



## THE SMITH RIVER

The Smith River has been described as the “crown jewel of the Wild and Scenic River system”. It is one of California’s last undammed river systems; originally protected from dams and major water diversions by its remote location. It rises in Oregon and flows with three branches to its estuary just north of Crescent City. It is characterized by exceptionally clear water, a vigorous anadromous fishery, and steep, forested mountains. The area exhibits tremendous diversity, including: lush coastal redwoods, dense stands of mixed conifers and hardwoods, sparsely vegetated, high elevation plateaus, and high mountain peaks and meadows. Much of the region is in public ownership, either within Six Rivers National Forest, or Redwood National and State Parks. Vegetation is exceptionally diverse, ranging from towering ancient redwoods on the lower Smith River, to unique serpentine plant communities in the heart of the National Forest. Highway 199, a scenic byway, is the major road, connecting Crescent City with Grant’s Pass in Oregon.



## I. Resource Values

### Natural

- One of the last **undammed rivers**’ in California, with exceptional water quality. Designated as a Wild and Scenic River.
- **High quality fish habitat** – the entire basin is a “Key Watershed”. The Smith River system is home to some of California’s strongest salmon and trout runs. The estuary remains open year-round, allowing fish passage in all seasons.
- **Ancient redwoods groves**, and other old growth forests in Redwood National and State Parks and the Smith River National Recreation Area (NRA).
- The world’s largest **serpentine Ophiolite outcrop**, the Josephine (Ophiolite) Ultramafic Sheet, with unique plant communities and geologic formation
- **Exceptionally high plant diversity**, in part due to the presence of diverse geological substructure.
- The Smith River watershed supports **four botanical areas**.
  - The *North Fork Smith* Botanical Area is one of the most botanically significant areas on the Six Rivers National Forest, containing plant habitat for one Federally Endangered species, nine Sensitive plants, and an estimated 40 rare plant species.
  - *Bear Basin Butte and Broken Rib* Botanical Areas are noted for the presence of enriched mixed conifer stands including the Brewer’s spruce, a Klamath Mountain endemic.
  - *Myrtle Creek* is both a botanical and cultural area. Ecologically, this area marks the boundary between the redwood and Douglas-fir-mixed evergreen forest types.

### Plants and Animals

- **Northern spotted owl** in several redwood groves and Late Seral Reserves on Forest Land.
- **Marbled murrelets** occupy areas in many of the ancient redwood groves
- The following species of **anadromous fish** are found in the area’s streams
  - Coho salmon
  - Chinook salmon
  - Steelhead trout
  - Coastal Cutthroat trout
  - Chum salmon
  - Pacific lamprey
- The following **endangered plants** and plant series are known to occur:
  - Western lily
  - Darlingtonia fen series

## Cultural

- Ancestral home of **Indian Tribes**, with many sacred ceremonial sites within the watershed. Gathering of foodstuffs and basket materials
- **Historic mining** at Myrtle Creek Cultural Area.
- **Early settler** historical interpretation including mining, dairies, and logging.

## Recreation

- World-class **fishing** for salmon and steelhead in the clear streams
- **White water** rafting and kayaking with a lot of Class 3 and 4 water
- **Camping** in the developed campgrounds in the National Recreation Area and State Parks.
- **Backpacking** and back-country camping in undeveloped areas of the National Recreation Area
- **Hiking** trails extend throughout the NRA and Redwood National Park.
- **Driving** for pleasure, especially along highway 199 which is designated as a scenic byway

