This is the circulatory system of the planet. You cannot get more fundamental than that."**

— Marcia Weese, donor, Carbondale, Colorado



# BUILDING ON OUR SUCCESSES

**OUR DRINKING WATER**, the food we eat, our quality of life, our future: it all depends on rivers. That is why we re-dedicate ourselves every day to protecting wild rivers, restoring damaged rivers and conserving clean water for people and nature.

## Here's a snapshot of some of our successes:

### PROTECTING WILD RIVERS

American Rivers has led the charge to safeguard more rivers as Wild and Scenic — a designation that prohibits dams and other harmful development. To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 2018, we launched the 5000 Miles of Wild® campaign, in cooperation with conservation and corporate partners, to protect an additional 5,000 miles of rivers and grow the national Wild and Scenic Rivers system by 40 percent. We are well on our way to meeting our goal: We have secured new Wild and Scenic designations for more than 600

miles of rivers, including Montana's East Rosebud Creek, Oregon's Rogue and Molalla rivers, and the Nashua, Squannacook and Nissitissit rivers in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

### RESTORING DAMAGED RIVERS

American Rivers leads the national movement — and has inspired a growing international effort — to remove obsolete and unsafe dams. Starting with the removal of Edwards Dam on Maine's Kennebec River in 1999, we made the once radical-sounding idea of returning rivers to their natural, free-flowing condition

mainstream. The result: hundreds of miles of restored waters, from the Penobscot in Maine to the Patapsco in Maryland to the Elwha in Washington. We have built momentum nationwide by influencing federal and local policy to make removing dams easier, more efficient and more cost effective. The trainings we hold for state agencies, project managers and other nonprofit organizations to ensure they have the necessary skills and knowledge have accelerated the pace of river restoration. A record number of 86 dams were removed across the United States in 2017.

### CONSERVING CLEAN WATER

No one should have to worry about the safety of their water — or whether there will be enough for the future. American Rivers has helped communities everywhere from Atlanta to Tucson promote sustainable water use and equitable, resilient, innovative ways of managing drinking water, stormwater and wastewater to meet both community and ecosystem needs. We are also demonstrating how protecting source water benefits supply chains, livelihoods and quality of life. In major river basins, from the Southeast's Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint to the Southwest's Colorado River, we have been instrumental in moving debates over scarce water resources from conflict toward collaboration.



EAST ROSEBUD CREEK, MONTANA

PHOTO: MIKE FIEBIG

# STRATEGIC APPROACH

## Our 2020-2024\* plan is built on three strategic priorities:

### ■ CONSERVATION PRACTICE:

American Rivers will improve the health of the nation's rivers and address the impacts of climate change by protecting and restoring flows, connectivity, water quality and habitats.

■ **CONSERVATION POLICY:** American Rivers will be the nation's voice for rivers, using our policy and communications expertise to advocate for a strong framework of laws, regulations and policies that protect and restore rivers, and conserve clean water for people and nature, including addressing historical injustices to communities of color and marginalized communities.

■ **ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE:** American Rivers will continue to be

a financially sound, well-managed organization, with an equitable and inclusive culture and a diverse staff and board.

Our mission to **protect wild rivers, restore damaged rivers and conserve clean water for people and nature** has never been more necessary or more urgent. Under the 2020-2024 Strategic Plan, American Rivers will take substantial strides toward realizing our vision of **a nation of clean, healthy rivers that sustain and connect us.**

As the nation's most effective river conservation organization, American Rivers will drive forward lasting solutions that benefit people *and* wildlife, cities *and* rural communities, the economy *and* the environment.

