

OPINION

OPED: TIME FOR A MASSACHUSETTS WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS DESIGNATION

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Did you know there's a federal law that protects our most special, beautiful, and wild rivers? This law, called the "Wild and Scenic Rivers Act," was passed in 1968, in large part to save big rivers from destruction by big dams, and celebrates its 50th birthday this year. Many federally-designated Wild and Scenic Rivers are out west, in states like California, Oregon, and Washington.

But for the past 30 years or so, a movement has been growing to protect eastern rivers using this law. Called "Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers," eastern rivers in the program usually flow through private, not public lands, and they tend more toward the scenic than the wild. But these rivers are equally, if not even more, beloved by the people who live near them.

Similar to the more traditional route to protection under the act, designating a partnership river requires a vote of Congress, but these rivers are included in response to a formal request from the communities that border them.

In the past five decades, the law has been used to protect three Massachusetts rivers, with a fourth one now under consideration. The federal law protects more than 78 miles of the Westfield River, 40 miles of the Taunton River, and more than 74 miles of the Sudbury/Assabet/Concord Rivers (considered one river system).

More may be on tap. Overall, only eight rivers in all of New England have received a Wild and Scenic River designation. However, in September of this year, Congresswoman Niki Tsongas introduced a bill in the House of Representatives to designate the Nashua River (along with two of its tributaries) a Wild and Scenic River. Senators Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey introduced a companion bill in the Senate.

The Wild and Scenic River designation process didn't start with that legislation, however.

For the past three years, a multi-community planning process has worked to develop a resource plan for the Nashua River to support the designation. That process has documented how the river can best be managed to protect its water quality, maintain its recreation values, and preserve its cultural and historic resources. Impressively, all 11 communities affected by the designation have endorsed the request to designate the Nashua River as a Wild and Scenic River.

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act has served Massachusetts well. Although additional dams are not a big threat to our rivers (we already have almost 3,000 dams in Massachusetts), designation of a river qualifies surrounding regions for federal appropriations to preserve the recreational, scenic, historic, cultural and natural resources associated with the river. The designation of Massachusetts rivers has also become a strong marketing tool for local businesses supporting ecotourism.

Given the proximity of most Massachusetts residents to rivers, it is sometimes easy to forget just how fragile our rivers can be. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act prohibits federally permitted, funded or initiated activities on designated rivers that would harm them. For 50 years, the act has encouraged river management that crosses political boundaries and has promoted public participation to develop goals for protecting our waterways.

Still, 50 years after its enactment, of the approximately 3.6 million miles of streams in the United States, less than one quarter of 1 percent — 12,734 miles of 208 rivers in 40 states — are protected by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

As Massachusetts residents count our blessings as this 50th anniversary year of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act winds down, we celebrate the protection the act has brought to three of our state's most outstanding rivers. However, as we look forward to what lies ahead in the new year, we should re-dedicate ourselves to continuing efforts to gain the Nashua River the protection it needs and deserves.

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