

Narrated by PETER COYOTE

Narrator

This is a portrait of five great American rivers and the people who love and protect them.
A river trip on the Middle Fork of Idaho's Salmon River defines the wilderness experience.

Robert Redford

The beauty of wilderness is so powerful.

Narrator

The Yellowstone River runs through "America's Serengeti," with vast wildlife populations and exquisite beauty.

Tom Mangelsen

A magical, incredibly special place.

Narrator

The Rio Grande River in Big Bend National Park in Texas is an international study of contrasts.

Ernesto Hernandez Morales

Rivers are the roots of the oceans.

Narrator

Southern Utah's San Juan River flows through a stark desert landscape with archeological treasures.

Terry Tempest Williams

Water in the West is our lifeblood.

Narrator

Dramatic rapids of the Colorado River through Grand Canyon illustrate the dominant river of the American West.

Martin Litton

Great parts of it are still as wild as they ever were.

Narrator

Rivers are arteries of the planet.
Rivers inspire; from Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn" to Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness".

Rivers have an inherent drama, defining the landscapes they flow through.
Emotions range from sublime to the suspense of thundering white water.
There is elegance, and there is power.

THE SALMON RIVER: *HEART OF THE WILDERNESS*

Narrator

The Middle Fork of Idaho's Salmon River runs through one of the great wilderness areas in the lower 48 states.

The Middle Fork is a tributary of the Salmon River, which is the main tributary of the Snake River.

The Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area is named for the late Idaho senator.

He was instrumental in preserving these 2 million acres in 1980.

The Middle Fork was one of the first eight rivers to receive Wild and Scenic status in 1968.

It's a free-flowing, undammed river of spectacular beauty.

The Frank Church wilderness is managed with "leave no trace" wilderness ethics.

Conflicts are resolved in favor of wilderness.

Robert Redford is an eloquent voice for wilderness.

Writer Wallace Stegner wrote about it in his "Wilderness Letter".

Stegner called it "a geography of hope".

Robert Redford

He saw the wilderness and preservation of the wilderness, and I agree with this, as the reason to preserve it, because it told us who we are as a people, and as a nation.

Narrator

A white water adventure down the Middle Fork is one of nature's most grand.

The trip starts at Boundary Creek, not far from Stanley, Idaho. The white water team is led by veteran river guide Bronco Bruchak.

Guides Codye Reynolds, Nick Grimes, Zak Sears, Dan Thurber, Camilo Montano, Ned Perry, and Tyler Wendt captain individual boats. Kyle Cooper assists.

Codye Reynolds

Why did I choose to be a river guide? Well, I wanted to be, you know a lawyer, doctor, make big bucks. My dad made me be a river guide. That's only half true I guess. He encouraged me from a young age to do things that were a little different, and we started doing rivers when I was young. And there's something about it that just got in me. You know it gets in your blood. It gets to the point where you don't want to be without it. There's something really unique about a landscape that moves you through

it.

Narrator

Flows are dictated by nature on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River.

Bronco Bruchak

I think one of the most special things about the wilderness is what it does to you as a person. It has a positive effect on you. You don't have a choice in that. It leaves you a better person after you've had that experience.

Narrator

Surrounding the river is a vast wilderness.

Codye Reynolds

There's something about wilderness that is very primal. It brings you back to a very centered place. The expedition comes to Pistol Creek Rapid.

Codye Reynolds

There's something about the Middle Fork specifically that keeps me very present. I am 100% where I am, and that's really hard for me to do in a lot of other aspects of my life. As soon as you pass a rock you have to be on the next one. You can't spend any time thinking about how that could have been better, how you could have been closer, how you could have been more left, how you should have been taking shallower strokes. You can't think about all that because you're moving on to the next one. It keeps you very focused. It keeps you very present, and I appreciate that.

Narrator

The Middle Fork offers great trout fishing.

Nick Grimes and Zak Sears try their luck.

One of the greatest threats to this wilderness is the potential invasion of non-native fish and parasites. Twilight illuminates evening camp.

Life on the river offers moments of tranquility punctuated by pulsing rapids.

The expedition comes to Tappan Falls Rapid.

Codye Reynolds

Tappan Falls is great. What's going through my mind is, well I hope I'm not too far left, and this is going to be sweet. There's a sweet, sweet moment to coming over the edge of that horizon line and you're in it. There's no turning back.

