

“FIRST RIVER: How Arkansas Saved a National Treasure”

Suggested talking points for group discussion

Any of these questions might serve as either an opening or closing discussion point.

- 1. What's so special about the Buffalo River?
What does it mean to be a "National River?"
Does the Buffalo deserve such a designation**

The Buffalo River was the first river to be designated a "National River." President Nixon signed the legislation in 1972 making the Buffalo River part part of the National Park system. Most of it, over 135 miles, is managed as a park, called "Buffalo National River." Beyond that, the Buffalo is special, even among other scenic rivers, because it has so many dramatic, beautiful, historic, and accessible features packed into those miles. It is "free flowing," meaning it has no dams or impoundments.

- 2. Would the young people you care about -- your children, grandchildren, students, friends -- benefit from experiencing the Buffalo?
If so, in what ways?**

- 3. What was lost with the decision not to build dams on the Buffalo?
Was the trade-off leading to the National Park worth it?
Was it possible to leave the River untouched?
Why couldn't the river and the people who lived along it just be left alone?
What would the River be like today if that had happened?**

We hear about the "Battle of the Buffalo," the controversy over whether to dam the river or make it into a national park. The motivation to build dams along US rivers had been growing since the 1930s. Dams provided hydroelectricity but they also led to the creation of boat docks, hotels, restaurants, resorts, highways, even whole towns around resulting lakes. Dams brought "development," and the U.S. Corps of Engineers stood ready to build more. The Buffalo was literally and immediately the next river in line to be dammed, along with several others nearby; legislation had been proposed and this legislation had major political support.

Compared to the case for "development," what was the case for "preservation"? It was simply the reality that America's natural features like the Buffalo River were quickly disappearing. Awareness was also growing that people have a fundamental need for spaces and places in nature they can retreat into. And the idea that the Buffalo was such a place became a "cause." The option did not exist to simply leave the river alone.

**4. Is active participation in protecting the Buffalo River needed going forward?
Why does the Buffalo need protection?**

The Buffalo River is vulnerable partly because of its physical structure. Because of the way the Ozarks were formed, the area's "bones" are mainly limestone and other rocks that over time are dissolved in water that seeps in, over, under, and around. Water that feeds into the Buffalo may run on the surface in streams or travel under the limestone layers and enter the river as run-off. If any of the water sources are polluted in any way, that pollution easily reaches the Buffalo. Since only a relatively narrow strip of land along the river is protected, any destructive "development" nearby is a serious threat to the river.

Another threat to the river is its popularity. Over 1.5 million visitors come to canoe, fish, swim, camp, and hike each year. That's why the Buffalo National River staff, along with related agencies and organized volunteers, is needed to monitor the health of the river and its surroundings, including plants and animals. Park staff also manage the flow of people, vehicles, and any kind of building or earthwork within the park. They are there to guide, educate, and protect visitors. Their goal is to give visitors their best chance to experience the river and its natural setting while, at the same time, protecting it.

5. If the Buffalo River is being taken care of as a National Park, why do I need to get involved?

What are things I can do, what issues I should be aware of to protect this special place?

You can recognize the river is a legacy, what people before you fought to save and what you're leaving for future generations.

Know how to protect your river by informing yourself of best practices, such as not taking glass on the river and always bringing a trash bag along to take out your trash, just to name a few. Be aware that policies such as "Leave No Trace" become more difficult to apply as visitation and public use increase beyond current levels.

Become a voice for the river by joining any of several advocacy groups, such as the Buffalo National River Partners, the Ozark Society, or the Buffalo River Watershed Alliance.