

We're Wild and Scenic ... So Now What?

Bill Napolitano, October 2009

The twenty-year journey to Wild and Scenic River status has finally ended for advocates of the Taunton River. The Congress voted and the President signed ... we are official!

All 40 miles of the mainstem of the Taunton River have been found eligible for Wild and Scenic River designation based upon free-flowing condition and the presence of one or more outstandingly remarkable natural or cultural resource values. The eligible reach extends from the headwaters of the Taunton at the confluence of the Town and Matfield Rivers to Mt. Hope Bay at the US 195 Bridge in Fall River, south of the confluence of the Taunton and Quequechan Rivers. Outstandingly remarkable values include fisheries; history and archaeology; ecology and biodiversity; the estuary, and scenery and recreation.

Classification

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act provides for three possible classifications of eligible river segments: wild, scenic, and, recreational. The criteria distinguishing these classifications are based on the degree of human modification of the river and its adjacent shorelines. Based upon the applicable criteria, the Taunton River's designated segments are as follows:

- The headwaters down to Route 24 in Raynham, an 18 mile segment, is classified as "scenic."
- From Route 24 to a half mile below Weir Bridge in Taunton, a 5 mile segment, is designated "recreational."
- An 8 mile segment from Taunton down to Muddy Cove in Dighton is designated as "scenic."
- The lower stretch down to the Quequechan River and I-195 in Fall River (9 miles) is designated as "recreational."

Taunton River Stewardship Plan

The Taunton River Stewardship Plan is the most important product of the Wild and Scenic River Study. It was developed through the efforts of the Study Committee and presents a vision of the values for which the Taunton River is cherished, and of the strategies to better manage and protect these values. It has been extensively reviewed by all of the river stakeholders represented on the Committee (including the ten mainstem river communities, state agencies, non-profits, and tribal stakeholders), and was formally endorsed by Town Meeting and City Council vote in every community. The Stewardship Plan also serves as the "Comprehensive Management Plan" required for all federally designated Wild and Scenic Rivers.

To date, approximately 160 river segments have been added to the national system, totaling approximately 11,000 river miles. Of the designated segments, only eight are located in New England: the Farmington and Eightmile in Connecticut; the Allagash in Maine; the Wildcat and Lamprey in New Hampshire; and the Westfield, Taunton, and

Concord-Sudbury-Assabet in Massachusetts.

Each river designated into the national system receives permanent protection from federally licensed or assisted dams, diversions, channelizations and other water projects that would have a direct and adverse effect on its free-flowing condition and special resources. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act explicitly prohibits any new dam or other project licensed by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) on or directly affecting a designated river segment, and requires that all other proposed federally assisted water resource development projects in the area be evaluated for their potential impacts on the river's "outstandingly remarkable" values and free-flowing condition. Any project that would result in adverse effects to the designated segment is precluded under the Act.

A Partnership Approach to Stewardship

The Wild and Scenic designation also establishes the Taunton as a "Partnership" river.

Under this scenario, the federal government, through the National Park Service, is a partner in the implementation of the Stewardship Plan. The Park Service approach to the Taunton Wild and Scenic River is based on strategies developed over the last 20 years in the northeast region through a succession of Wild and Scenic River studies and designations, including Wildcat Brook (NH); Farmington R (CT); Great Egg Harbor R (NJ); Maurice R. (NJ); White Clay Creek (DE/PA); Lower Delaware (NJ/PA); Lamprey R. (NH); Sudbury, Assabet & Concord Rivers (MA). Each of these studies and subsequent designations has been based on a "Partnership" model that emphasizes local participation in the process. The centerpiece of this approach is the locally-based Stewardship Council, that serves as the coordinating/facilitating body for the implementation of the Stewardship Plan.

Additional features of this approach include:

- A high emphasis on public education and participation
- Reliance on local and state protections vs. federal
- No federal acquisition anticipated or authorized
- Development of a locally-based management plan as a part of the study
- Implementation of the Plan through a locally-based committee structure
- Providing opportunity for federal funding to implement the action strategies of Plan and support the operations of the Taunton River Stewardship Council

The Stewardship Plan itself includes Objectives and Action Strategies that have been developed through a locally-based facilitation process, and each community has formally endorsed the Plan through Town Meeting vote or City Council action. This sort of management framework has proven very successful on the seven other Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers that are in the northeast. Now, it's time for all of us to work together to make a similar approach work on the Taunton.

Bill Napolitano
Principal Environmental Planner, SRPEDD

