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How to Save a River: a handbook for citizen action

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### **Author**

Glaser, Christopher D.

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**Review: *How to Save a River: a handbook for citizen action.***

By David M. Bolling

Reviewed by [Christopher D. Glaser](#)

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Bolling, David M. *How to Save a River: a handbook for citizen action.*  
Washington D.C. Island Press, 1994. 266p. US \$17.00 paper ISBN: 1-55963-250-X. Recycled, acid-free paper.

"If you've fallen in love with a river, if you feel your life linked somehow to its flows, then at least half the commitment has already been made" (5). Bolling begins his book by identifying the primary reason for saving a river: love of the river. Building on this foundation, he discusses what one needs to know and do to save a river. *How to Save a River* is divided into three parts: Techniques, Tools, and Issues.

The section on techniques covers the political action side of a river campaign (from getting organized in the first place, to planning the campaign, building public support, and finally accomplishing your goal).

Bolling recommends that any river organization get legal status as a corporation. "Politicians and powers-that-be relate better to organizations than people" (9). The future tax status of an organization is a huge consideration since it has implications for fund raising and lobbying.

Often the first response to a river in need is to try and patch up all of the wounds at once. In any emergency you have to decide which bleeding cut needs attention first. This requires that you plan your river campaign. According to Bolling, the first step in this process is to know your river, not just the major problems (such as building a dam), but everything from the bottom up -- the geology to riverside development. Often the key to running a successful campaign is to know more about the river than the opposition.

Once you have mapped the major issues in your campaign, you take your message to the public. In delivering the message, it is important to do two things: 1) stick to the facts since any exaggeration or slight mistruth can and will be used against you; 2) leave no part of the potentially concerned public untouched. Bolling notes that the group you

ignore could be the one that rears its head at a critical point in the campaign to stop you cold.

"After you've committed, planned, organized, and promoted, just one step remains to protect your river, doing it" (99). To Bolling "doing it" involves forming partnerships with other organizations, proposing alternatives to the threatening activity, responding to the opposition's campaign, and finally negotiating the final deal. If you have reached the point of negotiation your campaign has been fairly successful, the powers-that-be are willing to sit down and talk with you.

Any good craftsman has the tools to do the job right. Anyone who has ever used a wrench as a hammer knows that tools are not always put to their proper use. In any river organization's tool box there are a variety of tools to get the job done, such as the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act or flood plain management. Each tool has its strengths and weaknesses. Which tools you choose for your river depend on the particular threats. "You may find that some tools are missing, that there is need for a river-saving remedies which haven't yet been created" (143).

The value of rivers and the problems of rivers are two sides of the same coin. For every value there is a problem that degrades it. Clean drinking water, for example, is ruined by pollutants from factories and urban and agricultural runoff. Knowing what a river is good for in its natural state is the basis for saving a river. That a free flowing river provides millions of dollars from recreation for the local economy is a good reason to keep it that way.

David Bolling draws on his experience at the River Network and that of other river organizations to create an effective handbook for citizens interested in saving a river. Even though the book focuses on the USA, it would still be a valuable resource for river organizations around the world. The section on tools focuses on American law, but it gives river organizations outside the USA ideas about what to look for in their country's laws and regulations. There is an index and list of sources at the end of the book along with the addresses for organizations concerned with rivers. *How to Save a River* is not a comprehensive guide to all of the ins and outs of organizing, media, politics, etc. It is, however, a very good start and valuable to both the novice and the veteran.

*Christopher D. Glaser <[rglaser@arterhadden.com](mailto:rglaser@arterhadden.com)> is a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer in Hungary. 22895 Mastick Road, Fairview Park, Ohio*

*44126 USA. TEL: 216-779-9710.*