Bronco Bruchak

If I had to think of one word about what this river means to me, that word would be home. It's a place that I love dearly, and I've had the great fortune to spend over 30 years running the Salmon River. And it's history, the beauty, the energy of the place; like right here where we're sitting at Big Creek. There is just so much energy here. You can't help but be affected in a positive way, and sharing it with people. Sharing this experience with people is probably one of my biggest joys.

Narrator

Impassable Canyon starts below the confluence of Big Creek and the Middle Fork.

Terrain changes from alpine to an inner gorge of imposing canyon walls.

The poetry of wilderness is pervasive.

Floating down a swift river may be the best way to see and feel it.

The sound of oars dipping into the river combines with the distant roar of rapids. Often, there is only silence.

Robert Redford

I think that the beauty of wilderness is so powerful when left alone that it does go into that new realm of magic.

THE YELLOWSTONE RIVER:

AMERICA'S SERENGETI

Narrator

Yellowstone is the nation's first National Park, created on March 1, 1872. Different stories exist, but the name may come from the yellow color found in its canyons.

John Colter was an explorer of the Yellowstone region in the early 1800s. He described an exotic landscape, a land of boiling water and rising steam.

The Yellowstone is a tributary of the Missouri River. It's the longest undammed river in the lower United States. Its water flows to the Mississippi and the Atlantic Ocean.

The Yellowstone's banks are lined by thermal features—a characteristic of underlying geothermal activity in Yellowstone National Park.

The river is a lifeline for the animals who live here. Yellowstone is sometimes called "America's Serengeti" because of the large number of animals who call it home. Herds of bison and elk migrate in and out of the park. Large predators like grizzly bears and wolves follow. Bison roam the banks of the Yellowstone River feeding on lush grass in Hayden Valley.

The remoteness of Yellowstone allowed a refuge. Bison swim the Yellowstone River with difficulty. Some calves are just old enough to make the journey. The calf was born late in the year. Surviving Yellowstone's harsh winter is questionable.

A fierce winter comes quickly with only brief warning. Yellowstone changes to a frozen landscape. In the Lamar Valley, bison move slowly, conserving energy. Rocky mountain bighorn sheep dig for grass

on steep mountain slopes.

Winter is a difficult time for the animals who live here. The Yellowstone River also slows in winter's grasp. Wolves cross the icy Slough Creek drainage on a cold winter day.

Yellowstone in winter can also be a magical place. A seemingly endless winter returns to spring. The Yellowstone River runs in torrents to great falls.

Artist Thomas Moran painted here, hence the name "Artist's Point." The Yellowstone River creates one of the greatest falls in North America.

Tom Mangelsen lives near Jackson, Wyoming at the foot of the Tetons. He's famous for iconic images of animals and the world's wildest places.

Tom Mangelsen

Well, I think my photos hopefully have an environmental message. I tend to shoot the more beauty of nature I think; and how one might perceive in a natural world, which there isn't too much left of the pure natural world, which is impacted by humans as you well know most everywhere.

Narrator

Fall colors are alive as Tom leaves for Yellowstone.

Tom Mangelsen

The greatest challenge in photographing Yellowstone is trying to photograph it differently and just trying to see it a bit differently and capture its moods.

Narrator

"America's Serengeti" is home to some of the most spectacular animals on the planet.

Tom Mangelsen

I get the shot only rarely to be honest. I shoot a lot. I wait a lot; mostly patience.

Narrator

Tracks along the shore of Yellowstone Lake give a dramatic clue. The king of Yellowstone, the grizzly bear, gives Tom a dramatic photo opportunity. It's not long before the grizzly appears in the open. Grizzlies were decimated throughout much of the West. Yellowstone became sanctuary.

Tom Mangelsen

I think if my photography has a message, a conservation message, it would be that this is the way it would be great to be. This is the way, if we could get back to some of that semblance, or keep it as wild as possible. That's my goal, and that's what I hope my work does.

Narrator

If Yellowstone is a national Treasure, the Yellowstone River is its lifeline. The river connects animals

with the land. Running water is part of what shapes and defines Yellowstone.

THE RIO GRANDE RIVER:

RIVER OF CONTROVERSY

Narrator

The Rio Grande River flows slowly into the bustling city of El Paso, Texas. Its headwaters are in Colorado. The Rio Grande is one of the longest river systems in North America, about 1,900 miles long. Along the way, the Rio Grande's water is used and re-used. In places, the river is little more than a trickle. Agriculture, industry, and people take a share. Little of the Rio Grande's original flow reaches the Gulf of Mexico.