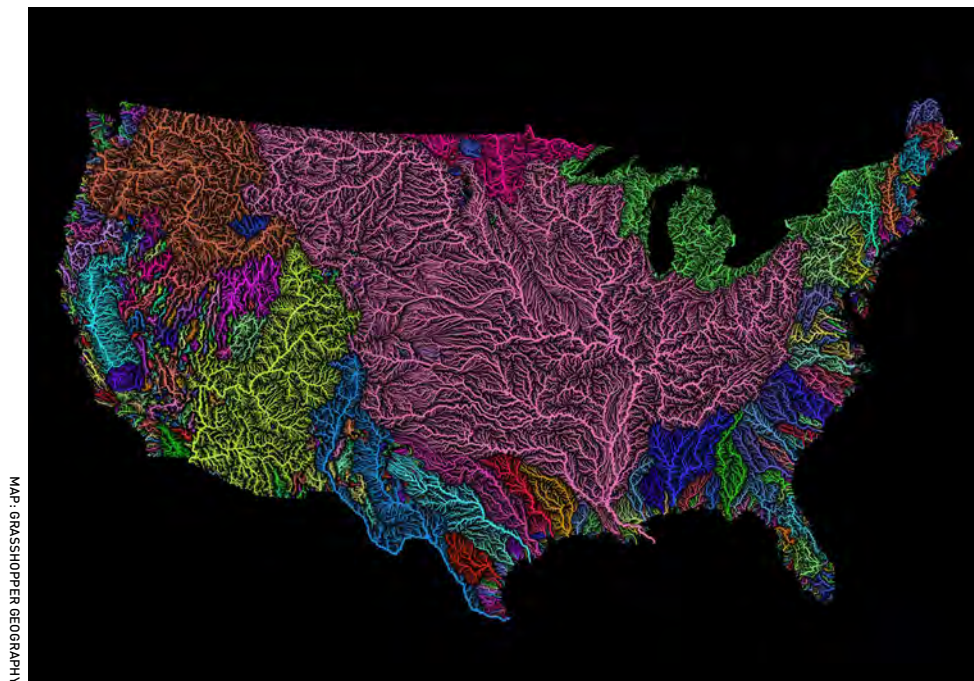
**Our most important work begins now.**

**"Water infiltrates my every day. I fix breakfast for my children. I wash their dishes, do my laundry...I try to think about the ways I'm using water because it's precious. Our families and our communities need healthy rivers. From ensuring clean water sources, to revitalizing fish and wildlife habitat, to improving opportunities for river recreation, the work of American Rivers aligns with our mission, values and passions."**

—Michelle Kalberer, co-owner of Klean Kanteen

\*Fiscal years July 1, 2019-June 30, 2024

Rivers are the cardiovascular system of our nation — essential to our well-being and continued survival. Free flowing, clean and strong, they provide our nation's most important natural resource. Blocked, polluted and reduced in flow, the entire system breaks down, jeopardizing our health and very existence.





## STRATEGIC PRIORITY: CONSERVATION PRACTICE



PHOTO: ALAN CRESSLER

FLINT RIVER, GEORGIA

**American Rivers will improve the health of the nation's rivers and address the impacts of climate change by protecting and restoring flows, connectivity, water quality and habitats.**

### THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

are already manifest, and nowhere is the impact more keenly felt than in the management of rivers and water resources. In general, dry areas of the country are getting drier, wet areas wetter, and droughts and floods are striking with more frequency and severity. The resulting risks to water security can take the form of too little water — threats to supply for agriculture, industry, municipal use and the natural environment — or too

much water, including disastrous flood damage to communities in harm's way and adverse impacts on water quality. Healthy, well-managed rivers and floodplains provide relief in both cases, providing reliable sources of water in drought, and helping prevent or mitigate flooding.

Our conservation work is based on the understanding that:

- Optimal flow, connectivity, water quality and river and

**"I know that my gift to American Rivers helps protect my favorite rivers and mitigate the impact of droughts and flooding associated with climate change."**

— John Haydock, American Rivers  
Board of Directors  
Charlottesville, Virginia

riparian habitats are the essential components of river health.

- River basins or collections of rivers and streams sharing common biogeographic characteristics (referred to below collectively as “basins”) are the units within which conservation action is most effectively planned, implemented and measured.
- Healthy and resilient river ecosystems — streams, wetlands, floodplains and riparian corridors — are a necessary bulwark against the adverse impacts of climate change on the human and natural environment.

- To be successful, our work must equitably engage, benefit, prioritize the values and needs of, and mitigate harm to communities of color and historically marginalized communities.

American Rivers is well positioned to lead efforts to address climate change. Our river-basin approach — in which we improve the health of rivers across the nation by protecting and restoring flows, connectivity, water quality and habitats in 11 priority river basins — gives us unique expertise in coordinating projects over large geographic areas.

