

Wild river



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River. The word is repeatedly thrust into our consciousness. We read of worsening pollution; we see pictures of a river afire in Cleveland or of dead fish in the Mississippi or Hudson and Columbia. If we listen carefully we can hear the sound of political promises breaking. Mercifully there are things we don't see or hear: factory wastes spewed into rivers under cover of darkness; deals made between industry and government that assure loopholes in pollution legislation. Rivers bear the brunt of our industrial society. A million years ago man's impact on river ecosystems was no greater than that of the beaver. Roving bands of people camped beside rivers and paddled these watery roads. They speared fish or dug muskels and drank the clear water. Wastes thrown into the water were quickly

diluted
and digested; the rivers flowed sweetly on.
But there are limits to what a river can
digest. Today close to four billion people
crowd the earth^{1/4} and many dump sewage
and other wastes into its waters. Rivers-
the most intensely used of all ecosystems-
are further changed by dams^{1/4} channeliza-
tion^{1/4} erosion^{1/4} biocides^{1/4} and thermal pollu-
tion. Today the sickest rivers are in those
nations considered to be the richest^{1/4} most

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