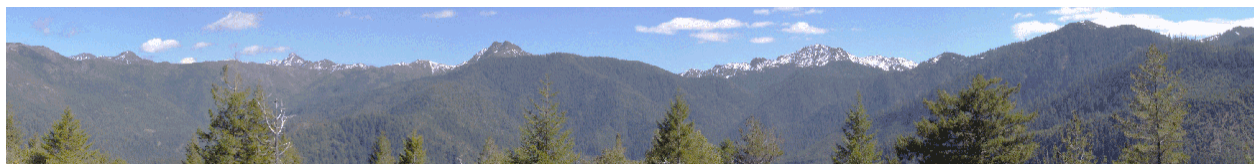
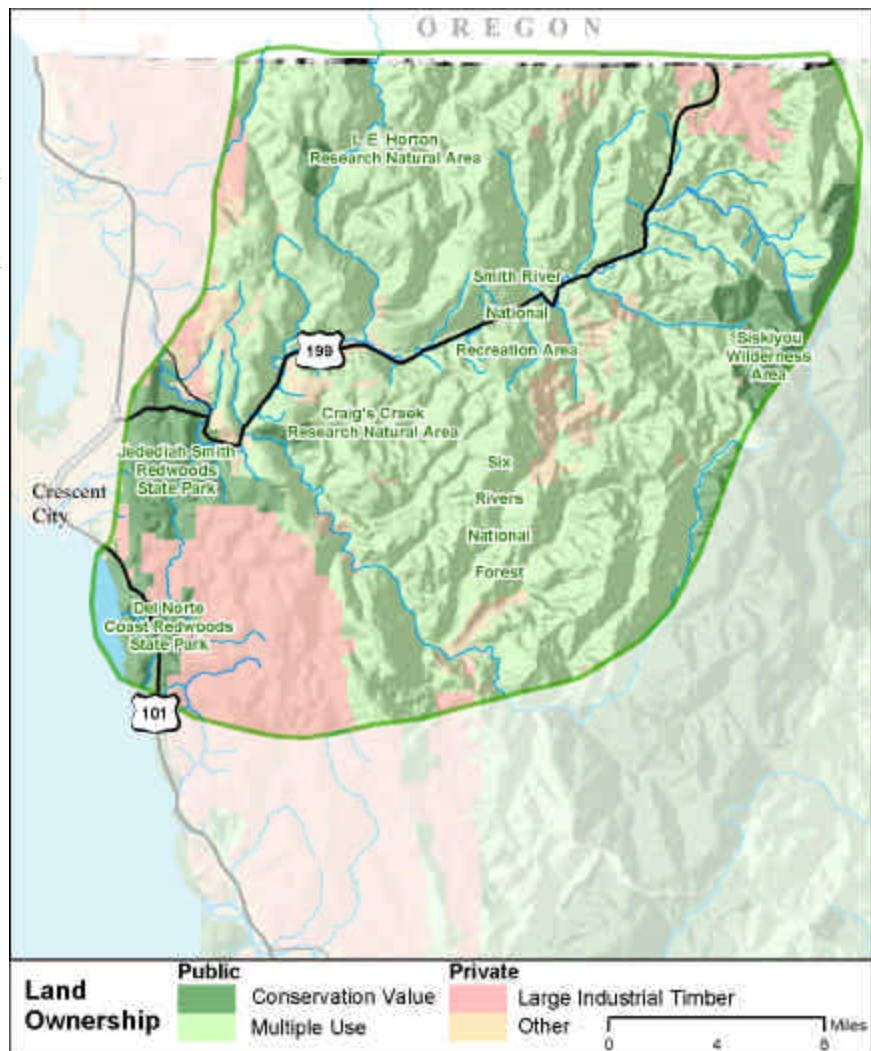
## Visual

- **Highway 199**, located along the Smith River, is a scenic byway
- Many outstanding vistas and views on the county and forest service roads.

## II. Community Values

### Land Ownership

- The majority of land is **federally** owned, either in the Six Rivers National Forest, Smith River National Recreation Area or Redwood National Park.



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- Jedediah Smith Redwoods **State Park** lies on the lower portion of the Smith River.
- Most **private land** is located along the main stem and south fork of the Smith River, and in Gasquet at the confluence Middle and North Fork.
- **Small communities** in the watershed include Smith River, Hiouchi, Gasquet, and Big Flat. Crescent City, population 8,805, is located several miles outside the watershed and lies about ten miles (16 km) south of the Smith River mouth.

### Economics

- Traditionally the region's economy has been based on primary industries, mainly **timber** and **commercial fishing**.
- Increasingly **recreation** and **tourism** are becoming important.
- Del Norte County has high **unemployment**, with the major employers being the County and State Prison.

