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Nashua, Squannacook & Nissitissit Rivers Should Receive ‘Wild & Scenic’ Protection

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BY MARY J. METZGER

Members of the eight-town Study Committee are halfway through their task of documenting for the US Congress why portions of the Nashua River and its tributaries, the Squannacook and Nissitissit, should be designated Wild and Scenic Rivers. They shared an update of their findings and provided a listening session with the general public April 27 at the Nashua River Watershed Association’s River Resource Center in Groton.

“The 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act originally protected rivers just on Federal lands in the West,” said Jamie Fosburgh, from the National Park Service who has been Team Leader for the Wild and Scenic Rivers Program in New England the past 25 years.

“What began as an experiment of using local partnerships of study and management for rivers in the East has become a proven process that works. This very flexible tool allows local communities to plan and manage their own natural river resources.”

After the Boards of Selectmen of Ayer, Dunstable, Groton, Harvard, Lancaster, Shirley, Townsend and Pepperell voted to endorse the Study, Congress authorized it in December 2014. Congresswoman Niki Tsongas publically announced the study in January 2015. Each Board of Selectmen chose a town representative. Other voting members come from the National Park Service and Nashua River Watershed Association. The committee has been meeting monthly, interviewing regional resource experts to find the Outstandingly Remarkable Resource Values (ORRVs) of the Nashua River system.

The list is long. Al Futterman and Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell of the NRWA outlined the key findings of the study so far. Most of the work has centered on Biological Diversity of the region.

There are three dozen rare species. Many, such as the Blandings Turtle and freshwater mussels, are river dependent. An assemblage of wetlands habitat provides for six NHESP Imperiled and Vulnerable Natural Communities. The area has one of the few flood-plain forests remaining in New England and 26 percent of the Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) in the Commonwealth. The river is the second most important bird migration flyway in Massachusetts and may host an Alewife and American Shad reintroduction.

Studied since 1960, the Squannacook, which is the cleanest river in central Massachusetts, has been a reference river for decades as a Coldwater Fish Resource. It provides one of the few habitats in eastern Massachusetts for the native brook trout.

The whole river system is a major aquifer, providing flood storage areas and clean water for several towns. Extensive conservation lands in the region have preserved water quality. In the 1960s only the Groton Town Forest provided this service. Now there are 155 miles of permanent protected greenway. These also act as a south to north wildlife corridor which provides resilience in a time of climate change.

The Study Committee has also outlined Recreational and Scenic values for the Nashua River system. There are extensive walking trails. Over 380,000 people use the Nashua River Rail Trail every year. The Squannacook Rail Trail will provide similar recreational opportunities. The area has some of the best cold water and warm water fishing. It provides opportunities for hunting and boating, and the enjoyment of a scenic landscape.

Historic and Cultural ORRV's abound in the region. The Nashua River renewal, from one of the 10 most polluted rivers in the country, is a story of national significance. The rivers also provide environmental educational opportunities.

The Study Committee will work to come up with a Management Plan to protect these river resources. Each town will need to approve these plans at their 2018 Spring Town Meetings before they can be submitted to Congress. If Congress approves the Wild and Scenic designation, a local Advisory Committee would be established to oversee any designation funds, which traditionally have amounted to around \$170,000.

“These funds are very flexible,” said Fosburgh. “They can be used for land acquisition, education, river access, or whatever the priorities of the local management committee are.”

A Wild and Scenic River Federal designation does not affect local laws and regulations. It does prevent any building of new hydro-electric dams on the rivers. And it allows the local committee to have input on any Federal projects that might damage or affect the rivers. It can provide access to other grant monies and support regional tourist interest.

Robert Pontbriand, Chair of the Outreach Sub-committee, says the Wild and Scenic River Study has been “a great partnership so far. I see it continuing to build as the towns along the rivers work together to protect their shared regional resources.”

Further information on the Study Committee efforts can be found at www.WildlandScenicNashuaRivers.org