The river is known as Rio Grande Del Norte in Mexico or “Great River of the North”. It is an international river. On one side lies Mexico; on the other is the United States. Here, the Rio Grande separates the 1.3 million people of Juarez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas.

A border fence runs along the Rio Grande River, dramatically confronting the issues. The Rio Grande River meanders through conflict. Downstream, the Rio Grande reclaims a natural character. It runs through Big Bend National Park in southern Texas.

Ancient people inhabited these arid lands an estimated 10,000 years ago. Mexicans settled here in the early 1800s. It's not difficult to wade back and forth between countries. Small villages in Mexico are across the river from Big Bend National Park. Much of Big Bend is sharp in this Chihuahuan desert.

The Chisos Mountains rise from the desert floor. There is little water to be seen, except for the placid pools of the Rio Grande. Roadrunners feed on lizards and snakes, which they kill with their sharp beaks. Hot springs along the river's bank seem out of place in this desert heat. This stretch of the Rio Grande is protected under Wild and Scenic River designation.

A river trip is prepared on the Rio Grande. Canoes are used because the river is too shallow for inflatable rafts. Ernesto Morales is a citizen of Mexico and a river guide in his home country. He is part of a trip on the Rio Grande through the beauty of Santa Elena Canyon.

Ernesto Hernandez Morales

A friend of mine said that rivers are the root of the oceans and the artery of the continents. Rivers define the geography of land. So, rivers are life.

Narrator

The crew must transport canoes over a long distance of rocky terrain to reach the river.

Jenny Schooler-River Guide

If there's a rock coming on this side, I'm going to lean into that obstacle. Okay? Or, if I'm coming into the wall on that side, I'm going to lean into that.

Ernesto Hernandez Morales

I found it very interesting to run rivers in Veracruz, where I was born. And I just practiced this sport for

many years.

Narrator

The Rio Grande River in Santa Elena Canyon offers moments of stunning, fragile beauty.

Ernesto Hernandez Morales

I feel different emotions when I'm paddling or rowing a boat. The first emotion is to be free, to be and understand, especially on rivers, the physics and dynamics of the planet. All that energy is moving. I'm just part of that energy current.

Narrator

Canoes must be dragged often through the shallow water of the Rio Grande. Water is precious in this harsh environment. The nature of the Rio Grande River changes in winter. The river passes through New Mexico on its way to Big Bend.

Winter paints a different portrait of the Rio Grande. Scorching heat is forgotten. A dry storm front envelops the Rio Grande River in Big Bend's Santa Elena Canyon. The wind howls fiercely, making paddling difficult.

The river trickles beyond the mouth of Santa Elena Canyon. Seasonal drought compounds the problem. It hasn't rained for weeks. No thunderheads appear to offer promise on the horizon.

Ernesto Hernandez Morales

To save the Rio Grande you need a big, huge, international intention. I think that's the solution. If we generate that, and learn more about efficiency on the use of water, we will recover this river all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico.

THE SAN JUAN RIVER:

HIDDEN TREASURES

Narrator

The San Juan in Southern Utah is one of the West's most scenic rivers. It lacks the thundering rapids of some western rivers. The San Juan more than makes up for it with beauty and archeological treasures.

The San Juan is a tributary of the Colorado River. It flows into Lake Powell. The river has carved meandering canyons, which twist and turn.

Terry Tempest Williams is an author, naturalist and advocate for conservation in the West.

Terry Tempest Williams

The rivers in the desert cut through stone like a river of light. The landscape here, red rock walls rise upward like praying hands, and you see this thin, thin line until you actually walk down to the edge. The river is always an edge.

Narrator

A river trip on the San Juan starts near Bluff, Utah. The San Juan is known for archeological sites not far from the river.

Ancestral Puebloans populated the Four Corners region. Ancient people lived near the San Juan River between AD 900 and the late 1200s. They were farmers growing corn, beans, and squash. The ancient ones must have looked down on this same vision centuries ago.

Sara Sidwell – River Guide

So, here we are at Butler Wash on the San Juan River. And this is a perfect example of early Basket Maker period rock art. The Basket Makers were farmers in this area. They used the bottom lands in this area, and a little farther downstream to grow all of their crops—simple crops such as rice grass and squash. Later on, when the Anasazi came in they would grow corn and beans and stuff like that. They also left their mark on this panel, but it's not as prevalent as the Basket Makers.