We have also developed important relationships and trust with communities, governments, experts and other stakeholders, and we are experienced at working at the scale required to create a lasting impact.

**“Before we met American Rivers, Hispanic Access Foundation didn’t have a direct way to serve as advocates for the Colorado River. Now, we have more opportunities for Latinos to be fully engaged on these issues that are so important to our communities.”**

— Maite Arce, Hispanic Access Foundation president and CEO



PHOTO: AMY MARTIN

## Building power by engaging communities

One-third of Latinx people in the United States live and work in the seven states of the Colorado River Basin. Teaming up with the Hispanic Access Foundation has helped American Rivers engage Latinx communities in thoughtful dialogue about rivers. We produced two films in English and Spanish, “I Am Red” and “Milk and Honey,” about the importance of the Colorado River to the cultures, economy and livelihoods of these communities, and we distributed them to audiences across the region. Hispanic Access Foundation facilitated film screenings at 25 churches from Denver to Los Angeles and reached 4,000 Latinx youth at special events. The foundation partnered with American Rivers to mobilize public action when we named the lower Colorado River America’s Most Endangered River® of 2017. When it comes to standing up for healthy rivers, we are proving that we are always stronger together.



## STRATEGIC PRIORITY: CONSERVATION POLICY



PHOTO: CODY BEAR SUTTON

GILA RIVER, NEW MEXICO

**American Rivers will be the nation's voice for rivers, using our policy and communications expertise to advocate for a strong framework of laws, regulations and policies that protect and restore rivers and conserve clean water.**

**A GREAT STRENGTH** of American Rivers is the powerful combination of our field programs and our active presence in the nation's capital. In Washington, policy work supports our river protection, restoration and clean water work, which in turn provides examples of river conservation that buttress our policy advocacy. We are the nation's voice for rivers and clean water in the press, across social media and in the halls of Congress and federal agencies.

We provide specialized analysis and technical expertise to help governments at all levels address river and water resources management policy issues. We bring sophisticated advocacy tools to bear for stronger protection for rivers and clean water, organize coalitions of conservation and water resource management groups, and work with states, Native American tribes and local governments to ensure sound policy outcomes. We build the necessary public awareness and support to create positive change for rivers.

**"Our people have lived on the banks of the Gila River in Arizona for thousands of years, and we have watched as our river dwindled through overuse in the upper valley. We have known for decades that our river is in danger, so the action of American Rivers today strikes a chord with me and my people."**

— Governor Stephen Roe Lewis, Gila River Indian Community, in response to New Mexico's Gila River being named America's Most Endangered River® of 2019



## Clean water so cities can thrive

Cities have complex needs when it comes to improving water quality, promoting economic development and addressing neighborhood flooding. In Milwaukee, American Rivers has helped innovate integrated water management solutions, such as green roofs, that provide multiple environmental, social and economic benefits. As climate change and aging infrastructure bring new water challenges, cities that aspire to use, manage and distribute water efficiently and equitably will be the ones that come out ahead.



PHOTO: DAVID MARK

**“The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation has supported efforts to restore and protect the Great Lakes for nearly 40 years, and American Rivers has been a key partner in that endeavor. With our support, American Rivers took up the complex challenge of helping cities rethink how they manage drinking water, stormwater, wastewater and source water systems. Building partnerships is a guiding principle at the Mott Foundation. American Rivers has demonstrated the power of partnerships to effect change.”**

—Ridgway H. White, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation president



## Making an impact as the nation's voice for rivers

Every community deserves clean water and a healthy river. That's why American Rivers leverages our national expertise and advocacy to influence policies that touch every river and stream in our country. We have successfully defended clean water protections in court, secured federal legislation protecting hundreds of miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers, and influenced statutes, such as the Water Resources Development Act, that will support river restoration nationwide. In addition, our highly anticipated annual America's Most Endangered Rivers® report focuses national attention on river conservation issues, mobilizes citizen action and produces victories for rivers every year. Our partners and supporters trust us to be the voice for rivers nationwide.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITY:

# ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE



PHOTO: RAWPIXEL

**American Rivers will continue to be a financially sound, well-managed organization, with an equitable and inclusive culture and a diverse staff and board.**

**AS AN ORGANIZATION,** we must constantly seek innovative and more effective ways of making progress toward our mission. For American Rivers to achieve our vision of a nation of clean, healthy rivers that sustain and connect us, each function of our organization — the Board of Directors, executive leadership, programs, fundraising, communications, financial management and administration — must operate efficiently and effectively.

