



## RECREATION - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Riverbend Subcommittee

The Riverbend Region offers more varied recreational opportunities than perhaps any other segment of the Connecticut River, due in part to the river's changing character as it moves from free-flowing stream to the deep expanses of the Fifteen Mile Falls reservoirs, combined with the scenic, largely undeveloped farm and forest land along its banks. The state line, which follows the Vermont riverbank as it lay before construction of the dams at Fifteen Mile Falls, is now inundated by Moore and Comerford Reservoirs. Popular land-based recreation includes camping, hiking, bicycling, hunting, picnicking, photography, bird-and wildlife-watching, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing, as well as snowmobiling and touring by all-terrain vehicles.

#### TOP PRIORITIES FOR RECREATION

1. Reduce mercury contamination in the Connecticut River system.
2. Encourage landowners to keep their land open to the public for recreation
3. Encourage protection of open space for recreation and scenic views
4. Prevent the spread of invasive species to this reach of the river
5. Encourage more car-top boat access
6. Preserve the scenic rural character of local roads
7. Provide consistent dock rules on both sides of the river
8. Ensure that water quality is safe for recreation
9. Discourage high-impact recreation facilities
10. Encourage low-impact recreation

#### Water-based Recreation

**Boating activity** - Canoeing, kayaking, rafting, sailing, swimming, and fishing are important low-impact forms of river recreation, while power boating, water skiing, and jet skiing are common higher-impact activities. Above the Lancaster-Lunenburg Bridge, the river is not wide enough for legal travel over headway speed, and only small outboards can pass among the rocks. Canoes, kayaks, and shallow-draft pontoon boats use the river from the Route 2 bridge to the Gilman Dam. Below the Gilman Dam, shallow paddling water gives way to the broad expanse of 3500-acre Moore Reservoir. Moore and Comerford Reservoirs are used by all types of craft. All the dams have portage trails, providing carries and access, although some of the carries are difficult.

**Boating Laws and Safety** - Other than on the reservoirs, the river is rarely wide enough for legal travel over headway speed. Many river users consider that enforcement of boating laws should be increased. Boating hazards include submerged or floating logs and rock shoals in the reservoirs that may be more or less submerged due to changing water levels. On Moore and Comerford Reservoirs, strong winds and chop from boat wakes can create difficult conditions for small boats. Releases from any of the dams here or from Murphy Dam upstream can result in sudden water level changes, posing danger for boaters anchored below the dams. The remains of the Wyoming Dam at Guildhall/Northumberland include concrete, spikes, and rebar, all hazards to paddlers. Area fire departments need emergency water rescue equipment and training to be prepared for boating accidents, particularly here, and in all seasons.

**Jet skis** - Ski craft can be used legally in the Riverbend region only on Moore, Comerford, and McIndoe Falls Reservoirs, although they are regularly observed as far north as Lancaster. Jet skis create a high wake and have potential to disturb wildlife resting in areas too shallow for larger boats. There are reports of conflicts between jet skis and fishermen. The rules for jet skis are confusing on the Connecticut River because the definition of the craft is outdated in New Hampshire. Inconsistencies in this definition have resulted in confusion as to which laws apply to which craft, and have made enforcement difficult.

**River Access** - Twenty-one boat launches provide access to the Connecticut River in the Riverbend segment, including 11 ramps for all kinds of boats and ten sites serving only car-top boats. There are public ramps for trailered boats located on all parts of the river wide enough for legal travel above headway speed. Boat landings in the region sometimes suffer from litter problems and vandalism. People enjoy picnicking at power company access sites on the reservoirs. Any new access sites should be carefully located and designed to prevent a level of boat traffic that leads to unsafe conditions such as conflicts between power boats and swimmers or non-motorized craft, demands a level of enforcement that currently

does not exist, or disturbs sensitive habitat areas. A privy is needed to reduce the present human waste problem at the canoe/fishing access at the breached Wyoming Dam in Guildhall. There is currently no public access in Ryegate.

**Fifteen Mile Falls** - The Riverbend Subcommittee considers that there is currently no room for expansion of high impact uses, particularly of power boating on Moore Reservoir, which has greatly increased in recent years. The impoundments offer some of the best sailing conditions anywhere on the Upper Connecticut River, and could host sailing regattas. Scullers now use the area near Moore Dam, and sculling races and canoeing competitions, which are becoming popular downstream, could also take place here.

**Docks** - The past ten years have seen new private docks installed on Comerford Reservoir, although there are few docks on the rest of the river in this region. There is currently little or no control over docks on the Vermont shore, since New Hampshire jurisdiction extends to the low water mark on the Vermont side, and on the reservoirs, the state line has been inundated by the dams.

**Invasive Species** - In 2007, the invasive alga *Didymo* was discovered in the Connecticut River in Guildhall and upstream. Eurasian milfoil and water chestnut, exotic plants that interfere with boating, swimming and fishing, are now present downstream but have not yet reached the Riverbend region. While the Zebra mussel has not yet invaded the Connecticut River, the river's water chemistry is suitable, and the mussel has already infested Lake Champlain, just a short trip for a boater or fisherman.

