The birth of the wild river concept in Wisconsin must surely go back many years. Perhaps the best-known elegy came from Aldo Leopold who in 1943 wrote the essay “Flambeau—the Story of a Wild River.” Modern-day Wisconsin voyageurs like Joe Mills and J. J. Werner of the John Muir Chapter (Sierra Club) probed the white waters of the state with their canoes. They made mental notes of unusually primitive waters and began talking up wild rivers.

During the early 1960’s the Wisconsin Conservation Department fought against proposed construction of dams on the Wolf and Popple rivers in northeastern Wisconsin. Perhaps the biggest thrust was made by Walter E. Scott, then administrative assistant to the director. In 1964 Walter (as his many friends call him) delivered an address in Madison entitled “Preserving Wisconsin’s Wild Rivers.” He summarized clearly the outlook for wild rivers as being both “bitter and sweet,” as having “great possibilities as well as serious setbacks and failures.”

When he became President of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters (1964–65), Walter proposed that the Academy initiate a research program on Wisconsin’s wild rivers. There were two reasons for this. First he recalled that in the early 1940’s the Conservation Department made a series of basic studies on the famous Brule River in northwestern Wisconsin. These studies appeared in installments over several issues of the Transactions. They have since become definitive and useful references. Second, a wild river needs basic research which can be shown to the State Legislature. This is one of the paradoxes of human nature—secrets must be unlocked before the organism, in this case the river, is allowed to keep its secrets. The bill for setting aside the Pine, Popple and Pike rivers of northeastern Wisconsin was already in the legislative hopper. A going program of research on these streams would hopefully influence the Legislature to pass the bill.

1 Paper No. 1 in a series, “Studies on the Pine-Popple Wild Rivers Area of Northern Wisconsin”, which will appear in this and succeeding issues of the Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy. As an account of the history, objectives and development of the project it is written, quite properly, by Professor George Becker, who as its coordinator was largely responsible for its organization, progress and supervision.—Lowell E. Noland, editor.
Early in 1965 Walter asked me to assume organization of a wild river study for the Pine, Popple, Pike and Wolf rivers. I accepted the task with some misgivings. There were no funds at hand for getting such a program under way, nor did there appear to be much opportunity for getting financial aid. Also the people we thought most likely to perform the research were already actively engaged in other research and publishing. Could they be persuaded to turn time, effort and money in this direction?

I spent several days talking to these people. They were enthusiastic about the wild rivers of northeastern Wisconsin and about the mysteries to be unravelled. On October 16, 1965, the organizational meeting was held at the Hill State Office Building in Madison. Present were James Anthony, Robert Dicke, William Dickinson, Lewis Posekany, Edward Schneberger, Walter Scott, Howard Young, Stan Welsh and James Zimmerman. The committee decided to complete its report over a five-year period, culminating with the Academy Centennial in 1970. Plans were to collect all information into a bound book which would be distributed to members of the Academy and to other interested agencies. During later deliberations the committee voted to direct its research primarily toward the Pine and Popple basins, leaving the Pike and Wolf basins until after the first phase was completed.

The Wild Rivers bill became law in November, 1965. It set up a program for the preservation of the Pine, Pike and Popple rivers in Florence, Forest and Marinette counties. It designated the Conservation Commission to provide leadership in the development of a practical management policy. Late in 1965 the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology, Inc., donated to the Wisconsin Academy a sum of $2500 for the study of birds in the wild rivers area.

Perhaps the most memorable meeting of the Wild Rivers Cooperative Research Project took place at the Trees for Tomorrow Camp at Eagle River, October 22–23, 1967. Arranged by Art Oehmke, it was designed to show members of the committee and their families the beauties and the scars of the Pine and Popple rivers. Speaker for the occasion was Philip Archibald, then Forest Supervisor, Nicolet National Forest, who discussed "The U. S. Forest Service and Its Management of Wild Rivers." The text of this paper appeared in the 1966 Fall–Winter issue of the Wisconsin Academy Review, pp. 77–80.

At the very start of our research it became apparent that adverse activities were going on in the basins of the Pine and Popple. Some of this activity was initiated by individuals and towns who feared that unless "improvements" were made immediately, wild river policy restrictions, which were in the process of being de-
veloped by state and federal agencies, would forbid the desired “improvements.”

These conflicting activities were called to my attention by Art Oehmcke, then area supervisor with the Conservation Department at Woodruff. Late in 1966, with permission from the Academy Council, I named the Wild Rivers Advisory Policy Subcommittee, with Oehmcke as chairman. Members appointed were Phil Archibald, Joe Mills and Calvin Erickson. This committee would be advisory to the Conservation Department’s wild rivers policy committee, but its main role would be that of watchdog. It would attempt to forestall any possible activities which appeared to be detrimental to the wild river program.

During the subsequent months, conflicting encroachments within the wild rivers basins were observed and appropriate action was taken. We are grateful to this sub-committee for its vigilance, which preserved a number of wild features that would otherwise have been lost.

It was a forester, Aldo Leopold, who said “The best way to manage a wild river is to let it be.” Because sectors of the newly-named wild rivers are used for many purposes, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in its policy statement has established a zoning system, allowing considerable man-use in some sectors. The U. S. Forest Service has developed yet another plan which, even within its “wild river” zones, feels man-directed embellishments are permissible. For instance, mature timber to a forester demands cutting, and, keeping things “wild” means proper landscaping.

I wonder, for instance, whether a lightning fire will be allowed to run its course or whether an insect infestation will avoid treatment? I wonder if the down-tree in the water must really be removed to make easy passage for the canoer, or whether the stabilization of naturally-eroding stream banks should be “top priority work within the zone?”