## III. Opportunities and Threats

- **Management within the Highway 199** Corridor has potential to impact a variety of resources including water quality and aesthetics. Most of the highway is located within the inner gorge of the main stem Smith River allowing limited space for highway improvements, including rest areas and scenic pull-outs. The highway is a primary transportation artery carrying much of the region's traffic, including hazardous materials with potential for catastrophic spills into the Smith River (Del Norte County's primary water supply). Caltrans is planning road widening that will result in larger cut-banks and fill areas, degrading scenic quality.
- **Noxious weeds** are spreading throughout the Smith River basin, with Highway 199 and 101 as the primary vectors. Noxious weeds are also becoming established on gravel bars along the river. The movement of construction and road maintenance equipment, as well as general use of the highways, has the potential to introduce and/or spread noxious weeds to other areas. Species of concern include scotch broom, English ivy, pampas grass, cottoneaster, acacia, knapweed, and gorse.
- **Gravel extraction** on private lands downstream of the Smith River National Recreation Area, particularly the practice of trenching (digging out the channel vs. scraping off the top), has impacted aquatic habitat, gravel bars, and spawning habitat. Because it still has good quality habitat (meanders, sloughs, riparian vegetation), and relatively healthy fish runs, the Smith River basin is a high priority for protection measures.
- Past **fire suppression** has increased the risk of destructive, high intensity wildfires. Backcountry access via Forest Service roads increases the risk of human ignitions.
- Unmanaged **dispersed recreation** on the Smith River National Recreation Area poses a number of resource threats. Ninety percent of the dispersed use on the NRA is river-oriented, and there are a number of undesignated dispersed campsites located directly adjacent to streams. Recreational users dump trash, defecate, and cut trees in these areas. Unmanaged use can lead to the loss of riparian vegetation, bank destabi-

lization, and consequent impairment of water quality and aesthetics.

- **Port-Orford-cedar root disease** has killed many cedars in the Smith River basin. The disease is primarily spread by the movement of infested soil or infected seedlings into uninfested areas, mainly by activities such as earth movement in road construction, road maintenance, and vehicle movement on forest roads. The Smith River NRA has imposed wet season closures on many roads in order to minimize the spread of the disease, but further actions are necessary. Management actions need to be coordinated between Redwood National Park and the NRA to control spread of the infectious disease.
- Many Forest Service **roads are in poor condition** due to a lack of maintenance dollars. Some Redwood National and State Parks dirt roads contribute silt to streams and/or pose a safety risk. Failing culverts, impacts to streams, loss of access, loss of productivity, unsafe road conditions, impacts to fish habitat. Additional roads could be constructed in some areas to access fishing holes.
- There are opportunities to enhance resource management by **acquiring** parcels of land or rights-of-way within the Smith River Basin.
- Past **strip-mining activities** in the North Fork Smith watershed have impacted plant habitat, altered scenic quality, and pose a safety risk.
- Past timber harvesting and development in the watershed have **fragmented habitat** for wildlife species of concern, and decades of fuel suppression have altered habitat conditions for a variety of species.
- **Rowdy Creek Fish Hatchery** currently stocks 100,000 steelhead smolts annually at the boat ramp by the forks. There is a risk of displacing the wild juvenile steelhead that may be rearing downstream of the release site and potential impacts to wild steelhead genetics.
- **Elk restoration and reintroduction** at Lower Coon Elk Habitat and Flat Mountain.

## IV. Conservation Action

### Current

- The **National Fire Plan** is providing funding for fuel reduction on Federal lands.
- The Smith River NRA is currently **assessing river access, dispersed recreation**, and sanitation to identify high priority areas for action.
- Evaluate recreational access as part of the **Access Travel Management Plan** that will be performed in 2002 by the Smith River NRA.
- A **Port-Orford cedar conservation strategy** has been developed by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.
- **Seasonal road closure** to reduce road-damage and consequent water quality impairment.
- A Forest Service **road analysis** is scheduled for completion by 2003
- An effort is underway to **acquire** the entire upper watersheds of Mill and Rock Creek, tributaries to the Smith River, for conservation management.

