

RIVERS MONTH NOTES VITAL NETWORK FOR PEOPLE, WILDLIFE

AUSTIN, Texas -- Texas is a landscape dominated by 191,000 miles of waterways made up of some 8,000 named rivers and streams. Like veins in the human body, Texas rivers are the lifeblood for fish, wildlife and people, facts emphasized during Texas Rivers Month in June.

Gov. Rick Perry issued a declaration on March 14 stating "Texas rivers are part of our state's history and heritage. History has been made on their banks, cities have been founded along their waters, and just the mention of their names evokes countless Texas legends. Through the ages, these treasured natural resources have contributed immeasurably to this great state we call home."

There are 15 major river basins in Texas that provide crucial freshwater in-flows to coastal estuaries. These rivers and their many tributaries transport life-giving nutrients to the coast. Estuaries, where river freshwater meets saline seawater, are ecological factories powered by sunlight that form the foundation of multi-billion dollar sport and commercial fisheries.

"Rivers enrich our lives, provide water to drink and food for the table and form the landscape of this great state," said Bob Spain, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department assistant director for resource protection. "I hope everyone will get their favorite fishing pole, swimming trunks, canoe, or pair of binoculars and enjoy their favorite waterway for rivers month in June."

Rivers provide direct benefits to Texans by assimilating and naturally treating wastes, recharging aquifers, and buffering floods. Rivers also provide statewide recreational opportunities including boating, fishing, canoeing, hunting, and birding.

They supply water for municipalities, industries and agriculture. They replenish wetlands and bottomland hardwoods, some of the most important yet most rapidly disappearing wildlife habitat types in Texas.

Yet rivers are threatened. According to Texas Commission on Environmental Quality data, of the 14,315 miles of streams that were evaluated for a recent report, 12,892 miles of monitored streams meet the requirements of aquatic life. This means 10 percent of the monitored streams did not adequately support life. For water contact recreation, only about 71 percent of the classified streams in Texas are considered safe to swim, water ski or wade.

The TCEQ, TPWD and other agencies focus considerable staff time and resources on monitoring river and stream quality, tracking pollution complaints and enforcing water quality laws. Much effort is given to proactive education to encourage voluntary water stewardship, but wrong-doers can face penalties. In 2002, TPWD investigated 181 fish kills and pollution complaints in rivers and streams. Major causes of these kills included a widespread outbreak of golden alga, as well as spills of brine and oil.

For more information about rivers, including real-time river flow rates and access points to launch boats in various river basins, check the Texas River Guide, visit the Web (<http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/texaswater/rivers/>).