Terry Tempest Williams

When you come onto these panels of pictographs or petroglyphs the first thing you want to do is imagine what were they trying to tell us. And perhaps we'll never know.

Narrator

Desert bighorn sheep come to the river for a cooling drink. Desert bighorns are typically smaller than Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. Desert bighorn males may weigh 150 to 200 pounds. Rocky Mountain males may approach 300 pounds. Females are smaller with straighter horns. The magic hour twilight is a poetic part of the river experience.

Terry Tempest Williams

I think one of the great gifts of a river trip is that you come to sense yourself differently. You come to sense time, not against human time, or a human life span, but great eras and eras that you see exposed through the river cutting through rock.

Narrator

Footsteps of the ancient ones lead to one of the great treasures along the San Juan: River House Ruin.

Sara Sidwell – River Guide

The River House Ruin is in an alcove, on the south-facing alcove, so that means in the summer it stayed in the shade most of the time and it was relatively cool. And, in the winter it got a lot of winter sun and stayed relatively warm. So they were able to stay there year round.

It started off, they estimate around 13 rooms, which means it was a really large family. Now this is an Anasazi ruin, not Basket Maker, so it's a little bit later in the time period.

Terry Tempest Williams

And I think one of the great gifts when you walk into a place like River House Ruin is that there's a

sense of humility, that we are not the first inhabitants, that other people were here before us. I think that gift of silence, of reflection, allows us to really think about what is our press and place on the planet right here, right now.

Terry Tempest Williams

Every so often I'll think to myself, I need to be by the river. You know there are so many times where in your life you feel stuck, or you feel uninspired, and you go into these desert rivers, you go into these desert canyons, true wilderness, and you know, hand on stone, hand on water, hand feeling the breath of wind. How can you not be inspired? I so often think that being on a river in desert wilderness is the birthplace of inspiration.

Narrator

The trip ends near Mexican Hat, Utah.

A sombrero formation marks the end of one journey leading to yet another adventure.

THE COLORADO RIVER:

THE LAST LION

Narrator

River through Grand Canyon in 1869. He called it "The Great Unknown." The Colorado River carved the canyon. The erosion, which formed the canyon, took about 65 million years. The earth's history is written in its geologic layers.

The Colorado River starts as a stream of snowmelt high in the Rocky Mountains. The river tumbles to its destiny with the Gulf of California. The Colorado descends to Southern Utah's Westwater Canyon. The river becomes turbulent as the gradient increases.

The view from Dead Horse Point shows a meandering river. The river carves rock into sculpture. The Colorado reaches its confluence with the Green River in Canyonlands National Park. Below is the treacherous white water of Cataract Canyon. Cataract Canyon was intimidating to John Wesley Powell and his crew. There were days of toil and struggle.

Martin Litton is at home on the Colorado River. He first ran the river through the Grand Canyon in 1955. He has spent a lifetime learning each turn and defending each mile.

Martin Litton

I felt that the Earth has been, for many years, in a desperate situation if we want to save anything wild, anything natural.

Narrator

He broke his own record as the oldest individual to pilot a boat through Grand Canyon in 2004. He was 87 years old. Martin Litton lives in the San Francisco Bay Area not far from the ocean. He is known for his environmental legacy. Preserving the California coast and giant sequoia trees are issues he cares deeply about. The Grand Canyon is his passion.

Martin Litton

A great deal of the Grand Canyon is as pristine a wilderness as it ever was, and you're very well aware that it's an intricate place with hidden side canyons and alcoves where people have never gone yet.

Narrator

Martin was contemporary with the greats of the environmental movement, including Wallace Stegner and David Brower.

Martin Litton

I'm sure that many of the giants of conservation who also cared deeply for the natural earth, and did something about it would find their position hopeless today.

Narrator

He is now in his 90s.

Bronco Bruchak – River Guide

For me, as a young man having him as a role model, his ideals, his ethics, the way he has fought for wilderness. It's just very special to me that I was able to have a guy like him as a mentor. He means a lot to me.

Narrator

Martin piloted glider planes behind enemy lines in World War II. His mission was to deliver troops. Martin Litton kept his interest in aviation. In years past, he flew his vintage Cessna to the Grand Canyon for yet another river trip. River trips in Grand Canyon begin at Lee's Ferry. It's named for the historic ferry once operated by John D. Lee.

Martin Litton

Until Powell's time, until Powell's epic journey, there was no knowledge of what was down here.