I personally take a dim view of a wild river program which prohibits damming of the main stem but makes no similar provision for its life-giving tributaries. These are but a few of the many objections which may be raised against “management” of our wild rivers.

Men are of many persuasions; men tend to relate the concept of wilderness to their own training and interests. Unfortunately the present state and federal criteria allow for considerable encroachment on the wildness of the area. It is my hope that our experts will soon come to the concept that “the best way to manage a wild river is to let it be,” and that wilderness is its own master.
During the course of committee activity several reports were published and, in a sense, belong to the series which follows. Among these are: Olson, Gerald W. and Francis D. Hole "The Fragipan in Soils of Northeastern Wisconsin," Trans. Wis. Acad. Sci., Arts and Letters, 56 (1967-68), pp. 173-184; and Mason, John W. and Gerald D. Wegner "Wild Rivers Fish Populations (Pine, Popple and Pike Rivers)" Dept. of Nat. Resources, Madison, Wis., Research Report 35 (1970), 42 pp.

The following topics and prospective authors constitute the Wild Rivers series. This list is not arranged according to order of publication; nor is there assurance that all of these topics will appear. At this date a number of manuscripts have been received and are indicated by asterisks before the names of the authors.


Inventory of surface waters—*C. W. Threinen, Administrative Assistant, Wis. Dept. of Nat. Resources, Madison.

Vascular plants—Prof. S. Galen Smith, Dept. of Biology, Wis. State Univ., Whitewater; Prof. Hugh Ilitis, Dept. of Botany, Univ. of Wis., Madison; Dr. James Zimmerman, Naturalist, Univ. of Wis. Arboretum, Madison.

Non-vascular plants—*James A. Jesberger, Dept. of Biology, Univ. of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.

Forest resources—Robert Train, Supervisor, Timber Management Staff Officer, Nicolet National Forest, Rhinelander.

Aquatic insects—*Prof. William Hilsenhoff, Dept. of Entomology, Univ. of Wis., Madison.

Fish parasites—Prof. James D. Anthony, Dept. of Zoology, Univ. of Wis., Milwaukee.


Distributional list of fishes—Prof. George Becker, Dept. of Biology, Wis. State Univ., Stevens Point.

Amphibians and reptiles—*Dr. William E. Dickinson, Curator of Lower Zoology, Milwaukee Public Museum.
Mammals—*Prof. Robert McCabe, Chmn. Dept. of Wildlife Ecology, Univ. of Wis., Madison.

Birds—*Prof. Howard Young, Dept. of Biology, Wis. State Univ., La Crosse.

Wild rivers—*Joe Mills, Wild Rivers Chmn., Izaak Walton League of America, and John Muir Chapter of Sierra Club, Ripon.

History—John Winn, Field Representative, Office of Field Services, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

Maps and mapping (historical)—Walter E. Scott, Asst. to the Deputy Secretary, Wis. Dept. of Nat. Resources, Madison.

Aboriginal occupants—*Prof. Robert Salzer, Logan Museum of Anthropology, Beloit College.

Literature and arts—Prof. Robert E. Gard, Director, Wisconsin Idea Theater, Univ. of Wis., Madison.

Climatology—Hans Rosendal, Weather Bureau Wisconsin State Climatologist, Madison.

Economic development—Pres. Walter Peterson, Univ. of Dubuque.


Limitations imposed by zoning ordinances—Calvin Erickson, Editor, Florence County Mining News, Florence.

Case for public ownership of wild river stream banks—*John Chaffin, Forest Supervisor, Nicolet National Forest, Rhinelander.


I speak in behalf of the entire committee in expressing gratitude to Professor Lowell E. Noland (Academy President 1946–47) who has consented to edit this wild rivers series.

Finally, as an indication of the psychological effect of the Pine-Popple wild rivers region on those who have spent some time there, I submit the following poem written about 1930 by James M. Woodman, then a sports writer for the Chicago Tribune, and made available to me through the kind offices of Prof. L. G. Sorden, of the University of Wisconsin.
WHERE THE POPLLE JOINS THE PINE

Far away from all the glitter of the busy city's life,
Where calm contentment drives away all worldly grief and strife,
Where the melody of songbirds lulls a fellow's soul to rest
When the slanting shadows greet him as the sun sinks in the west—
'Tis a spot that Nature moulded in a manner most divine,
Just a place of matchless beauty—Where the Popple joins the Pine.
There is music when the water ripples o'er the polished stones;
There is sadness when the balsam bows before the gale and moans;
And my heart leaps wild with rapture when I roam along the streams
Living o'er once more my boyhood in a mass of daylight dreams.
So I snuggle close to Nature claiming all her charms for mine
In that place of tranquil splendor—Where the Popple joins the Pine.
There I gaze upon the glory of the river's mirrored sky
And the magic of the boulders where the speckled beauties lie.
I can hear the partridge drumming to his faithful feathered mate—
Oh, it fills my heart with gladness and it drives away all hate
As I loiter in the shadows with my rod and reel and line,
Courting Nature in her homeland—Where the Popple joins the Pine.
When my brow by Time is furrowed and my hair grows silver white,
When my eyes are dimmed though eager for a never failing light,
When the Lord who in His wisdom sends a summons unto me,
When I leave this earthly turmoil for a Land-that-is-to-be,
I would lie forever sleeping where the sun and stars may shine
Through the branches of the hemlocks—Where the Popple joins the Pine.

(Written for and dedicated to my friend Oscar Franknecht, whose beautiful home occupies a most inspiring position where the Popple joins the Pine.—James M. Woodman.)