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## Prospective

- Work with the **County and Caltrans to coordinate management** within the scenic highway 199 corridor through (a) ordinances, and (b) planning and facility design, including rest-stop provision, trail development, improved signage, and (c) minimized herbicide usage. Consider a tunnel through the gorge area that is at prime risk area from a point-source haz-mat spill; slides here often close the highway, affecting tourism, business, and the general population in the county.
- Acquire, exchange or develop **conservation easements** (a) on key Forest in-holdings, (b) on critical watershed land, (c) to provide landscape connections for natural processes and recreational access.
- Acquire right-of-way along the old County Road to **develop mountain bike trail** from the coast to the Oregon Caves.
- Convert existing aerial utility lines to **underground utility lines** in visually sensitive areas including Hiouchi Flat and Redwood State and National Park lands.
- Develop a Del Norte County **Weed Management Area**, including contractor standards (to prevent spread of noxious weeds), inventory, mapping and treatment.
- Improved **management of Botanical Areas**, including prescribed burns and fuel treatment, corrected drainage problems, and visitor facilities (signs and trails).
- Develop an **Interagency Darlingtonia Fen Conservation Strategy** including plant survey, mapping and population documentation of 5 Sensitive and endemic plant species; habitat characterization; documentation of threats; and identification of management recommendations.
- Identify the **least impacting gravel extraction** techniques and alternative gravel sources (e.g. old flood plains, historic river channels) and work with operators to modify their practices.
- Develop one or more **Fire Safe Councils** representing communities in the basin, and seek grants to equip and train volunteer fire departments.
- Work with Tribes to implement treatments to improve conditions for **material gathering** (e.g. for basket materials) at traditional gathering areas
- Develop **visitor facilities** to manage dispersed recreation, including campsites, restrooms, cabins, trails, and spur roads to fishing holes. Offer other types of recreational activities to draw people away from the rivers.
- Consider an **outdoor school** during the off-season at the Big Flat Guard Station to provide educational facilities and to decrease vandalism at the site.
- Work with Del Norte County to manage **illegal refuse dumping** to decrease the amount of illegal dumping on the NRA. Consider creating a trash assessment instead of “pay as you go” dump fees.

- Decommission, maintain, upgrade roads and **replace culverts** to facilitate fish passage.
- **Rehabilitate** old mining sites (e.g. Brown’s Mine), including open shafts, workings and old cat roads.

## V. Potential Partners

Army Corps of Engineers  
 BLM-Medford District  
 California Coastal Conservancy  
 California Department of Fish and Game  
 California Department of Food and Agriculture  
 California Department of Forestry  
 California Highway Patrol (for planning highway expansion/improvements)  
 California Native Plant Society-North Coast Chapter  
 Caltrans  
 Cave Junction Chamber of Commerce  
 Chamber of Commerce  
 Congressional Delegates  
 Crescent City Cultural Center and Chamber of Commerce  
 Del Norte County  
 Del Norte County Planning  
 Del Norte County Public Health  
 Del Norte County schools  
 Environmental Protection Agency  
 Farm Bureau  
 Federal Highway Administration  
 Forest Service  
 Friends of Del Norte  
 Gravel operators  
 Kiwanis Club  
 Lost Coast 4x4s.  
 National Marine Fisheries Service  
 National Off Road Biking Association  
 Sierra Club (North Group)  
 Oregon Caves National Park  
 Redwood National and State Parks  
 Resource Advisory Committee  
 Save-the-Redwoods League  
 Smith River Alliance  
 Resources Conservation District  
 State Water Quality Control Board  
 The Nature Conservancy  
 U.S. Forest Service  
 Water Quality Control Board

## VI. Linkages

- The area links the Klamath-Siskiyou ecoregion with Redwood National and State Parks.
- Lake Earl and the Crescent City Plain lie to the south of the Smith River estuary

## **VII. References**

USDA Forest Service, Six Rivers National Forest. 1995. "Ecosystem Analysis of the Smith River Ecosystem at the Basin and Subbasin Scales." Six Rivers National Forest, Eureka, CA.

USDA Forest Service, Six Rivers National Forest. 1995. "Smith River National Recreation Area Management Plan." Six Rivers National Forest, Eureka, CA.

USDA Forest Service, Six Rivers National Forest. 1997. "Smith River Basin Port-Orford-cedar Risk Assessment." Six Rivers National Forest, Eureka, CA.

USDA Forest Service, Six Rivers National Forest. 1998. "Special Interest Area Management Strategy." Six Rivers National Forest, Eureka, CA.

### **Resources for Additional Information**

Smith River National Recreation Area, Six Rivers National Forest, Gasquet, CA, 95543. (707) 457-3131 <http://www.r5.fs.fed.us/sixrivers/>

Redwood National and State Parks, 1111 Second Street, Crescent City, CA 95531. (707) 464-6101 <http://www.nps.gov/redw/>