Financial stability and revenue growth are vital to advancing our goals and core activities, particularly unrestricted funding that is flexible to meet needs and address urgent opportunities.

Over the five years of this strategic plan, American Rivers will raise \$83 million in philanthropic support and government grants to sustain programs and operations. In addition, American Rivers will determine the feasibility of raising an additional \$47 million through a comprehensive capital campaign to expand programs and operations, and build cash reserves and endowment.

To maintain organizational success and support this revenue growth, American Rivers must be strongly positioned with key elements in place: strong volunteer leadership, clear philanthropic communications, fundraising infrastructure, up-to-date technology, financial systems,

## Strengthening communities in the face of a changing climate

Years of advocacy by American Rivers sparked a paradigm shift in California's Central Valley, where large agricultural operations coexist with communities in a vast floodplain ecosystem being pushed to the brink by climate change. Instead of relying on traditional approaches, such as building larger and higher levees to manage more frequent floods, the region adopted a new flood protection plan to strategically expand floodplains, floodways and flood bypasses, giving rising water more room, reducing flood risk to people and property, and benefiting fish and wildlife habitat. The plan, which American Rivers was instrumental in driving forward, is exemplary because it takes into account the impacts of climate change. It will benefit over 1 million Californians, protect \$70 billion in homes, businesses and infrastructure from flooding, and is a model for other watersheds nationwide.



skills training and a holistic cultural approach to philanthropy in which everyone — staff, Board and other volunteers — has a part to play in increasing the profile, and support for, the organization.

Over the next five years, American Rivers will:

- Ensure a diverse, equitable and inclusive work culture.
- Maximize net contributed income.
- Engage our Board of Directors to reach higher levels of excellence in governance, strategic leadership and ensuring resources for American Rivers' work.
- Increase the numbers of donors, particularly individuals, and sources of contributed income.
- Nurture positive relationships with all stakeholders to increase engagement and support.
- Enhance the organization's visibility and reputation as the nation's leading river conservation organization.
- Bolster financial and administrative systems, as well as physical and technological assets.



PAUL BRUCHEZ, REEDER CREEK RANCH, COLORADO

PHOTO: RUSS SCHNITZER

**“The Colorado River is the lifeblood of our entire valley. In the early 2000s when we had our drought, these ranches weren’t sustainable and the health of the river was doomed. We knew that if we did not take action, not only would we not have a river, but we wouldn’t have a ranch.”**

—Paul Bruchez, fifth-generation rancher in Kremmling, Colorado. American Rivers partnered with Paul and local conservation groups to restore 30 miles of the Colorado River headwaters for the health of the trout fishery and ranching families that depend on the river for survival.

## Focus on priority river basins maximizes results

A core element of our strategy at American Rivers is targeting our efforts in priority river basins. This allows our on-the-ground staff to build lasting relationships with partners, connect with local decision makers, tackle basin-wide conservation and management issues, mobilize action at the right time, and deliver the greatest results. Our success in basins means real benefits for rivers and communities. And when we amplify and share these successes, we scale up our impact, inspiring positive change on other rivers nationwide.

We will continue focusing our efforts in the following priority basins:

- Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River Basin
- Chesapeake Bay River Basin
- Colorado River Basin
- Connecticut River Basin
- Delaware River Basin
- Great Lakes Basin
- Northern Rockies River Basin
- Puget Sound and Columbia River Basin
- Sacramento-San Joaquin River Basin
- Southern Appalachia and the Carolinas River Basin
- Upper Mississippi River Basin



PHOTO: ROBERT ZUNIKOFF



American Rivers believes every community in our country should have clean water and a healthy river. Since 1973, we have protected wild rivers, restored damaged rivers and conserved clean water for people and nature. With headquarters in Washington, D.C. and field offices across the country, we are the most effective river conservation organization in the United States, delivering solutions that will last for generations to come.

**[AmericanRivers.org](https://AmericanRivers.org)**

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