**Swimming** - The Riverbend region offers fine swimming, whether at a public beach, such as at the reservoirs or at a natural beach on a sandy river bend. At Woodsville and downstream, people swim from sandbars on the river. The State of New Hampshire assessed the river in 2004, finding it safe for swimming throughout the Riverbend region, except for the northernmost part of this area, from the confluence of the Upper Ammonoosuc River to a half mile below the Guildhall/ Northumberland bridge, due to *E. coli* bacteria from an unknown source. Sudden releases of water make swimming unsafe immediately below the dams.

**River Camping** - There are currently only six places on the river here where the public may camp overnight. Interest in canoe camping is rising sharply, and new sites will help prevent trespassing and disperse impacts. Unauthorized camping on Moore Reservoir has been a problem for years. The reservoirs present barriers to paddlers on extended trips, because they are long, often experience wind-driven waves, provide little or no current, and must be crossed in a single day. Indian Island, at the mouth of the Passumpsic River, is not suitable for a public campsite, although it is frequently used.

**Fishing** - People enjoy fishing nearly year-round here for cold water species such as rainbow, brown, and especially the native brook trout. There is a big spring walleye run and fishing for northern pike is good from Comerford Dam on down. Moore and Comerford Reservoirs draw boats from all over New England for fishing derbies, and in winter, they become ice-fishing villages of their own. Mercury has accumulated in resident fish to the point where the State of New Hampshire considers the entire river system, and others in our region, to be contaminated. On Moore, Comerford, and McIndoe Falls Reservoirs, the State has issued stricter fish consumption guidelines.

#### **KEY RECOMMENDATIONS for Water-based Recreation**

- NH General Court should increase funding for enforcement of boating laws. NH Department of Safety should enforce existing boating laws to improve boating safety and minimize the erosive impacts of boat wakes.
- The NH General Court should update the definition of ski craft to simplify enforcement and to protect the sensitive river shoreline. Businesses renting jet skis should be certain their customers understand how and where these craft can be legally operated.
- NH Department of Safety and Vermont State Police should buoy off danger areas on the reservoirs and confine the use of high speed, high powered boats and water skiing to selected areas on Moore and Comerford Reservoirs. Boaters should avoid anchoring their boats below dams and watch for hazards in the reservoirs.
- State Emergency Management agencies should assist local fire departments in acquiring emergency water rescue equipment for river recreation emergencies at all seasons.
- Fish and Game/Wildlife and Parks/Recreation agencies and towns should encourage more car-top boat access for canoes and other small craft because of their low impact on the river. State transportation agencies should

assist where federal funds are used in transportation projects. The states should explore a registration fee for non-motorized boats, to provide funds for non-motorized river access. Vermont should work with the Vermont River Conservancy to explore a possible public access easement below the Dodge Falls Dam in Ryegate.

- Fish and Game/Wildlife and Parks/Recreation agencies and towns should discourage new public access for trailered boats, since enough access exists where the river is wide enough for legal travel above headway speed.
- The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources should adopt and enforce rules for docks on the Connecticut River similar to those established by New Hampshire.
- Fish and Game/Wildlife and Parks/Recreation agencies should set up boat washing stations at launches at infested waters to prevent vehicles from bringing invasive species to the Connecticut River. Fishing derby organizers should require boat and trailer checks. Boaters should check boats and trailers before launching.
- NH Department of Environmental Services and VT Agency of Natural Resources should assist volunteers in monitoring water quality, to ensure that the river is safe for swimming. Guildhall should work with the State of Vermont to provide a privy to reduce the human waste problem at the town's riverfront property.
- Fish and Game/Wildlife and Parks/Recreation agencies should work with local volunteers to identify potential canoe campsite locations. TransCanada should build a primitive canoe campsite on Moore Reservoir.
- Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department and New Hampshire Fish and Game Department should cooperate to offer a joint free fishing day for residents.
- The federal government should act to reduce mercury pollution coming into the region, and citizens should avoid using household items containing mercury or recycle them.

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## Land-based Recreation

**Private land and public access** - Public access to private land is increasingly threatened as land is becoming subdivided, sold, and posted against trespassing. For example, no land in Caledonia County, Vermont was posted in 1991, but by 2004, 10,982 acres had been posted. Fear of liability is often cited as a factor in the decision. Conserving land brings new opportunities for public recreation.

**Scenic landscape**- Much of the stunning beauty of the river and its forested backdrop around Fifteen Mile Falls is due to long-time stewardship of thousands of acres by the hydro power companies. The terms of the dams' new license include donation of permanent conservation easements on some 8,000 acres, permanently protecting both waterfront and ridgelines from uncontrolled development. Throughout the region, an effort to keep farmland open and active, perhaps with the help of conservation agreements, will help retain scenic views to and from the river.

**Walking and Hiking Trails** -Many towns in the Riverbend region offer hiking and walking trails enriched by views of the river and surrounding hills. A number of local schools have constructed nature trails for their students and the public. New trails could offer a way for residents to enjoy town forests. A map of major area trails would be welcomed.