Narrator

Martin and his crew drift through turquoise water. This is the confluence of the Little Colorado River and the main Colorado. The Little Colorado runs this striking color from sediments in its water. The Granite Gorge offers some of the biggest white water in Grand Canyon.

Martin Litton

I think Hermit Creek Rapid is my favorite because of the kinds of waves it has. They are said to be 30 or 40 feet high sometimes.

Narrator

The strength of Upset Rapid causes Martin to lose an oar. Early explorer Emory Kolb capsized here,

giving the rapid its name. The expedition comes to one of the crown jewels in Grand Canyon: Havasu. Dories pull into a hidden canyon on the river's left. It leads to Shangri-la. A journey from the river up Havasu Creek reveals Havasu Falls. Mooney Falls tumbles from great elevation to pools below. The terrain becomes volcanic. The expedition comes to one of the most feared rapids on the river: Lava Falls.

Martin Litton voice only

It's a challenging rapid. It's the one rapid that you are glad to have behind you. You don't want to look forward to that thing any longer than you have to. And then after Lava, of course, that's the last big challenging rapid in the canyon as you go downstream.

Narrator

The river travels on to its historic delta in Mexico. Now the Colorado only reaches the gulf in very wet years. On this expedition the Colorado runs dry in the sands of Mexico before reaching the ocean. Every drop has been used.

Martin Litton

Looking back, oh, if anyone were to ask me what I take the most satisfaction from, in terms of ecological or environmental successes, or let's say less failure than otherwise would have occurred; I would say probably, my part, small part in stopping the building of the dams in the Grand Canyon was one. Doing the same thing in Dinosaur National Monument, Echo Park. I plastered the newspaper with articles and I think they had an effect. I think they changed things.

Narrator

Martin Litton's lasting legacy is his advocacy for the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River.

Like each of the five rivers, his long and storied journey has brought him to the sea. The same sun that sets on one river's journey will throw first light on headwaters tomorrow. And five great rivers will course their way through the American West—etching the landscape, touching lives.

Terry Tempest Williams

When Wallace Stegner wrote his beautiful wilderness letter, and offered us that beautiful sentiment, "Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the last remaining wilderness be destroyed," I think that what Wally was saying to us is that wilderness is a reservoir for our spirit; that it returns us to a place of dignity and humility; that is a reminder that beauty is not optional, but a strategy for survival. And when he ends that wilderness letter with that great phrase, "Geography of Hope," nowhere do we find that geography of hope more illuminated than the great western rivers.

Narrator

In every sense, rivers carry us.

In time, in place, in self.

Credits

Producer-Director-Writer

JOHN HOWE

Associate Producer

JEFF ELSTAD

Production Assistant

COLBY TUELLER

Music

VINCENT FRATES

NONSTOP MUSIC

HD Cinematography

JOHN HOWE

Location Sound

KEVIN SWEET

Post-Production Audio

WILLIAM MONTOYA

WILLIAM GORDON

Production Intern

LUKE HARTVIGSEN

Editor/Color Correction

CAROL DALRYMPLE

Script Consultants

KEN VERDOIA

NICK GRIMES

Photographs

THOMAS MANGELSEN

MARTIN LITTON

Production Assistance

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE-FOREST SERVICE

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

RIO GRANDE NATIONAL PARK

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK

AMANDA JAMIESON

SUE CEDARHOLM

SHALESE HILL

GREG HENINGTON

BOB JONES

SAMANTHA DERBYSHIRE

MONETTE CLARK

ESTHER LITTON

TAMMY BESMYN

Production Supervisor

JENNIFER LATCHMAN-ATKINS

Post-Production Supervisor

BILL LAUER

Development

ALICE WEBBER

JANETTE SCHIMPF

ERIK ROLSTAD

TAUNJA BAXTER

STACEY BOARD

JAN COLEMAN

LAUREL CANNON-ALDER

SUSIE FLANDRO

Creative Services

MARY DICKSON

MARK THOMAS

JACQUI VOLAND

SHERRI HUTTEN

ROGER JONES

DAVE KRUMMENACHER

HOLLY AMMON

THOMAS KESSINGER

MASON JONES

Operations Supervisor

DAN GILBERT

Engineering Supervisor

GARTH STECK

Assistant General Manager/Chief Financial Officer

REBECCA DAVIS

Accountants

NORA KARST

CHALALAI CHARBSUWAN

APRIL FOSSEN

Broadcasting Assistant

SUSAN DOI

Director of Production

KEN VERDOIA

General Manager

MICHAEL A. DUNN

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