THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

‘The visionary’: Spokane Riverkeeper Jerry White Jr. stepping down after a decade advocating for waterway

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Jerry White Jr., who has served as Spokane Riverkeeper since 2014, is retiring from his position. (DAN PELLE/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW)

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As Jerry White Jr. paddled down the stretch of the Spokane River that he fell in love with after moving to the West Central neighborhood in the late 1990s, the memories brought a wide grin to his face.

“In those days, it was a little like Disneyland,” White said, leaning back from his seat aboard a boat donated to Spokane Riverkeeper and raising his arms portraying lingering astonishment at his good fortune more than two decades later. “It was just undiscovered, untrammeled fly-fishing.”

White, who’s served as executive director on the nonprofit since 2014, is stepping out of a role that has made him among the clear voices for preserving the waterway for nearly a decade. Along the stretch of river from Redband Park, named for the native trout that White angled for and now swims with, to the Riverside Park Water Reclamation Facility, White sees both the past and present of the river and developments that also have him anxious about its future.

“This kind of a river corridor is so rare, and so precious,” White said, a blue heron streaking through the sky behind him and perching on a tree to ponder the raft floating by. “It’s going to be very critical to look at this, analyze this corridor, and take very good care of it.”

For the next leader of the nonprofit, spun off from the now-defunct Center for Justice in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, that will mean keeping a focus on pollution, the depth and speed of the water, the health of its fish as well as rising water temperatures from a warming climate. Those are all challenges White, a former schoolteacher who remembers looking out over the river from the Howard Street bridge during Expo ‘74, tackled during his tenure leading the organization. There will inevitably be new challenges, he said, that will take a steady hand, not unlike guiding a raft down the rapids.

“In a river, you’re always looking as far down as you can see, and you’re putting yourself in the right spot on the river now,” White said. “Because by the time you get into rapids, it’s too late.”

Informing the public and policy

Dips with the trout he once fished in the Spokane River have White thinking a little differently about the fish these days. A friend photographs the redband using an underwater camera, and White has tagged along on several of the excursions.

“The juveniles will come up, and they’re curious,” White said. “I just love them. They’re so cool; they’re like exotic birds.”

White grew up on the Willamette River, near his hometown of Corvallis, Oregon, fishing for chinook salmon with his family. He later learned how to row for fishing on a driftboat after moving to Spokane in the 1990s. It was was the trout in the river near his home that attracted his attention as he made a family with his wife, Karen, and their two now-adult children.

“At that time, through the 2000s, all of Spokane, on the weekends, would go to the Coeur d’Alene, or the St. Joe River, or Pend Oreille Lake or Coeur d’Alene Lake,” White said. “Everybody still had this attitude about the Spokane, that it was kind of a garbage trench.”

For years the city had been emptying its combined sewer and stormwater overflows into the river, and dating back to the days before Expo ’74 the river was a dumping ground for some industrial waste. But the trout captured White’s attention, and he began working with the local chapter of Trout Unlimited to protect their home in the river.

That work included penning letters to warn about potential effects to the fish, including plans for a whitewater park under the Sandifur Bridge that emerged in the late 2000s. Now, years after the project was abandoned, White navigates his raft through the area, looking for the “V’s” of calm water near rapids that will avoid treacherous rocks below.

“What the hydrology of this is, this is a huge redband spawning area,” White said.

Farther down the river, White called out to a fishing guide he knew, and a man casting a fly. During the three-hour float trip, his voice bellowed to most of the people recreating on the river, asking how the fishing was going or if a person lying on the beach was enjoying the sun.

It’s both that public-facing and policy-driven focus of the job that makes it difficult to hire for, said Bart Mihailovich, a Spokane Riverkeeper board member. Mihailovich served as Riverkeeper before White and is the current organizing director for the Waterkeeper Alliance, a coalition of independent water conservation advocates.

“The ones that can make it, can survive and grow, are the ones that can be responsive and not spread all over the place,” Mihailovich said. “That’s what Jerry has done.”

“He’s brilliant,” Michailovich continued. “He can process what’s happening and speak to it in a simple, but authoritative, way.”

That was a job made more challenging last year.

Jerry White Jr. paddles his raft near the Sandifur Memorial Bridge on the Spokane River with paddleboarder Bill Burford in tow Wednesday. (DAN PELLE/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW)

‘Jerry is the visionary’

On a bend in the river filled with “frog water,” a still section that requires a bit of rowing oomph to progress, White said there were several minutes before he was struck by a car while walking downtown last January that he doesn’t remember.

“I didn’t have a brain bleed,” White, who turned 60 this year, said. “But I had a very severe concussion.”

