

Taunton River Now “Wild and Scenic”

Rachel Calabro

Advocates in the Taunton River watershed are celebrating the recent designation of the Taunton as a federal “Wild and Scenic River.” The process of designation began with a study led by the National Park Service in October, 2000; designation became a reality on March 30th, 2009, when President Obama signed the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act, adding 86 new rivers to the Wild & Scenic River system.

The study highlighted six outstanding resource values: agriculture; ecology and biological diversity; fisheries; history and archaeology; recreation and scenery; and the estuary. Each of the values will be protected and enhanced through implementation of a stewardship plan, which outlines goals, opportunities and action strategies. While designation does not affect state and local regulations, it will provide for added oversight by the National Park Service for projects requiring federal action that could harm the outstanding resources of the river.

The designation establishes a Wild and Scenic Taunton River Stewardship Council, comprised of representatives from ten Massachusetts towns located along the river’s mainstem, the State of Massachusetts, the National Park Service, a regional planning agency, a business representative and non-profits including the Taunton River Watershed Alliance, The Nature Conservancy, Save The Bay and regional land trusts. The Council will implement the Taunton River Stewardship Plan, which was developed during the designation process. The work of the Council will provide added opportunity for outreach, education, land protection and habitat restoration in the river corridor.

While the primary focus of the study was the mainstem of the Taunton River, major tributaries within the ten mainstem communities are considered in the plan because of their critical role in protecting and enhancing the outstanding resource values of the river and its watershed. Protection of these resources is essential to the achievement of the goals of the Wild & Scenic River.

The Taunton River is the only major coastal river in the region that is without a dam or obstruction over its entire length. The river flows more than 40 miles from Bridgewater to Mount Hope Bay, and is tidal for 18 miles from its mouth. The Taunton has an

unusually flat watershed, dropping only 20 feet over its 40-mile course. While the mainstem remained free, the tributaries were heavily dammed and were a part of New England’s earliest industrial history. Shipbuilding, textiles and jewelry became the base of manufacturing in the watershed. The watershed hosts 154 species of birds, 45 species of fish, and 360 identified plant species, three of which are globally rare. The watershed is still known for

its rural character, its agricultural products and rare animal habitats, although it has been under pressure from residential development in recent years.

Residents and visitors to the watershed can look forward to activities that highlight the extensive native and colonial history of the area, as well as its use today for agriculture and recreation. Several important areas of open space and wildlife habitat have been recently preserved, and river and salt marsh restoration projects are underway that will provide fish access to their native spawning areas. See www.tauntonriver.org



Looking south over the Taunton River. Photo: John Martin, Save The Bay

in the coming months as the Council develops its new web page and meeting schedule. All meetings are open to the public and all are welcome.

In Rhode Island, the Buckeye Brook Coalition has been advocating development of a Wild and Scenic River Study for its watershed. Buckeye Brook in Warwick originates at Warwick Pond and travels unimpeded through historic Warwick and into Mill Cove, south of Conimicut Point. The watershed is home to large annual runs of river herring, due to a lack of dams. It has great historic significance as an area of early settlement for native peoples as well as a colonial history that is still evident along the banks of the river. As a first step in the process, the Buckeye Brook Coalition applied for nomination into the National Rivers Inventory, an inventory maintained by the National Park Service for rivers under consideration for a Wild and Scenic River study.

—Rachel Calabro is the community organizer for Save the Bay.

Go Deeper!

Learn more about the Taunton River at www.savethetaunton.org.

Learn more about Buckeye Brook at www.buckeyebrook.org.