**Rail Trails** -The Ammonoosuc Recreational Trail is a well-used 19.2 mile trail on a former railroad bed running from Woodsville to Littleton. In winter, this trail is so heavily used by fast-moving snowmobiles that it is unsafe for other use. Another trail follows the former Wells River-Montpelier rail line from Wells River to Groton State Forest and provides fine mountain biking and hiking.

**Bicycling** - Bicycling is a popular family and touring sport in the Riverbend region, especially near the river. In Vermont, bicyclists and bike tour groups use Routes 102, 18, and 5, and a loop along the west side of Comerford Reservoir from Barnet to Lower Waterford and White Village, to Route 135. In New Hampshire, Route 135 from Lancaster through Woodsville, Route 18, and Route 10 are now part of the statewide bicycle route system. Safe traveling for cyclists on busy highways is sometimes a concern, such as on state-identified bicycle routes that have no shoulder or bike lane.

**Nature Observation** - The Fifteen Mile Falls area is a favorite for watching bald eagles, where open water below the dams year-round provides the birds with good fishing when other waters are frozen over. The Connecticut River Birding

Trail, a series of nature observation sites in the river valley, was extended north in 2005. There are nine stops in the Riverbend region. Hunting remains a favorite traditional pastime.

**All-Terrain Vehicles** -Landowners near ATV trail systems report that riders sometimes stray onto their property, leave gates open, and cause erosion. The Subcommittee reported in 1997 that four-wheeled off-road recreational vehicles were eroding the earth fill on Moore Dam. This remains a problem, and presents an expense and enforcement issue for the power company. Enforcement of rules for ATV use is essential. Snowmobile clubs present a good model for ATV riders.

**Recreational Developments** - The Riverbend Subcommittee values the rural character of the river and its use as a migratory route for wildlife, and recommends that development of intensive recreational facilities, such as theme parks, should take place only well away from the river, to protect the environment and passive recreational use. Factors such as sound, light, runoff, and shoreline stability should be considered.

**Winter recreation** -The Riverbend region is lively in winter with snowmobiling, winter hiking, and cross country skiing. Ice fishermen bring their bob houses onto the frozen impoundments and backwaters. Hundreds of miles of snowmobile trails attract riders to the area, bringing business to local stores and eateries. While there is better cooperation between snowmobilers and foot travelers, snowmobile trails are usually so busy that they are dangerous for cross-country skiers and snowshoers. On the Connecticut River, ice thickness can vary greatly, and in the impoundments, the water level continues to change even though the ice appears solid. This can mean a safety hazard to snowmobilers and other vehicles.

**Connecticut River Byway** - Open scenic views of the river valley provide pleasant auto and bicycle touring, particularly along Routes 10 and 135 in New Hampshire, and Route 5 in Vermont, part of the Connecticut River Byway. The Byway was designated a National Scenic Byway in 2005. Byway visitor centers in Lancaster, St. Johnsbury, Wells River, and Haverhill Corner are now introducing residents and visitors to the region's natural and cultural heritage. The State of New Hampshire's visitor center at Exit 44 off Interstate 93 in Littleton commands a fine view of Moore Reservoir.

#### **KEY RECOMMENDATIONS for Land-based Recreation**

- The New Hampshire General Court should provide adequate funding for the Land and Community Heritage Investment Program to help keep land available for public recreation. TransCanada Hydro Northeast should complete the conservation of company lands called for in the 2001 FERC license.
- Fish and Game/Wildlife and Parks/Recreation agencies, recreation clubs, and the Connecticut River Byway Council should encourage landowners to keep their land open to the public for recreation, and educate residents and visitors to the region on visitor responsibility and respect for private land.
- Towns should explore programs to create trails especially for cross-country skiing, hiking, and snowshoeing. Towns should consider creating trail guides to town owned properties. TransCanada should restore the old trail along Moore Reservoir from Waterford Launch to Dodge Hill and North Littleton.
- Recreation groups should encourage local care-taking of recreation areas, address trail erosion with increased trail maintenance, set up connections between trails, develop more published information on trail systems, and provide better signage where needed.
- States should assist towns in creating separate bike paths to reduce pressure to widen roads to accommodate bicycles, and avoid road improvement that could lead to increased speed of traffic.
- Fish and Game/Wildlife and Parks/Recreation agencies should enforce ATV rules and require users to pass a rider safety course. NH General Court should establish a registration fee large enough to provide funds for law enforcement, trail construction, and a landowner restitution fund. The states should require riders to have insurance and to be members of an ATV organization which would provide education and training. Towns should consider ATV trail development in local planning and zoning and allow construction only with the written permission of the landowner and with the necessary trail construction permits in place.
- Towns should discourage development of intensive recreational facilities such as theme parks near the river, to protect the environment and the passive recreational experience there. Marinas and other high impact river uses should be discouraged, because they invite further enforcement problems which already exist in this reach.

- The Connecticut River Byway Council should encourage low impact forms of recreation, such as birdwatching and other nature-based recreation, an excursion train along the river, and inn-to-inn canoe and bicycle trips.
- Land conservation organizations should work with towns to help protect scenic views and open space, especially along the river. Towns should encourage farmland conservation to keep farmland active and views open, and provide public recreation access for birding, car-top boats, or trails where possible and appropriate.