He had just said goodnight to Katherine Thompson, managing director for the nonprofit, and walked a few blocks before being struck. He woke up in a hospital bed the next day, and since then has experienced some lingering

vertigo and finds himself writing down more details to remember than he used to.

“It doesn’t impair the work, but it did age me,” White said. He’s quick to say that the crash, and its medical consequences, aren’t what pushed him to consider stepping down. The organization, and in many ways the river, are in better places then when he took up the job in 2014, he believes.

Josh Abel, who met White through work with Trout Unlimited and is the chair of the Spokane Riverkeeper board, agreed.

“Jerry is the visionary. Jerry is essentially the CEO,” Abel said. “Spokane Riverkeeper would not exist today without Jerry White Jr.”

The river’s future is visible just around another bend, where salmon that were released in Peaceful Valley last year by local Indigenous tribes found conditions to spawn. White pointed out the gravel on the shallow bend of the river where the adult salmon used their bodies to loosen rock and improve conditions for hatching fish. The adult salmon then die, and the salmon that spawn head out to the ocean.

“I think we got to imagine that some of those fish made it out,” White said. “When we say we’ve got salmon spawning, we really do have parts of their life cycle beginning to take a hold.”

To ensure the water is the right depth, temperature and clarity for those fish, and the people that subsist on them including Indigenous tribes, the next Riverkeeper will need to be vigilant, White said.

Jerry White Jr., positions his raft along the banks of the Spokane River west of the Maple Street Bridge, just before heading out on a river run, Wednesday, Aug. 2, 2023. White Jr., who's served as Spokane Riverkeeper since 2014, is retiring from his position. Under his watch, the organization has advocated for water conservation efforts, stricter oversight of pollutants flowing into the river from governments, companies and farmers along Latah Creek and taken legal action against polluters on the Palouse. (DAN PELLE/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW)

Ties to the tribes, and the aquifer

On the shores of the river below Doomsday Hill, cold water gurgles through the earth and flows directly from the Spokane Valley-Rathdrum Prairie Aquifer.

White said the area demonstrates the interconnectivity of the subterranean sea and the Spokane River, and the need for residents to be aware of that connection by limiting their use of water during the dry summer months.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" White said, water rushing down the beach to the banks of the river. "If you come over here, these things keep going all the way around the bend."

Such springs were sacred to Indigenous people, White said, part of his constant awareness that the river holds significance for the people that were here before Spokane was laid out by white settlers in the late 19th century. Where the river meets Latah Creek, White points out that the land near the confluence has been home to people for centuries.

“This is one of the oldest urban areas in Washington state, 8,000 years of continuous occupation,” White said as the raft passes what is today People’s Park on the south bank of the river past the Sandifur Bridge. “A city, a Native American city, that was here for millennia.”

Today, the water rushing in from the Latah Valley is clear. But when there’s agricultural runoff earlier in the season, the creek waters can turn the Spokane River a muddy brown. One of Riverkeeper’s priorities during White’s tenure has been cleanup in Latah Creek, resulting in a 2018 agreement between the nonprofit and the Department of Ecology to develop a 10-year cleanup plan.

White said some of his proudest work during his time has been in conjunction with local tribes that traditionally fished these waters, working against water quality standards for pollutants known as polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, that are absorbed by trout and salmon and have been linked by researchers to certain types of cancer. By September 2024, the Environmental Protection Agency has agreed for the first time to establish a daily limit on the chemicals being released into the river.

Meanwhile, new potential threats have been discovered. A national study conducted last fall found remnants of per- and polyfluoralkyl substances, known as PFAS, in the Spokane River, the same substance that pushed Airway Heights off its municipal well supply after it was discovered at much higher levels in their groundwater. White talked last week about new concerns over a chemical used in tire manufacturing to increase longevity, called 6PPD, that may be toxic to fish.

“Those are all the things we need to identify and say, what are we doing to anticipate that these are going to have bad effects, especially on top of the changing climate,” White said, “and then begin to mitigate those by acting differently and legislating?”

Jerry White Jr. paddles his raft near the Sandifur Bridge on the Spokane River on Wednesday. White, who's served as Spokane Riverkeeper since 2014, is retiring from his position. (DAN PELLE/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW)

Filling the shoes

Working with the EPA and Department of Ecology, and providing detailed comments on complicated legal documents about pollutants, is just one part of the job. It's why Spokane Riverkeeper is looking for someone who either has a legal background or can quickly get up to speed, said Abel, including knowledge of the federal law that guides much of the work to protect the health of the nation's waterways – the Clean Water Act.

"It's a specific set of qualifications we're looking for, including law, policy and a strong communications background," Abel said. The board had received a few dozen applicants as of last week, and the deadline for applying was Friday.

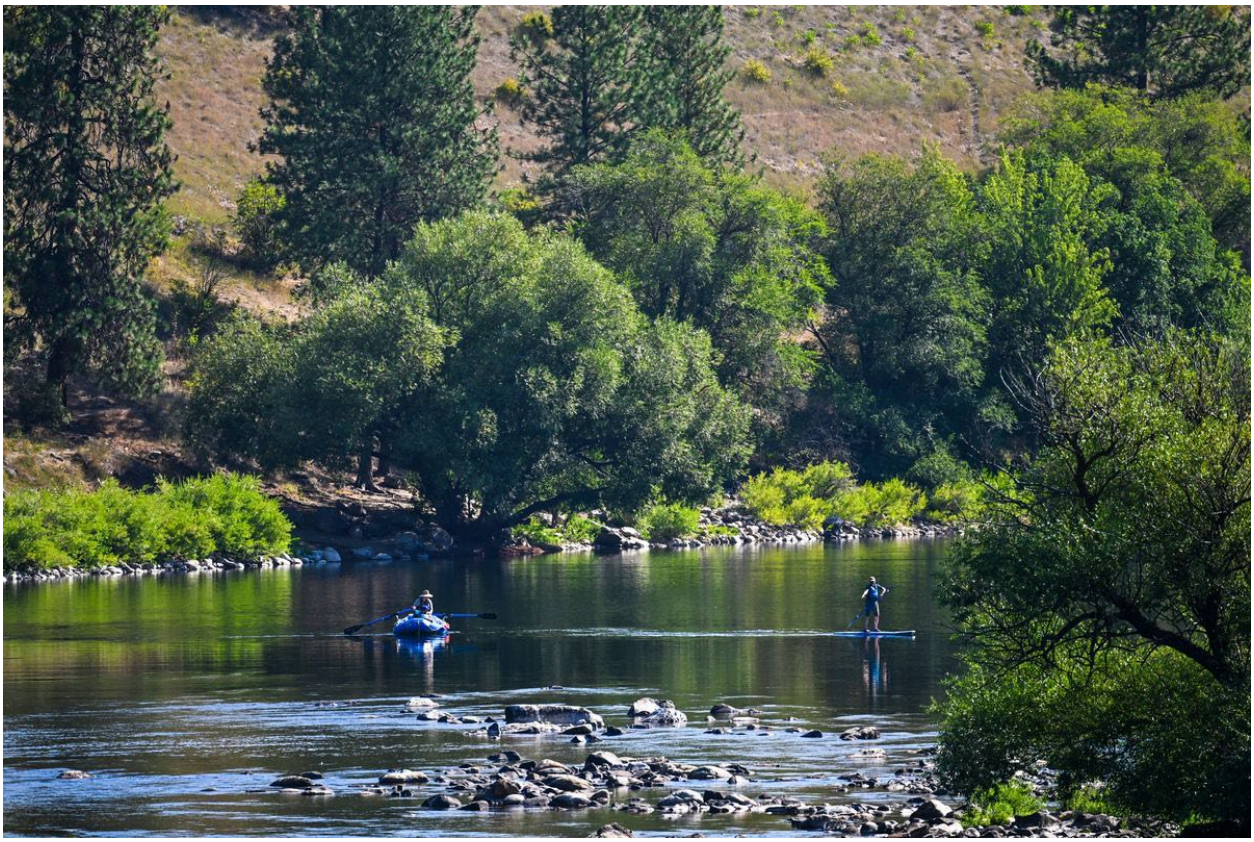
"We can't expect to find an expert in everything," Mihailovich said. "The real benefit, is that the foundation Jerry has built is solid."

White acknowledged that he's leaving a position that is difficult to fill.

"We're really going to have to have somebody that can show up, and pull folks together, and represent the river in a way that's effective," White said.

It’s pulling folks toward the river, the one that was like an otherworldly discovery as a kid and again when he moved back in the 1990s, that should be a community goal, White said. Reminding Spokane residents of the treasure that flows through their town, and their role in protecting it, won’t end with his time at Riverkeeper. But it’s a responsibility we all share, whether it’s for fishing, floating, swimming or just dipping your toes on a hot summer morning.

“Missoula, in Boise, you’ve got these communities that are really tied to the recreation, and Spokane is still developing that,” he said. “I think we’re poised on this really interesting knife’s edge, where there’s some pretty profound hazards, but there’s some pretty profound opportunities.”



Jerry White Jr. paddles his raft near the Sandifur Memorial Bridge on the Spokane River with paddleboarder Bill Burford in tow, Wednesday, Aug. 2, 2023. (DAN PELLE/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW)